

Bound up in the Bond of Life

Two years ago, I spoke on Yom Kippur about my anger with God. My dear friend and classmate, Rabbi Fred Elias z"l, was dying, his young children were crying, and I was struggling to make sense of it all. Two years later I still struggle. I still don't have any answers to the tragedies that shake our lives to the core, but I'm working on living through these moments. For nearly two years now, the frequency of these moments, the volume of funerals I have conducted, has increased three-fold. I have learned that as much as we might try, we cannot run from death. Only by confronting death can we build lives of meaning, purpose, and love.

I will admit, I was not planning on writing this sermon. I was content working through these feelings on my own without sharing my inner thoughts with hundreds of people. But then again, isn't that what this moment is all about? A rabbi sharing with his community how our tradition can help us live through the challenges of life. I still wasn't convinced until I reflected on two tragic deaths that struck our community this year.

To Jane, Molly, Lucy, and Abby. It has been nearly ten months since Marc died. 54-year-olds are not supposed to have surgery and never wake up. Marc was such a mensch, a kind and compassionate person, full of integrity. Marc was an amazing father, devoted husband, loving son, and dear friend to all who knew him. So many people here loved him, and he loved each of you deeply. I hope that he somehow feels the deep affection and great admiration that has poured out for him over these months and today.

And to Patti and Steve. Two weeks ago, your daughter-in-law's brother, Lt. Paul Fridley, USN, was one of five crew members killed when their helicopter crashed into the Pacific Ocean near San Diego. Paul grew up in Annandale and came from a Navy family. His grandfather, Rear Admiral Ronald Wigenbusch, is currently struggling with cancer, wondering why he is still alive

and not his 28-year-old grandson. Paul's wife is expecting their first child, a child who will grow up never knowing their father. Once again, taps will be played for another American patriot, leaving behind a family in tears and a nation diminished.

The great Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, once wrote: "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." In his inspirational book, *Against the Dying of the Light*, the late Leonard Fein wrote about his grief following the death of his 30-year-old daughter Nomi. He began just days after she died, understanding from the beginning that the act of writing was a way to both keep her alive and accept the fact of her death (Forward). My words today are in honor of Marc and Paul's memories, in honor of Fred's memory, as well as the memories of all those we each hold in our hearts. In this moment we will seek to create space for loss, and at the same time rage against the dying of the light.

Some of the most difficult conversations I have with congregants is when a loved one is in the final stages of life and the family is debating one more surgery, one last heroic attempt. Invariably, I am caught in-between those who believe we should do everything we can to extend life, and those who realize that extending life without extending quality of life is simply futile. There is never a simple answer, and far be it from me to tell someone what to do with the life of a loved one. So, I try to listen and offer guidance, empowering families to arrive at their own decisions. I always do so thinking about an article I read in the New Yorker years ago by Dr. Atul Gawande called *Letting Go*. Dr. Gawande is a surgeon, writer, and public health expert, and was recently nominated by President Biden to be Assistant Administrator of USAID's Bureau for Global Health. This specific article is a candid rebuke of how our society cares for people at the end of life. "Our medical system," Gawande writes, "is excellent at trying to stave off death with \$8000 a month chemotherapy, \$3000 a day intensive care, \$5000 an hour surgery. But, ultimately,

death comes, and no one is good at knowing when to stop.” He argues that sometimes adding days, weeks, or months is not the singular goal. Rather it is living with dignity.

Gawande shares many stories but none more enlightening than his conversation with Dr. Susan Block. Dr. Block is a palliative care specialist who is a nationally recognized pioneer in training doctors and others in managing end-of-life issues with patients and their families. Several years ago, Block got word that her father, a retired professor at UC Berkeley, was admitted to a hospital with symptoms from what proved to be a mass growing in the spinal cord of his neck. She flew out to see him. The neurosurgeon said that the procedure to remove the mass carried a twenty-per-cent chance of leaving him quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. The evening before the surgery, father and daughter chatted about friends and family, trying to keep their minds off what was to come, and then she left for the night. Halfway across the Bay Bridge, she recalled, “Oh my God, I don’t know what he really wants.” Block panicked, turned the car around, and drove back to the hospital.

