

Yizkor

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Congregation Rodeph Sholom

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How Much Did We Lose?

How much do we lose when someone we cherish dies? This is an impossibly poignant question particularly this year. We can't really know, can't really answer that question at the moment of impact. Every death is a unique experience with its own context. Some, of course, occur after a very long convalescence and gradual loss of physical health or mental acuity. Some are shockingly sudden—COVID-19, a tragic accident, suicide, sudden death by heart attack, blood clot, surgery gone terribly wrong.

What I observed over a forty-year rabbinic career, however, is that in most cases, whether death is gradual or sudden, we are not prepared when it hits us.

We go into a state of shock, of disbelief, not fully aware of the tremendous activity that is buzzing about us. It is as if we have been lifted out of the scene, out of our body, as if we are floating in an alternate realm.

This state, I have always believed, is a gift from God who has blessed us with many marvelous features in our personas, among them built in shock absorbers. We are permitted not to take in the fullness of what has happened to us. Death seeps in slowly like an IV, so that we don't instantly crumble from the enormity of the change that has befallen us.

How merciful, because for many of us we have just lost a great deal.

Rabbi Naomi Levy gives us a painful inventory:

My mother and father were walking from a doctor's office when a man tried to rob them. The attacker panicked, shot my father in the stomach then ran away. After seven hours in surgery my father was placed in intensive care. That evening when I went in to see him, he was unconscious. His face was so bloated they couldn't put his eyeglasses around his ears. There were wires and tubes coming out of all different parts of his body. The next day my father kept flailing his arms about. One of the nurses put a pen in my father's hands and he immediately started to write. Suddenly there was hope. My father was aware of everything around him. He was as witty as ever, even cracking jokes.

The next morning my father was taken into surgery once more. We waited outside the door. I remembered sitting there when the doctor came out with that uncomfortable mixture of fear, distance and disappointment on his face, uttered the two words that will remain forever etched in my mind: He's gone.

With those two words the entire world came to an end. One day I was a bubbly fifteen-year-old girl filled with crushes on boys and hopes for the future. The next day my whole life fell apart.

What died on June 23, 1978?

My father died. I would never again feel his touch, never receive his disapproving glance to set me straight whenever I misbehaved or his guidance and support when I needed direction. I would never hear the sound of his deafening snores, which always helped me feel sheltered at night. Most of all, I would never again have my daddy, the man who always made me feel safe.

What else died on that Friday afternoon? My mother died. My mother who had always been strong and had always taken care of me, overnight seemed weak and torn apart.

My family died. The man who shot my father also shot a hole straight through the center of a previously strong core. Now each of us seem to be incredibly alone, each of us is hurting too deeply to be able to comfort the other. We were no longer a normal family.

My faith in humanity died. I felt how could that man shoot my father, how could he? I no longer trusted anyone I didn't know.

My belief that life is predictable and orderly died. At fifteen I became a pessimist, convinced that something terrible was lurking around every bend.

All holidays died. The first Passover after my father's death, I begged my grandfather to take my father's seat at the head of the table but he declined. I can't sit in your father's seat, he said. I can't take his place.

Dinner conversation died.

The ability to walk down the street and feel safe died.

One more thing died in June of 1978. God died too. The God who performed great miracles, the God who protects and defends, the God who answers all prayers. What happened to that God the night my father was standing on the street?

It has been 20 years since my father's death, and not a day goes by when I do not think of him. I cannot make a decision without wondering how he might have advised me. Every celebration, every birth, every joy is tinged with bittersweet longing for his presence, his loving glance.

It is clear to Naomi Levin, even now, that nothing or no one will fill the terrible void. Amputation has occurred and though much resilience and much compensation will take place, the amputation is

permanent. The life of ordinary joys and aggravations, of pressures and projections, is suddenly dashed. The grief journey often seems to be a herculean effort. We're exhausted all the time as if we are pushing a boulder up a steep hill. Our dreams are suddenly replaced by harsh reality.

Leonard Fein wrote a book called *Against the Dying of the Light* when his 30-year-old precious daughter Nomi lost her battle to live for life. He quotes a letter that he had written to her when she was nineteen years of age full of hopes and dreams,

On your 19th birthday what I really want to say is thank you—for all these good years, truly good years past. May every step of your way be marked with meaning and with delight; may the pain of this part of life be eased by the pride you feel in your accomplishments, and in what you mean to those who love you; may your choices be wise and productive and may your mistakes be rare and reversible; may the light and the warmth and the sheer pleasure you brought to me be your own companions all the days of your life. And may God continue to bless you and to keep you and make His countenance to shine upon you, and grant you peace.

