

Cantor Morgovsky & Rabbi TelRav
Mourning Alone
Yizkor, 5782

RT:

I remember one of the most beautiful deaths I've attended like it was yesterday. Many of you know the Eppinger Family and will remember Bob as a joyful, funny, generous man who lived many of his final years with significant medical complications. I sat with him while he had his dialysis, I brunched at his home, and I looked at pictures of his scuba diving adventures...always aware that he felt gratitude for every minute – like he was living on borrowed time. When Bob's wife, Paula, an equally warm presence in this world, called to tell me what was happening, I headed right over to their home. Their adult children were there, along with many of the grandchildren as well. Bob was surrounded by loved ones who held his hand, whispered in his ear and all together we sang prayers and recited the shema. Finally, Bob's chest went down and it did not rise again. In that moment, Paula looked at me, and we both smiled. It was time. He had lived a good life. It was a good death. The funeral service was brimming with family and friends. The mourners nodded and smiled as Bob was eulogized, as they remembered his love of bridge and his beautiful demeanor. The shiva house was the same - people gathering during that first week of mourning, sharing prayers, meals, and stories of Bob. Everyone at Bob's funeral and the subsequent family shivas received what they needed from these moments of mourning and memory – closure, expressions of love and gratitude, and the presence and reassurance of others.

CM:

And then there is the dark inverse of this beautiful story - A death during COVID, though not *from* COVID. David S. Cohen, a two-time president of this congregation, was a teddy-bear of a man with a jolly laugh, an unshakeable sense of morality, and a remarkable awareness of the blessings in his life. David suffered, what looked like, a major stroke in May of 2020, during the worst of times in the Stamford area's COVID crisis. Doctors were overwhelmed with the

masses of patients and nurses were working round-the-clock. Nursing facilities, businesses and private homes were barring entry to anyone attempting to enter from outside and the hospital had enacted even stricter no-entrance policies. The healthcare workers were doing their best, but still, no one in David's family could contact the doctors and nurses caring for him. His family had no idea what was happening within the hospital walls. They couldn't visit him to comfort him and sit by his side. They couldn't get updates on his condition and they were left feeling completely helpless. In their desperation, David's family called Temple Sinai and, thanks to some congregants who work in the hospital, they were able to arrange a video call. At least they got to see him, virtually, one last time. David died alone in the hospital. Due to COVID precautions, his funeral was attended by only immediate family, and shiva was of a gallery-view of Zoom windows, each participant awkwardly unmuting to express condolences to Judy and his daughters. It was an excruciating way to say goodbye to a loved one.

RT:

More than four and a half million have lost their lives to COVID these past 18 months. There is not one among us who is not mourning the painful loss of a friend, a colleague, a family member or neighbor. While not all these losses are due to COVID, we are all mourning a life lost and we've had to endure it without the traditional mourning processes. In many cases, we didn't get to say goodbye or hug them one last time because we were not allowed entry at the hospital. Perhaps it wasn't safe to catch a flight across the country to attend the funeral service in person. Maybe there was no funeral service at all. Often, during these many months, families dispensed with sitting shiva altogether. There were no memories shared over meals. No comforting hugs or reassuring hands to hold. Under normal circumstances, Judaism provides us with a set framework for grieving which insists on community and connection. We are supposed to gather at a house of mourning. We can only say Kaddish in a minyan. It is even customary for someone to stay with the body of the deceased before it can be laid to rest. During COVID, we have been robbed of our sacred tradition of gathering in community. We are not meant to grieve alone.

CM:

Some of you are here today to mourn the loss of someone who died long ago, before COVID. Maybe you even lost someone right before the pandemic and can reflect with gratitude that you *were* able to lay your loved one to rest with all the traditional rites and rituals. Perhaps you're wondering how your long-passed loved one would have fared during this challenging time. Maybe you consider it a blessing they didn't have to live to see these difficult days. You might even feel a bit guilty for your loved one's "good death" when bombarded with the horror stories of loss in COVID times. As we sit here today, we are surrounded by a swirl of emotions. We invite you to sit in the complexity of these feelings, let them wash over as you remember your loved ones who no longer walk this earth.