When she arrived at his room she said: “Dad, I need to understand how much you’re willing to go through to have a shot at being alive and what level of being alive is tolerable to you.” Her father’s answer shocked her. He said, “If I’m able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV, then I’m willing to stay alive. I’m willing to go through a lot of pain if I have a shot at that.” This wasn’t what Block expected her father to say. He’s a professor emeritus and as far as she knew he’s never watched a football game in his life. In the end, this conversation changed how she approached her father’s end-of-life care, all because she asked him what was most important.

By and large, we live in a death denying culture; we fear death, and we avoid it at all costs. We simply could not survive with the constant awareness of how close we are to the edge. In her book, *Beauty Junkies*, Alex Kuczynski, a former writer for the New York Times Styles Section,

captures the follies, frauds, and fanaticism that fuel the American pursuit of youth and beauty. This is the culture we live in. Aging may be a natural fact of life, but for most Americans it means being pushed aside, one step closer to the grave. Just one more nip and tuck and we can reverse the clock and hold death at bay. We are so proficient at diverting our attention from the inevitable that when death comes knocking, we are completely unprepared.

Maybe that's why I always get goosebumps on the *yahrzeit* for my beloved Grandma Miriam, whose fourth *yahrzeit* is next week. This was the grandma that came and stayed with Jodi and me after Ari and Ilan were born. Her smile would always fill a room and her gentle kindness touched the lives of so many. The last time I saw her in December 2016 she was only a shell of the vivacious grandmother I had loved and adored. Even still, when she saw her great-grandchildren, her smile was right where I knew it would be. In the months that followed, her memory continued to deteriorate until she could no longer eat or drink. We knew it was just a matter of days. We also knew that Ari's 8th birthday was on the horizon. My phone rang in the middle of that birthday party. Before I picked up, I already knew. Ari was named after Grandma Miriam's husband, my Poppa Lenny, and Grandma Miriam took her last breath on Ari's birthday. I didn't have the heart to tell him that his beloved GG (that's what he called her) passed away just as he was blowing out his birthday candles.

I thought about those candles when one of you had told me that at the precise moment your father died, you saw a leaf floating past your living room window. And when a young widow described feeling her husband's soft touch in bed even though he died years ago. I remember one of you shared with me that you were sitting next to your mom when she took her last breath and visibly saw something leaving her body. I am sure many of you have similar stories. Believe me, just when I thought I've heard it all, the phone rings with another one. What do we do with these

stories? Do we assume they are just as fanciful as the stories we hear on the ghost and graveyard tour in Old Town Alexandria? Most of us feel compelled to tell *someone*, and that someone usually happens to be me because you know at least I won't think you're crazy.

Rabbi Elie Spitz, in his book *Does the Soul Survive*, shares how rabbis for most of the past century have ignored the supernatural or denied it. We were skeptical of anything that could not be seen, controlled, or measured. Accounts of the paranormal were often categorized as “twilight zone stories,” simply products of illusion, superstition, and the movies. Most suspected that charlatans who offered easy and false answers to people in pain promoted these phenomena. In eulogies many rabbis speak of immortality only as the perpetuation of the memory of the departed among the living. Even the best rabbis avoid talking about God or reduce God to the best expression of natural processes. There is, however, a growing trend of pausing to reflect on seeming coincidence and the possibility of other realms of human awareness. As a result, there is an increasing faith in the existence of a soul, and a desire to pour through the treasure trove of Jewish wisdom to better understand the mysteries of life and death.

Beginning with the Talmud, Judaism suggests that the soul may have a fully conscious life after it separates from the body. This view is the basic concept underlying belief in a medium's ability to confer with the deceased. The medieval Jewish philosophers debated the nature of the soul and the degree to which individual identity was attached to the soul in the afterlife. Drawing on views expressed in the Talmud, mystics of the medieval period shaped an understanding of the soul that would later permeate and dominate communal self-understanding. In this articulation, the soul was multifaceted, unique and immortal, and it entered the body to fulfill a particular task for that life. In all my years in religious school, Hebrew high school, as a Jewish History major in

college, and even in rabbinical school, not a single class, lecture, or discussion on the survival of the soul. Never did I learn that these were serious Jewish ideas.