What heartache overwhelms Label as he realizes that those hopes were gone when her precious life was snuffed out. What can we possibly do in the face of such loss, what can we say? Comfort is so hard to find or to give. Truth be told we make few attempts in the face of tragedy. Since we don't know what to say or what to do, too often we do nothing. Leonard Fein or Label as likes to be called teaches us otherwise: People wrote me letters. Again and again, they'd begin, "I don't know what to write." No matter. It is the fact of reaching out rather than the content that registers.

I confess: in my head I carry a list, a short list of the people who should have written or called or e-mailed and did not. Now, this is the most painful confession: my name appears on other's people's lists. We are, almost all of us, awkward around the fact of death. It is easier not to write or visit and I've done my share of not writing and not visiting. No more. The wisdom of the ritual forms of comfort and the etiquette of condolence cannot be exaggerated. Even the belated expression of sympathy is better, far better, than silence.

We often think of the enormity of our losses, but we rarely think about children when their parents die.

Susan Radin, age thirteen.

My mother died seven years when I was only six. It was during summer vacation and the four of us were on a houseboat in France. One day my little brother fell overboard and Mom dove in after him. She must have had a heart attack or something when she hit the water. I still remember the funeral. After she died I remember coming home from school when any little thing would upset me and I'd sit and cry, "I want my mommy. I want my mommy."

My mother was religious so in second grade I decided I wanted to go to Hebrew School and I liked it. Last year when I had my Bat Mitzvah there were a lot of times I just felt that my mother was there supporting and helping me. Occasionally I have dreams about her. I do think my mother can see me. Not always—just at certain times I think she is watching me. Sometimes I try to talk to her. Like when I have a problem I just think it out loud. Mainly I like to think about my mother when I am happy. You know if I were dead and watching people come by, I'd much rather know that the people who loved me were happy with the memories of me than just always moping around and always asking why I wasn't back on earth.

Jack Hopkins, age 8.

My father killed himself last year. I don't really talk about my father very much. I talk to my mother once in a while, but I usually keep my feelings to myself because I don't want her to start crying. If she starts crying, she coughs a lot and then I get worried that she'll have to go back to the hospital. Sometimes I talk with my friends if they bring it up. When my father first died, they asked me how it happened and why he died. That didn't bother me because I already knew how he did it. I never understood why though. After a couple of months his dying became easier on me. After about six months I felt a lot better. I started playing again, getting more active and doing the things I used to do when my father was alive. Like playing baseball. Only now I practice with one of my sisters instead. He could really throw a fastball—like you couldn't even see it, it went so fast. My sisters can't throw the ball as well but are getting better. And I like soccer better now anyway.

Brave kids, trying to make sense of tragedy and, if they can't make sense, trying to find their way back to the life they had once known. As all of us, at any age, struggle to wrap our minds and hearts around the death that has stunned us, Jewish ritual brings its immense wisdom into the room, gently starting us on the grief journey.

Think about how much have we missed these rituals. Have we ever appreciated the wisdom of Judaism about death and mourning as much as we do when we have been denied their power in our lives?

Let us remember how comforting these rituals truly are.

The family gathers. You will not walk this road alone. Will there be traditional burial *Tabara*, ritual washing and wrapping in shrouds, or will we bury her in her most beautiful outfit? Some of you have told me how powerful it was to sit with your loved one before the burial, fulfilling the mitzvah of *shmirah*, watching over your loved one in the transition from this world to the next, reciting Psalms and pouring your heart out in this sacred, intimate quiet setting.

You may face the funeral with decided dread, you may feel that you just want to be left alone, that you can't face all those people. You may fear that no one will come and are relieved that the Chapel

or Sanctuary fills. Those you never suspected would be there arrive, they came because they care and you particularly appreciate their hug.

The funeral service begins. The themes of his life, what was important to him, what did she seek to teach by the examples of her life. Listening to what was important to them, we can learn life lessons on how we should live. What a profound teaching for us, the living.

Shiva can be difficult, it can be exhausting, but once again we are grateful for our friends who prepare our home, get food—incredible volumes of food, which overwhelms our table, filling our fridge to capacity, the towering fruit baskets stand in testimony to our community wanting to do something, anything, to help.

