

After the Death

This morning's Torah reading begins with the words, *acharei mot*--"after the death." This verse refers to an odd and upsetting episode from a few chapters earlier in Leviticus. Aaron's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, brought the wrong kind of offering into the Mishkan, into the Holy of Holies, and were zapped by a deadly fire. This reminder serves as an introduction to what follows: a set of instructions for the High Priest when he would go into the Holy of the Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Mishkan, once a year on Yom Kippur. According to the medieval commentator Rashi, the instructions begin this way as a warning to Aaron: remember what happened to your sons when they approached the Holy of Holies in an inappropriate way; you can only come in under very particular circumstances, in a very proscribed way.

Rashi may have captured the plain meaning of the text, but there is another resonance to these opening words--*acharei mot*--"after the death"--when we read them on Yom Kippur. They invite us to explore the connection between this day and death; between Yom Kippur and our awareness of our mortality.

As many commentators have noted, there is a way in which we rehearse our own death on Yom Kippur. It is traditional to wear a kittel, this white garment, which is like the burial shroud. We refrain from life-affirming activities, like eating and drinking and sexual relations. We repeatedly recite the Vidui, the confessional, which is otherwise only recited on our deathbed.

And as depressing as that sounds, it's not meant to be. Yom Kippur is supposed to be a joyful fast day. The teaching here is that if we could live fully aware of our mortality in every moment, without fear - if we could truly rest in an awareness that any moment might be our last - then our experience of our life would be greatly enhanced.

There is a famous Talmudic story about the great teacher, Rabbi Eliezer, who said to his disciples, "Do *teshuvah* one day before your death." His students asked, "But master, how can anyone know what day is one day prior to their death?" And his response to them was, "Therefore, do *teshuvah* today, because tomorrow you may die." [Shabbat 153a] Rabbi Eliezer was teaching his disciples, and he teaches us, to not put off the changes we need to make. Do *teshuvah* today, for who knows how much time any of us has left?

Rabbi Alan Lew writes, "Yom Kippur is the day we all get to read our own obituary." He means that this is the day we reflect on what would be written about us if this were indeed our last day on earth. What impact would we have had in our lives? How would those around us remember us? What is the Torah, the teaching, we would leave behind? Every year on Yom Kippur we are given the opportunity to face this truth and make the most of it. To put aside the fear that accompanies an awareness of death, and to step outside of the fantasy that we're all going to live to 120. If we could truly sit, calmly and clearly, with the knowledge that these moments might be among our last, what would we see? What would we know? What would we make of our lives?

In February of 2014, a doctor named Jeffrey Piehler published a piece in the New York Times about his experience dealing with his diagnosis of stage 4 prostate cancer. After 11 years of

living with the disease, he realized that he had come to the end of treatment, and he was now facing the reality of his imminent death. As part of his process, he decided to build his own coffin. He proceeded to befriend a carpenter and together they made the coffin. This is what he wrote about the experience:

"The project has smoothed the rough edges of my thoughts. It's pretty much impossible to feel anger at someone for driving too slowly in front of you in traffic when you've just come from sanding your own coffin. Coveting material objects, holding on to old grudges, failing to pause and see the grace in strangers — all equally foolish. While the coffin is indeed a reminder of what awaits us all, its true message is to live every moment to its greatest potential."

Each of us sits here in our own unique relation to this ultimate question of life and death. For some of us, an awareness of our mortality is not an academic question. Some of us are dealing with serious, even terminal illness. For those of us with black or brown skin, every encounter with the police may bring the fear of violence and possible death. We may live in or travel to places where random violence or terror is not an uncommon occurrence. For others of us, our own mortality might seem quite distant, yet we have lost loved ones, we have accompanied others in their dying.

For me, I am coming at this whole issue of facing mortality a bit differently than in years past. Last fall, as we chanted "who will live, and who will die" in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, I was aware that my spouse, Gina, might be one of those not written into the book of life in the year to come. And indeed, the book of her life closed this past March.

Seven months later, I am still very much in mourning, as are many many people whose lives Gina touched. I am also aware of all that I've learned, the hard way, in the midst of this process, some lessons which, with your permission, I'd like to share with you today.