Imagine talking openly and honestly about the most painful and universal human experience. Imagine what it would look like to break the taboo around death and actually talk about it with the people we love and the people we trust. Imagine dipping into the well of our tradition, learning about the soul and the afterlife, engaging in conversations we often avoid out of ignorance and discomfort. Frankly, it is not only the soul and afterlife that we need to talk about. We need to be talking about end-of-life care, living wills, medical directives, and health care proxies. How can Jewish values influence our decisions around feeding tubes and respirators? Organ donation? When do we fight to preserve life and when do we let someone die with dignity? What do you do when family members disagree on treatment? I will be the first to admit that these conversations are not easy. We tell ourselves that it's too early to talk about end-of-life care. But as the saying goes, "It's always too early, until it's too late." The goal is both simple and transformative: talk about your wishes, so those wishes can be understood and respected by the people who matter most.

Ben Franklin famously said that "in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." I have no intention to talk about taxes, so let's have the conversations that will help us be more present for those we love when death approaches. When we walk with each other on the journey of grief and loss, we become better friends, we become supportive family members, and we grow closer as a community. Can we all commit, right here and right now, to have these conversations in the weeks and months ahead? Before...it's too late.

Today is Yom Kippur, and today is our dress rehearsal for death. We abstain from eating and drinking and making love, since corpses can do none of those things. We utter a variation of

the confessional we will say on our death bed. Many of us are wearing white, like the shrouds we will be buried in. At its deepest level, Yom Kippur is a dry run. It is the one day of the year we are asked to look our mortality in the face. The words we recite make that challenge perfectly clear: “How many will pass away and how many will be born? Who will live and who will die?” The images – of God writing us in the book of life or death, of us begging for mercy and kindness, of gates closing – are so stark and, frankly, so scary that many people want to turn away. Yom Kippur asks us to sustain the stare (NYT 17Sept18). And in this stare, we must decide what matters most and what, if anything, we will do about it.

This is not easy. It’s painful, stressful, and anxiety producing. It’s also very real and necessary. Yom Kippur is our chance to turn around (literally *teshuvah*) and say what needs to be said before we run out of time. I can’t promise that doing so will diminish our grief or heal our broken hearts. But thinking about death compels us to squeeze every bit of meaning, purpose, and love out of every day that we have.

In Dr. Paul Kalanithi’s beautiful memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, a 36-year-old neurosurgeon writes about his diagnosis with metastatic stage IV lung cancer. The day he found out, he writes, the next steps were clear: “Prepare to die. Cry. Tell my wife that she should remarry and refinance the mortgage. Write overdue letters to dear friends. Yes, there were lots of things I had meant to do in life, but sometimes this happens” (NYT 24Jan14). How could he go on like this? He was a walking ghost. Everywhere he turned, “the shadow of death obscured the meaning of any action” (149). And then one day, waking up in pain, unable to see beyond breakfast, the words of Samuel Beckett echoed in his head: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” With all his strength, Paul got out of bed and took a step forward, repeating the phrase over and over: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” That morning, he made an important decision; he would learn to live in a different way, seeing

death as an imposing itinerant visitor but knowing that “even if I’m dying, until I actually die, I am still living” (150).

And so it is with all of us. We can’t go on. We *will* go on. All of us will eventually die, but most of us are not dying today. In facing our mortality, in coming to terms with our fragility, we have the opportunity to remember that until we actually die, we are still very much alive. This is why Dr. Ira Byock, after more than 25 years in hospice and palliative care, taught patients who were facing life’s end, that what matters most in life is just eleven words, four short sentences: Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you (The Four Things that Matter Most, 3).

Do you know why we are here right now? Do you know what the whole point of this endless liturgy, hallowing music, and ancient ritual is? Do you know why we are fasting? All of this is meant to push us to the brink of death so we can feel the urgency to get up and say what needs to be said, while we still can. We are here to accept our limitations, embrace our vulnerability, and realize that it is never too early to say, “Will you please forgive me?” “I forgive you,” “thank you,” and “I love you.”

