

Lessons learned about death

An old Jewish man is lying on his death bed. His daughter comes into the room crying. "It's okay my daughter, I've had a good and long life, there's no need for tears. Mmmm, but what is that amazing smell?"

"Momma's making rugelach."

"Oh! Please, my daughter, it would mean so much to me, please bring me a piece of your mother's wonderful rugelach." The daughter smiles and leaves.

A little while later she comes back.

"Where's the rugelach?" her father asks.

"Momma said you couldn't have any."

"What?! Why?"

"She says it's for shiva."

My friends, since Erev Rosh Hashanah you have heard me deliver three sermons all focusing on October 7. It's a lot. I know. This morning I want to talk about a lighter topic: death.

So why do I want to discuss death with you on the holiest day of the year? The answer is simple. Today is a reenactment of our own death. Think about it for a moment. We deprive ourselves of food and water for a whole day. We are not supposed to concern ourselves with our physical appearance. We dress in white, the color of Jewish burial shrouds. In fact, this *kittle* that I'm wearing will actually be my burial attire. We ask forgiveness from God so that we might live another year by being inscribed in the Book of Life. And last night we began Kol Nidre by staring into an empty ark, called an *aron*, which is another word for casket. There isn't any other day more dedicated to death than Yom Kippur.

In recognition of this connection between Yom Kippur and the end of life, I have delivered sermons in previous years on the topics of Life after Death, Grief, and Ethical Wills. Today, I want to share a few lessons I have learned about death and dying during my almost two decades in the rabbi business.

I have officiated at more funerals than any other life-cycle event. It is not even close. I have been honored to help guide many families through this last stage of life by sharing space with them and their loved ones. It is a sacred duty and the most humbling aspect of being a rabbi. Knowing that I will accompany some of you on this journey gives me purpose to be the best rabbi I can be for you in the present moment. I am also aware that many of you will be a support for me and my family when I am mourning.

On the day when we are confronted with our own mortality, I give you several lessons learned, in no particular order.

1

You are not alone. Judaism stresses that we are not to let people die alone if we can help it. In the last stages of life and into the first stages of death, loved ones and community members will be by your side acting as *shomrim*, or guards. Nearly every custom we have supports this motivation to surround the deceased and mourners with family and friends. We show up for the dying and bereaved. We do not leave their side. The community is responsible for protecting the body and keeping it company while awaiting burial. One of my pastoral care teachers, Megory Anderson, wrote, “No one who sits with the dying ever remains untouched, It is a holy experience.”¹

2

The mitzvah of *kavod ha-met*, honoring the deceased, is taken seriously by those who tend to the newly departed. We treat the deceased with the utmost care. Just as we lovingly and gently bathe newborns as we welcome them into the world, our *Chevra Kaddisha*, Holy Burial Society, lovingly bathes and prepares bodies for burial. Near the end of a *tahara*, or ritual cleansing, participants ask forgiveness from the deceased for for any thing that they may have done to offend them or not show proper respect during the *tahara*. The body, in life as in death, is treated as a gift from God.

¹ Anderson, Megory. *Sacred Dying: Creating Rituals for Embracing the End of Life*. Marlowe, 2004. P. 11

3

Planning ahead for your death will bring peace of mind to you and your loved ones. I have heard that it's a strange activity to walk through the Beth Israel cemetery with Janis Ban and pick out your plot. But this is just one of the many tasks one should do before one dies. There is no reason to wait until the bitter end. Seriously, it doesn't matter your age. Filling out an end-of-life wishlist that we provide will ensure that everyone is on the same page when the time comes. You should make these decisions with the help of your loved ones. Write an Ethical Will and make sure you have an Advance Directive. Have all of your financial information and passwords easily accessible to those who you trust most to handle your estate when you are gone. Make it easy on everyone.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to those you leave behind are not possessions but clear directions on how you want to be cared for after you die. It will not matter to you at the time, but it will bring peace of mind to others. I have never heard of an *onen*, one who is in the first days of mourning, wishing they had more tasks to take care of. Our patriarch Jacob is the model for this lesson. He gathers all of his children together and makes sure they all know his wishes. Prepare now so your loved ones can be present for each other later.

