

YOM KIPPUR
5777

Goldie Cohen got into the limo at the cemetery after just burying her husband, Sam. The limo was filled with four generations of her mishpachah: herself, children grandchildren and several great grandchildren. As she sat in the last row looking at all of her family Goldie said: "Alavei, we should only have many more of these wonderful family gatherings."

Non-Orthodox Jews do not observe kaddish, yartzheit and Yizkor the way we used to. Because of this dramatic change Conservative daily minyans in the United States are disappearing and Adath Israel's is struggling. In the twenty four years I have been here I have witnessed a steady decrease in the observance of kaddish, yartzheit and, other than for Yom Kippur, Yizkor. How much longer our daily minyan will continue I do not know. What I do know is that it will only continue if we support our minyan. We will be reaching out to all congregants to make a commitment to attend at least one daily minyan a month, to observe yartzheit and when possible to bring children and grandchildren when doing so. At our last meeting, the Board of Directors of our synagogue made the commitment to do so. The future of the American Jewish community depends on such experiences of family, tradition and community.

What do we mean when we say *alav hashalom* and *iyeh zichronah livrachah*, may peace be upon him and may her memory be for a blessing? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed that it is absurd for us to worry about what happens to us after we die if we are not worrying about how we live. What does resting in peace mean if we do not pursue peace when alive? How can we have peace when we are filled with hurt and anger? Rabbi Joel Baron & Rabbi Sara Paascher-Orsow teach that every one of us has the power to write each other into the Book of Life by how we treat, talk to and respect one another. How different would our world be if everyone grew up being taught by their parents that the purpose of our lives is to write others into the Book of Life? Not too long ago a large family was torn apart by rivalry, jealousy and a very abusive father but they were able to make peace when they came together after he died. The rabbi who helped them during the shiva witnessed a family reclaiming what was lost over years. Someone died and yet a distant and divided family embraced. Ironically, death can give birth to life, rupture and pain can give birth to forgiveness and healing. This certainly is not easy but it is possible. When this happens it is recorded in big and bold print in the Book of Life.

How many of us have doubts about the goodness and value of our own lives? How many of us feel unfulfilled and that our lives have no lasting meaning? Every one of us is able to make our lives meaningful simply by doing good deeds. Remember the only currency we have to pay back G-d for our lives and all of our good fortune is our good deeds. The exchange rate for kindness and compassion is always at its highest. Anyone who lives like this never has to have any doubts as to the value of his or her life and when we live this way we have greater peace everyday and also as our death approaches.

There is a Talmudic story of a rabbi and his student watching a crowd of people at the port celebrating a ship's departure. The rabbi said: "This is all backwards; no one knows the end of the ship's journey. Only when the ship returns should there be a celebration." Netaneh Tokef tries to teach us every Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur that we do not know what will be a moment from now yet alone a year from now. There are two Torah portions that have as names the word for life in them: "Chaiyei Sarah, the Life of Sarah" and "Vayechi, and He Lived." In the first we read of Sarah dying and in the second of Jacob's death. Our rabbis tell us that only after we die can it be said that we lived; only after our ship returns. What will be said about us? Judaism has a strong bias insisting that we live altruistic lives; lives defined by giving of ourselves. Our hope is that when we die it will not be said that we had a good life but that we were good to life; that our lives were a blessing to others.

Traditionally, Jews are more concerned with yartzheits than birthdays. A yartzheit is remembering a real person who lived a real life filled with relationships, successes, failures, joy and pain. With death, we can be witness to all the good that people have done in their lives, the impact they have had, and we can experience gratitude for what they gave us. This is why observing a yartzheit is so important. Yartzheit allows us to keep our loved ones alive with us and introduce them to family who did not know them. There are wonderful customs for yartzheit including gathering for a special meal where we share stories and memories of our loved ones, watch videos and listen to recordings and renew our commitments to do tzedakah in honor of them. Yartzheits allow us to check in every year to see where we are as to our ongoing relationships with our deceased loved ones and to consider how our children will remember us. Have we found more comfort, has our respect and love for our deceased loved ones grown, has our hurt and anger lessened, do we still live by the values they taught us? As Jews we are commanded to pursue peace always and this includes with the dead. There are many who have died who left behind unresolved relationships. How does a survivor pursue such peace? Elton John related that his father never came to one of his concerts. When I read this I was saddened and this is only one example of the hurt and pain that lives on after death. In Judaism there are ways for us to make peace with those who died who wronged us and with those who died whom we wronged and did not make peace with. I have offered before and I do so again today to be here for anyone who wants to know more about these opportunities and healing rituals.

David Brook wrote that "parental love is supposed to be oblivious to achievement. It is meant to be unconditional. Parental support is to be a gift that cannot be bought and cannot be earned. It sits outside the prevailing meritocracy that leads parents astray as to what loving our children really means." How many of us intellectually understand this but have not succeeded in loving our children in this way? Unconditional love is not spoiling and indulging our children; it is very different. Being a good parent can be impossibly difficult even when we try; loving our children unconditionally is challenging even when we want to. How we meet these challenges determines our relationships with our children when we are alive and when we die how they will remember us.