In April of 2015, Gina wrote in her blog about her first cancer diagnosis, which she had received 16 years earlier. She wrote:

"Passover's coming, and many prayers for "liberation" have been floating my way...I appreciate the wishes, of course, but I gotta say, cancer is pretty damn liberating. When I was first diagnosed in 1999, I developed what I called "cancer eyes." No fog of bull*** or delusion. It's like putting on a pair of glasses for the first time - the world becomes crystal clear. I'm not saying that I'm enlightened or anything...But there is a clarity that we cancer-dwelling folks get as a sort of prize for what we're going through."

This clarity that Gina spoke about was a gift, and it is the awareness that we are invited into every Yom Kippur. If, as Rabbi Eliezer says, any day might be the day prior to our death, then what are we doing with our lives? When Gina received the diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer in June of 2014, she knew it was a terminal diagnosis, even if she didn't know exactly how much time was left. This was the moment in which she got to look at her life, and see what, if anything, was missing. Quite remarkably, she realized she didn't want to change anything. She loved her job, and wanted to keep teaching for as long as she could. She wanted to talk with her

kids every day and see her friends as much as possible. She didn't have a 'bucket list,' had no need to do any more traveling or have any particular experiences that she hadn't already had. Besides starting her blog a few months later, there were no major changes she made in her life, until the disease and the treatment made it impossible for her to continue working.

There is a beautiful teaching from Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, as told by Art Green: "Rabbi Nachman used to say, that prayers for 'length of days'--*orech yamim*--made sense insofar as they meant that every day of our lives should be a very long one, a day filled with *mitzvot* and deeds of kindness, to give it 'length.'"

I think in this sense, even though she was only 53 when she died, Gina had "length of days," *orech yamim*. Her days were indeed filled with *mitzvot* and deeds of kindness; she made a difference to a lot of people. Our society treats some deaths as tragic, others as not, usually dependent on how many years the person has lived. But there are people who live to be 90 who do not have "length of days," in the way that Rebbe Nachman taught. There are people whose many years on this earth are filled with selfishness and hate, who do little but enrich themselves or cause harm to others. And there are people who die far too young who have brought delight and joy and kindness into the world.

Perhaps we could start to see as tragic those lives filled with nonsense and negativity, even if they extend for 100 years; and take some measure of comfort knowing that when a too-young person dies, that in their time on this planet, they brought some good into the world, and left behind a legacy of love.

When I first started thinking about this talk, I assumed that this would be the main point: how in helping us confront our own mortality, Yom Kippur brings us to an awareness of the importance of each moment, of doing what we need to do before it is too late. And I do think that is true.

But in my own journey of grief, in first caring for Gina and then mourning her death, I've come to realize that there is even more that death and dying have to teach us.

This summer, I heard an interview with the poet Naomi Shihab Nye in which she spoke about a poem of hers that I know quite well, a poem that I've included as a High Holydays reading a number of times. The title of the poem is "Kindness." In the interview, Ms. Nye spoke about the circumstance of that poem--how she wrote it while on a trip with her husband in Colombia, right after they were robbed of all they had with them while they were riding on a bus. During the robbery, one of the passengers on the bus was killed. As she sat in the plaza afterwards, alone, while her husband went off to deal with their stolen documents, a stranger approached her, and asked her how she was, and if she needed help. Here is the poem that came to her in that moment:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,

what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

This is the truth that has been revealed for me, over these months of grieving for Gina: "Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing."

In caring for Gina in her final weeks, a wellspring of love and care opened up in me that I truly did not know I had within me until that point. It is amazing what we will do for another human being, when called upon. And there was a way in which the caring flowed even more easily once we had made the decision to go into hospice. The months leading up to that decision were pretty unpleasant. In addition to the challenges of a very difficult treatment, there was, dangling in the distance, the moment we didn't want to contemplate: the moment when it would become clear that there was nothing more to do. I was so afraid of that moment, and yet when it came, it was like a great calm descended. Here we were, and the worst was happening, and we were accepting it, instead of fighting against it. It was actually a relief.