RT:

Midrash tells us that the burning bush was aflame for a very long time. Countless never-to-be named individuals walked right past it and never even noticed. Only Moses was attuned to his surroundings, sensitive to God's presence as the universe, and his eyes were open to the miracle of the unconsumed bush. Pre-COVID mourning was certainly not perfect. Often, after the initial memorial and shiva, everyone else around the mourner goes on with life. In the weeks after we have suffered a loss, most walk past and have absolutely no idea the depth of pain and suffering we still feel.

CM:

In contrast to the subtlety of the burning bush, the moment of revelation on Mount Sinai was so all-consuming – we read how the earth-shook, thunder and lightning rained down from the heavens – it was impossible for the Israelites not to notice. They trembled in fear and tried to hide, but it was undeniable and inevitable. Overwhelming and all encompassing. During the pandemic, death has been thrust in our faces unlike any other time in our recent history. It

is impossible not to notice the pain and loss around us. We are, each of us, mourners and we can't ignore the global pain we're feeling.

RT:

For many, as a coping mechanism, a kind of emotional self-preservation, our minds have fogged over and a general numbness has settled upon us. We are zombies, wandering around in a haze, forgetting names and details that used to come easily to mind. It's natural to want to turn away, to turn off the feelings of loss and ignore the suffering around us. We no longer need to be awakened to loss – it has become part of our everyday reality. But perhaps in this moment of *yizkor*, of memory, we can also awaken to the blessings we so often overlook. As we move into this new year, what would the loved one, whose memory brought you here today, tell you to do with your life? Can you imagine them using these words found in the Machzor?

CM:

"Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep!

Rouse yourselves from your slumber!

Awake, like Israel at the sea, to the joyful song of Miriam and Moses:¹

RT:

The text acknowledges that most of us walk through life largely slumbering but still allows for the possibility that we might awake.

CM:

Awake, like Israel at Sinai, to the dignity of being God's partners:

RT:

You Shall be for Me a holy nation, a sovereign community.

¹ Mishkan Hanefesh, Rosh hashanah, p.203.

CM:

It is time to awaken once more and rejoin our sovereign community.

In a recent NYTimes piece, columnist Adam Grant wrote:

“We find our greatest bliss in moments of collective effervescence. It’s a concept coined in the early 20th century by the pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorming session, cousins at a religious service or teammates on a soccer field. And during this pandemic, it’s been largely absent from our lives.”

RT:

The author is reminding us what we already know, that humans feed off each other’s energy and support and that, as social animals, we need that contact.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הֵיטִיב הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ

To quote Genesis, “God said, ‘It is not good for a person to be alone.’” Our traditions surrounding death and mourning emphasize and, in fact, insist on community and shared experience. These tenuous times have robbed us of these rituals and our ability to share the same physical and emotional space with others. But they’ve also reminded us how important it is to use the social structures that have been and will, again, be in place. Similar to the collective effervescence of joyful moments, we need to grieve with others to experience the depth of our emotions and the breadth of our loss. It is time to awaken to our pain and share it with those around us. In doing so, here in this community, we become both the *comfort-er* and the *comfort-ed*. In doing so, we acknowledge our losses and our blessings simultaneously. We

feel this pain in direct proportion to the love and connection we had with another. In the year ahead, how will we use our sacred memories of loved ones lost as a force of good in the world?

CM:

In a moment, we're going to ask you to turn to your neighbor, look them in the eyes, and share aloud the names of those you're remembering today and something you miss about that person. As you lift up these names, we invite the memories of these loved ones into this space with us. In the chaos of this cacophony of names, in the chaos of this crazy world, there is shared experience. There is community. There is compassion. There is awareness and love. All of these remind us to bring beauty and blessing out into the world. Turn to your neighbor now. Look them in the eyes. And, in full voice, lift up your loved one's name.