When Angelo Merendino first saw his wife Jennifer he knew she was the one. Not only was Jennifer the most beautiful woman he had ever met, she was full of life and had a way of making everyone feel like they were the only person who mattered. A year later, they were married in Central Park. “When I saw Jen walking down the path,” Angelo recalled, “I couldn’t hold back my tears. I had never been so happy in my life and I couldn’t believe that this beautiful, kind, and strong woman loved me the same way that I loved her.” Five months later, Jennifer was diagnosed with breast cancer. Jen became very sick and Angelo needed help, so he turned to the only form of communication he knew best, his camera. After Jen’s cancer metastasized they decided to share their life through photographs. Over the next four years Angelo created a photo-documentary so

family and friends would have a better understanding of the challenges they were facing. After Jennifer's death, Angelo started a foundation to provide assistance to patients receiving treatment for breast cancer. He called the organization *The Love You Share*, inspired by one of his final conversations with his wife.

In Angelo's words: "Before going to sleep Jen and I used to ask each other what the best and worst part of the day was. Usually the best part was something like, 'When you walked by me and ran your fingers through my hair,' or, 'When we were at the hospital and you held my hand.' The day after we found out Jen's liver was failing we came home with Hospice Care and spent the evening with family and friends. That night, as we lay next to each other for possibly the last time, I asked Jen what she loved the most about that day. Jen thought for a minute then turned and, looking deeper into my eyes than ever before, Jen said, 'I Loved it all.'" When we reach the end of our lives, there is only love. When the funeral is over and friends have gone home, what's left is love.

In Jewish tradition, there are many *mitzvot*, many obligations that we have, but none is greater than the act of burying a loved one. We do so with our own hands, lifting earth from the ground and placing it upon the coffin. As anyone who has been to a burial knows, the *thud* of earth hitting the coffin is both haunting and jarring. It serves as a stark, powerful, and painful reminder of the reality and finality of death. It is also considered *hesed shel emet*, the truest act of love and kindness. The hazzan and I have supported so many of you as we placed earth, lovingly, on parents and grandparents, loving spouses, siblings, dear friends, and even children. In doing so, we all experienced that sacred gift of love.

From the moment we are born, we all have an innate need for relationships. And it is this desire that remains with us until our final breath. As we say in the Memorial Prayer – *u-tz'ror bi-*

tz'ror ha-hayyim – may their souls be bound up in the bond of life. In the very moment of our deepest grief and sadness, standing over the open graves of loved ones, we remember and we declare that we are all bound to one another, in this world and for eternity. Our greatest calling in life is to love and to be loved, one and another, bound up in the bond of life. When mourning the sacred souls that once graced us with their presence, it is really, really hard to remember the depths of our relationships, to remember those moments of holding a hand and saying, “I love you.” Yom Kippur serves as our reminder.

There is so much going on in our world right now. So much to distract us. Pick your headline, pick your crisis, it is all consuming. Yet here we are on Yom Kippur, removing ourselves from the land of the living, albeit for just a few hours, to remember that when all is said and done, whether we live 104 years, 54 or 28, what's left is love.

Two-and-a-half weeks ago, Fred's wife Michelle came to visit us with her two children, their first visit since Fred passed away last year. It was also a few days after what would have been their 20th wedding anniversary. Fred and Michelle met at Camp Ramah in New England, the very place all our kids had just come home from. We sat around the Shabbos table as our children took great pride in singing the very songs that had been sung by generations of campers. I had to hold back a few tears that evening. Not because I was sad, because I was blessed with the blessing of memory and love.

Today we walk together through the valley of the shadow of death. Not as punishment nor to be consumed by grief, but to remember that as we walk on this inevitable journey, our sacred task is to live...to live with passion and a vengeance. *We can't go on. We will go on.* On this Yom Kippur there is one vow we all must make, to live life with forgiveness, with gratitude and most

importantly, with love. When we do, we will live *u-tz'ror bi-tz'ror ha-hayyim*, bound up in the bond of life.