There is an African proverb that says when an old person dies, a library burns down. Are we talking to our children and grandchildren? If so, what are we saying to them? Are we sharing our concerns and hopes, our disappointments and inner demons, what we are proud of and thankful for? Are we sharing what we think a truly good life is, what we learned from our mistakes and what we would do differently if we could? Are we sharing memories, passing down family history and recipes? What will be our last conversation before dying? What will we say and what will we fail to say? Given we cannot know when our last breath will be, are we communicating with our loved ones now? Children and grandchildren need to help in being sure these conversations take place.

The author Katie Roiphe observes: "Sometimes the lingering questions, the unresolved or unfinished conversations, the forgiveness needed, are too big for words." Nevertheless, we must try to find the words, to speak with our mouths, our eyes and with our hearts using our love and concern as our language. Roiphe observes that "most of us do not do what we can to leave a satisfactory ending, to clarify, absolve and ask for forgiveness and we must try not worrying about doing it perfectly only being concerned with the loving effort." On Yom Kippur, before Yizkor, we can make the commitment to make this effort for our loved ones and ourselves.

When losing a loved one, our sadness and mourning can open us up; sensitize us to how fragile life is, how fragile relationships can be and how fragile each of us is. We can become more compassionate and caring for those in mourning. There is never too much compassion and caring in our world. Our personal pain can lead us to comfort by our turning to community and tradition; family and friends can hold, support and love us. When we do not have these our pain is not relieved; it is buried inside as we go about our lives as if everything is fine. When going to minyan in other cities to say kaddish for my mother and several years later for my father, I received comfort from people I never met before and I have witnessed regularly in our own minyan visitors receiving comfort from our minyan folks whom they never met before. The fact is human beings can comfort other human beings. What greater significance can we have than to bring comfort to another person? This is the inspiration behind our new grieving group, A Circle of Friends, that welcomes everyone in our community.

The novelist Dara Horn tells us that Judaism is largely built on preserving memory. Each day that passes is lost forever from the present but retained in memory. But what if we do not do anything to remember? What if we do not do anything to help our children and grandchildren remember? We are a people commanded to remember Shabbat, coming out of Egypt and to remember the Holocaust and its victims. As we traditionally remember our loved ones less and less, the next generations will remember us less and less. Without remembering there can be no memories. When we remember we keep generations alive.

It has been said that we should never be happier than when we retire and that evening is the best time because we have done our day's work. Enjoying a sunset is our reward for a life lived well. Perhaps that is why sunsets can become more beautiful as the years go by.

Growing old is taking the long way home. It is what we all hope for and G-d willing will be blessed with: growing old with grace, love and peace. Atul Gawande who wrote "Being Mortal" understands that being mortal is not easy to accept. He said that he does not feel any better knowing what he knows about the fact that he is going to die but he does feel clearer about his priorities: he wants to be able to communicate and connect to others. He does not, nor do I, want to go on living just technically. I hope that all of our lives to the last breath will be filled with connectedness and communication; that we will be fully present and have our dignity. Once again we are reminded by Netaneh Tokef that we do not know and we are not in control. We are, however, able to have hope knowing that without hope there is nothing.

There is a Buddhist practice of contemplating photos of corpses and imagining their own future bodies when they die—"Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate." The fear of death can paralyze us. Freud knew this and our rabbis knew this. It is told of Rabbi Huna that after he died and returned to a student in a dream he was asked whether he would prefer to be born again and Rabbi Huna responded: "Absolutely not! Though I know the joy of the world to come, the fear of death is more than I could endure again." Our fear of death makes us human and connects all of us to each other and to all who have ever lived. It is a great equalizer as is the simple but profound fact that no one knows what happens after we die. The idea that we may live on after death is a matter of faith and faith is the foundation for all hope not only as to life after death but to the future of our families, the future of our people and the future of our planet.

A study reported in the journal Science in 2004 that even though subjects reported deriving much more satisfaction from prayer and meditation than watching television, the subjects watched five times more television than engaging in any spiritual activities. How can any one of us expect to get our arms yet alone our minds, hearts and souls around anything relating to dying and life after death if we are not concerned with the spiritual quality of our lives every day? How can any one of us meaningfully deal with the death of a loved one or our own death when, if you will, we watch so much television? We must never underestimate ourselves as to the spiritual work we can do and the spiritual growth we can experience not only about death and dying but about living.

It is wonderful for us to all be together today and *alavei* we should do this more often. May we all live to 120 and be blessed to create inspiring and loving memories every day as precious and priceless gifts to our loved ones after we are gone. On this Yom Kippur may we all make a commitment to do so.

GOOD YOM TOV