I think both Gina and I felt calm once we knew that the fighting was over, the hoping was over, the denial of the end was over. And now all that was left to do was give love and receive love. Her time in hospice care was brief, just 9 days, but it was one of the more remarkable weeks of my life. As I wrote at the time to the congregation, it was a bit like getting a glimpse of the world to come. Every human interaction we had was graced with lovingkindness. It was if the kids and Gina and I were afloat in a little boat held aloft by incredible love and care.

It's not that every moment during hospice was pleasant; not at all. Yet even with the challenges, that experience of *chesed* and *rachamim*, lovingkindness and compassion, was incomparable. And in the end, when death came, that was a relief as well. It was time. And however sad I have been in the weeks and month since, it is not because I am sad about Gina's fate; wherever her soul is now, in whatever form, she is free. It's all of us left behind, missing her, who suffer. She is just fine, existing on some level that is quite beyond my imagining.

So this is one of the lessons Yom Kippur has for us: that if we can embrace our sorrow instead of running from it, we too can learn the lesson of kindness. If we can really know that the depth of our loss is also the depth of our capacity for love, then we will suffer less. I have learned, in this process, to think of sadness as a companion, a sort of sidecar on the motorcycle. Sometimes I notice it more than others, but I try not to push it away, get angry with it, or struggle with it.

So much of the time we live in fear of loss, in fear of the sorrow we know it will bring. Yom Kippur is an invitation to see that loss is inevitable, and that without it, we can't know compassion.

At the Passover seder this spring, about 6 weeks after Gina had died, I came across a commentary by Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg in the Reconstructionist Haggadah that I had never seen before. It spoke directly to my experience, and it speaks as well to what we are doing here on Yom Kippur. Sheila writes about the contrasting symbols of the seder: parsley, a symbol of life, in the salt water representing tears; dipping the bitter maror into the sweet haroset; the matzah as both a symbol of freedom and the bread of affliction. She asks, "What is the connection between these contradictions and freedom?" She goes on to say:

"Human beings are deeply conditioned to crave the pleasant and the sweet and avoid the unpleasant. This is a natural tendency. However, to be free means relating fully to all experience and choosing how to act because we wish to realize our values and commitments. As free beings we embrace all experience, and are not shaken or driven by our fears and desires to make our experience conform to our expectations. We are free insofar as we do not automatically identify pleasant and unpleasant with good and bad, with desirable and undesirable, with true and false. Freedom entails a perspective that is wider than our likes and dislikes."

We are here on these Days of Awe to wake up, to release ourselves from the "desire to make our experience conform to our expectations." Because the truth is that our experience has not, and will not, conform to our expectations. That much is guaranteed.

When I read Sheila's commentary at the seder this past April, while still in the early stages of grieving, I realized that grieving is a hard process, but not exactly for the reasons that people might think. It's hard the way being on an 8-day meditation retreat is hard, the way that staying in a relationship is hard, or parenting is hard, or doing most anything worthwhile in life is hard: because it demands that we remain present with what is, and not try to make it other than it is. It's hard because we have to live with all the feelings that come with love and loss, feeling the unpleasant as well as the pleasant. I realized that while grieving was sometimes really unpleasant, that did not mean that it was bad, or undesirable, or in any way false. It just is, and I need to remain in it, for as long as it takes.

The liberation that Rabbi Weinberg writes of, the liberation of not getting caught up in the endless cycle of desire and aversion, can also be the lesson of these Days of Awe. When we read that litany of possible human experiences in the Unetaneh Tokef--life and death, wealth and poverty, illness and health, peace and anxiety, safety and harm, tranquillity and torment--we aren't supposed to be wishing that we hit the lottery this year and avoid all the bad ones. Rather, we're being told that this is what life is about--all of it. Life and death. Wealth and poverty. Illness and health. Peace and anxiety, safety and harm, tranquillity and torment. Some days, some years, we'll have more of the pleasant than the unpleasant; other times, the opposite.

And what can we do in the face of that reality? According to the prayer, three things. *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*--these practices will help us meet that reality, will help us suffer less.

