

Rabbi Jay TelRav
Temple Sinai - Stamford
Our Eternal Beacons

This past year, I have had the privilege and honor walking the final steps of life with a goodly number of our congregants and their loved ones. Being with you during this hardest and most confusing of times is one of my most fulfilling roles as your rabbi. In addition to providing the structure of tradition and guiding you through the rituals of burial and mourning, I watch closely, learning from everyone I am with.

I saw those who have known their own end was coming for some time and put everything in order to ease the burden on their family and others who could not. I saw family members torn apart by their loss and others who were finally able to breathe again now that the battle was over. I watched them plan and discuss, care and fret. I watched the years of denial and the months of sitting vigil. I watched them escort grandfathers and mothers, husbands, sisters and sons to death's door and I watched those individuals walk through the door, leaving all of us behind.

There is a particularly surprising verse in the book of Ecclesiastes; a book known for its pessimistic and blunt language about the futility and vanity of life. But, in this case, the classic rabbis were so perplexed, they applied their Talmudic intellect to help us achieve a profound insight into life and death. Kohelet states, טוב יום המָּוֶת מִיּוֹם הַחַיָּוִת. "The day of one's death is greater than the day of one's birth." Judaism, a tradition that values life and permits every effort to preserve it, seems to be saying, a person's death is preferable to her birth. This statement

naturally puzzled the rabbis. So, Rabbi Levi explained the verse with the use of this striking analogy:

This can be compared to two ocean-going ships, one leaving the harbor and the other entering. For the one that was leaving, all were celebrating; for the one entering there were none who rejoiced. A wise man observing the scene, said: 'This whole situation is backward! For that ship leaving the harbor no one should celebrate, since they do not know her true condition, they do not know what seas she may encounter, and what wind she may have to face. But everybody *ought* to rejoice at the ship that is returning into harbor, as they know that she set forth in peace and returned in peace from her time at sea.'

Rabbi Levi continued: "So it is with a person. When a person is born and begins her life's journey, we do not know what sort of life it will be. Only once they have returned to port do we know that she is now, once again, safe.¹ The rabbis describe the safety of being with God like the safety of a harbor. No matter how difficult the condition on the other side of the wall, the ship is safe inside the port. We are the ship – God is the safe harbor.

And, we enter that harbor in so many different ways. Some are blessed to return to port in the fullness of life when we draw to a peaceful and quiet close – completing the cycle of life; While others are yanked out of the sea and into the harbor before we're ready for their journey to end. Some journeys end with a gentle breeze and others in the tumult of a storm. Some travelers have taken care of all the business of their journey while others left tasks uncompleted and relationships unresolved. Some journeys conclude leaving the rest of us at peace

¹ Midrash Rabbah, Sh'mot 48:1.

and sometimes, the end can leave us terrified. But, in every case, a loved one is lost but also loved ones are left behind.

Many of us take comfort in our faith that our loved ones have re-entered the safety of God's harbor. In fact, toward the end of their lives, we might have thrown ourselves into their care to such a degree that our own sense of self might even have disappeared as we focused on their needs. And this is where the metaphor of the Ship is somewhat limited for us. Because, as human beings, we do not travel the seas of life alone. The image of the ship suggests a tiny vessel bobbing alone in the midst of a vast sea but, *our* ships move in the safety of convoys... the fate of one is tied to the fate of the rest.

As our loved one's ship was being tossed about in the storm, we stayed close. We knew that their vessel was damaged and in danger of sinking into the abyss and so we offered it any help we could – urging it to limp along. We guided each other through the crests and troughs of the storm and then suddenly, in the deepest darkness, at the bottom of the Valley formed by one great wave, we lost sight of our dear one. Frantically we grasped for them – terrified that they might have simply slipped beneath the murky surface and were lost forever. But then, as we bobbed up and down, craning our neck in all directions, we received word that they were safe again in the harbor and we breathed a brief sigh of relief.

And yet, even the news that they are safe offers a precious short sense of comfort. We, after all, still have a journey ahead of us and, in the midst of searching for them, we've lost our bearing...perhaps we've even lost the memory of where it was we were headed in the first place! How do we move forward from this point? A sense of panic begins to rise in our throat as we realize that the sun

has dipped dangerously low on the horizon and the inky blackness of night is upon us. The words of the 121st Psalm begin to make sense as our heart cries, “I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?!?”

We look around, in the middle of the sea for a mountain – the symbol of God’s reliability and steadfast presence and, failing to find it, again, we feel our throat tighten with some difficult-to-define experience. And then we hear it...a still, small voice...**the foghorn in the distance**. Our head turns in the direction of the sound and there it is – dim but undeniable – the light of the harbor. The lighthouse – restoring our sense of direction and allowing us to re-chart our course.

If the deafening silence of loss in our heart had not been so overwhelming, we might have missed the sound of the horn. And, in truth, had our world not been so dark, we probably would never have seen the light at all.

The Trough of that wave was the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Some recall it from the distant past and others may feel that they are still very much in the midst of it.

The foghorn is your remaining loved ones calling you back to your community and that beacon of light from the ever present lighthouse is God. Like the ship’s sailors, who rejoice at finally seeing a yearned for lighthouse in the distance, we still must travel the remaining leg of our own journey before we enter the harbor. But, the more distance and time we cover, the brighter that light grows and the more we are reminded that there is life left to be lived. Pausing in our busy lives, to honor our loved ones with this Yizkor service places meaning on our loss, honor their memories and refocuses us on life.

As a part of our liturgy, we will say, as long as we live, they too shall live for they are now a part of us as we remember them. Let their memory become, for us, our beacons as we recall the imperative that we live our lives as they, in their higher moments wished to live. And let us now honor their memories through the words of our tradition.