4

Dying is not necessarily the worst thing that will happen to you. I have been in the presence of many dying people. I have held their hand and said prayers for them. I have even asked those who were still cogent if they were afraid. Never have I heard anyone answer in the affirmative and never have I sensed anyone was afraid. By the time most people are close to death, there is a peacefulness that washes over them. One of my rabbinical school teachers, Rabbi Steve Leder, wrote the following:

Most people are ready to die the way we are all ready to sleep after a very long and terribly exhausting day. We just want to pull the covers up around us and settle in for the peace of it all. We are not anxious about sleeping. We are not depressed. We are not afraid. The rabbis called death minucha n'chonah—perfect sleep. Disease, age, life itself prepares us for death and when it is our time, death is as natural a thing as life.

*Here's some good news. This means if you are afraid of dying it is not your day. Anxiety is for the living. And when it is really your time to die, you will be at peace and welcomed into the arms of God.*²

5

If they can help it, terminally ill people do not want to think about their own death all the time. Be mindful of this and try not to remind them of their situation. They know what is happening and if they want to talk about it, they will bring it up. Follow their lead. A Jewish funeral director wrote, "I recently talked with a teenager who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. People had been visiting with him just a few days after the diagnosis and finding it very difficult. He said to me, 'I'm not even sick yet, and they're sitting shiva.' We have to be very careful to always keep in mind that terminally ill people are still sensitive, living human beings."³

6

Sometimes people die on their schedule, not yours. It has often happened that one will wait to be alone in their room when they take their final breath. I am sure that some of us have been en route to be at someone's side only to learn that they passed right beforehand. This isn't about us, after all. Our need to witness this final moment is not always their need.

7

Reciting the *viddui*, or the deathbed confession, either for oneself or on behalf of a dying person can bring peace and closure to one's life. I recall with absolute clarity one time when I was called to the hospital room of a dying woman. I recited the *viddui* for her and immediately after I concluded the prayer with the *shema*, she took her final breath. She was not able to ask forgiveness from her loved ones for any hurt she may have caused them, and that is why the *viddui* is so powerful. It asks God and others to forgive the dying so they may rest in peace.

² Leder, Steve. "Rabbi Steve Leder's Yom Kippur Sermon: What Have I Learned about Death?" *Jewish Journal*, 12 Oct. 2017, jewishjournal.com/judaism/225598/what-have-i-learned-about-death/.

³ Wolfson, Ron. *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort. A Guide to Jewish Bereavement*. Turner Publishing Company, 2012. P. 12

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We will all die but not all of us will fully live. Every person has been dealt a hand. Some people truly are luckier than others. It is a fact of life. The universe does not care about fairness and equality. Comparing your life to another's or dwelling on your life's regrets are wastes of time. Make the most of the time you have and you will fully live. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."⁴ Choose wisely.

9

A clutter free and chaos free space is most conducive for dying. The physical surroundings, whether at home or in a hospital room, may impact the quality of death that one experiences.

10

The best cure for grief is to grieve. Let yourself feel whatever emotions arise in you, whether it be heartbreak, sadness, guilt, anger, or just plain rottenness. The mourning journey is not linear or predictable and everyone's grieving timeline is different. What feels normal to you might not for someone else.

"As awful as it feels, grief serves a valuable purpose in life...Grief signals to us that we have experienced a profound loss. It reminds us why the loss is so hard in order for us to feel grateful for that which is no more. And if embraced, it ultimately teaches us that we need to adapt in order to move forward. The end goal is to find meaning in our new lives. In short, grief opens our hearts and helps us appreciate what we've lost before it guides us to acceptance and a new life."⁵

11

Show up to synagogue and say kaddish on the yahrzeit of your loved one's death. This is for you and for the memory of your loved one. When someone realizes you are reciting kaddish, they comfort you. I see it happen every week. This is the power of being in community.

⁴ Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Pocket Books, 1963.

⁵ An excerpt from one of my High Holy Day sermons from 2020 on grieving in the time of Covid.

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What comes next? God only knows. This is why Judaism teaches us to focus on the present. The present is for us. The unknowable is for God. As my younger self used to say all the time, “don’t worry about it.”

May each of us be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. But more importantly, may the rest of our days be filled with meaning, connection, and most of all, love.

G'mar hatima tovah.