Teshuvah--in Rabbi Richard Hirsh's translation, "the process of deciding the direction of our lives." We can choose to live as fully in alignment with our highest values as possible, with an awareness of the Greater Reality within which we exist--whether we call it God, or the sacred, or simply What Is. Here is where we imagine our obituary if it were written today, and consider whether we are living our values, living in a Godly way, going in the direction we would like to go.

Tefillah--which can be translated most literally as petitionary prayer. I would say that one thing I learned in the process of Gina's illness and death was the necessity of asking for what I need--from the universe and from other people. Sometimes it was just calling out into the darkness, asking for help from the Source of compassion. Sometimes it was texting a friend and asking her to come over as soon as possible. Sometimes it was asking members and staff of the congregation to take on parts of my job, when I simply couldn't show up.

We come together over these holidays to remind ourselves that we're not alone, and that sometimes we need to ask for help. We're reminded of the importance of community, of not trying to do this hard work by ourselves. The thing about petitionary prayer is that we don't always get what we ask for, so we also need to be patient and realistic. But there is something about just admitting that we need help that can be a huge relief.

Tzedakah--giving and receiving; acts of generosity. It can be hard to ask for what we need, and it can also be hard to receive. When we move into the realm of kindness that Naomi Shihab Nye describes in her poem, we are open to both giving and receiving in new ways. As Gina's illness

progressed last year, a new gift would arrive on our doorstep nearly every day. Last December she wrote this in her blog:

"A book of poetry landed on my doorstep today. Every single day I get a card - or several. Many days I get a package - a book, flowers, magazines, ice cream (well, in gift card form), pictures by children whom I love. It's crazy. And it's hard to describe how happy it makes me. A present! A card! I feel like every day is my birthday. And it kind of is, because every single day someone, or multiple people, share with me their happiness that I am in the world. And that makes me awfully happy to be in the world as well."

What a world it would be if a person didn't have to be dealing with cancer to get such attention. That is what a world of endless kindness would look like.

The final lesson I've learned from this journey of grieving is that of forgiveness. At the heart of Yom Kippur is forgiveness, and it's also at the center of dying and mourning. When a person is given a terminal diagnosis, there is time to forgive, time to mend relationships, time to find some closure with loved ones. Gina was granted a fair bit of time, and it made her passing that much easier. But we are not all given so much time to prepare. This is when Rabbi Eliezer's warning becomes especially trenchant: I might die tomorrow, so I should seek forgiveness today. Jewish tradition is quite clear that while observance of Yom Kippur can repair a person's relationship with the divine, with our own hearts and souls, the only way to repair relationships with other people is to go directly to them and do what is needed.

Our tradition also offers us this consolation if we have failed to make amends with someone who suddenly dies. We can go to their graveside and ask forgiveness there, and know it will be granted.

What I realized, in the weeks following Gina's death, was that I needed to forgive myself. I was suffering because I had not been able to do more to ease her discomfort, because of all I wanted to do for her and couldn't do. I needed forgiveness for all the moments I wished I would have done something differently. I needed to ask her forgiveness, even though she was no longer here, and I needed to forgive myself.

Just as when we are grieving, Yom Kippur asks us to be gentle with ourselves. It's good to ask others for forgiveness, but not from a place of berating ourselves, not from a place of shame. It was out of compassion for Gina and her suffering that my need for forgiveness arose. That same compassion that we extend to others, we need to extend to ourselves.

As we enter into this new year, may we bring compassion for ourselves and others into the days to come. May we celebrate every moment given to us to the best of our ability. May we appreciate every person we encounter, and especially cherish our family and friends, and not wait to tell folks that we love them. May we ask forgiveness if forgiveness is needed; may we grant forgiveness if forgiveness is asked for. May we follow Gina's example and never be afraid to speak up when something is wrong, when someone needs defending, when the truth needs to be spoken. May the inevitable loss that we will experience be an opening into ever deeper

kindness and awareness. *Gmar hatimah tovah*--may we all be sealed for a year of life, of true "length of days."

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