Yes, there is much to critique or satirize, in the shiva process, but even though we can't always hear what people say to us, we feel profound gratitude to those who take the time to show how much your loved one meant, how much you mattered to them. A community you've given so much to rallies around. You are not alone and you realize that for all that you have lost, you have gained a support system that will not let you fall, will not let you fail.

You are not alone also because God is there. Yes, we may ask throughout the process why did God do this to me? Where is God in the midst of my tragedy? But this existential question rarely dominates the early grief journey. More importantly, we need to know that we will survive, we will make them proud by how we will live in the aftermath of loss. At that moment God enters the void. Perhaps the words of the *Adon Olam*, “God is with me; I have no fear” crosses our mind and we can feel the warmth of God's presence.

At services we rise when we hear her name for Kaddish, you say words you may not fully understand or agree with at the moment, *Yitgadal v'yitkadash*, God is great, God is holy. No matter what we specifically believe, we try to feel the presence of the Holy One, we even feel the presence of our loved ones in that Sanctuary. Once again we feel the power of community watching you rise, perhaps walking forward to put stone on slate, we see them walking over to us after services to see how you are, giving you that hug which once again fills you with love and gratitude. Perhaps during the service we are hesitant to walk forward, but later we place stone on slate and hear that distinctive sound. The reality of death resurfaces, as you resolve that they will not be forgotten, that I will continue to take the time to say Kaddish to remember them, to gather my strength, to learn from the grief journey how to live a more caring, loving life, because she was with me, teaching me by the example of her life.

Ari Goldman wrote the book *Living a Year of Kaddish*.

To me the hardest thing about dying must be not knowing the end of the story. My mother and father left this world when their grandchildren were small and their sons were still settling down to jobs and homes and relationships. Our rational understanding is that my parents will never know what happened to us all. But how could they not know? How could

someone be part of the story one day and in the dark the next? In a sense Kaddish keeps these essentials alive. Maybe Kaddish is in itself a kind of afterlife. The one thing my parents knew with reasonable certainty is that we, their children, would be reciting Kaddish for them. They could be physically gone but their Kaddish would live on. I like to think of it as more than a prayer. I like to think of the Kaddish as a portal for the dead to connect to life.

Kaddish can be its own life force. Of course, some of us may not want to confront death so directly, don't even want to hear the sound of stone on slate. Because when we confront their death, we confront our own and this can fill us with blinding fear. Rabbi Harold Kushner helps us here:

A friend of mine, a clergyman I admired, turned to me with a problem. A member of his congregation, a forty-three-year-old doctor, was hospitalized with an inoperable brain tumor. My friend said to me, 'I don't know why but I just can't bring myself to visit him. I like him, I care about him. I know how much my visits mean to him, but I keep finding reasons not to go and it bothers me.'

I told him, 'I think I understand why you do that. I suspect you see too much of yourself in him. Seeing him ill and dying makes you think a year from now it could be you in that situation and you just can't handle that. I would guess you are afraid of dying. It's nothing to be ashamed of, most people are.'

'How do you get over this fear?' he asked me. I told him that I hope to live for many more years. But I was not afraid of dying because I felt satisfied with what I had done with my life. I have a sense that I have not wasted it, that I have lived with integrity, had done my best and had an impact on people which would outlast me. I pointed out to him that he could certainly say the same thing about himself, about his life, his love and his work.

Kushner continues, "it's not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We're afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days without the sense of who we ever really are."

So on this holiest of days, we know that we need to search for meaning, to live a life in which we and the people we care about can admire. To live a life that's not about me, myself, and I, but about the we, both in the familial sense and in the larger communal and global sense. Because, our wise tradition commands us to live, Judaism prescribes limited grief and grief rituals.

Listen to this pretty harsh warning, from Rabbi Meir in the Babylonian Talmud:

A person who meets a mourner after a year and speaks words of consolation to him: to what cannot be compared? To a physician who meets a person whose leg has been broken and healed and says to him, 'Let me break your leg again and reset it, to convince you that my treatment was good.'

Those words are hard to hear, but the point Rabbi Meir makes here is important. The average lifespan when Rabbi Meir was alive was 25. He knew we could not spend the rest of our days mired in pain, grief and endless recitation of the shoulda, woulda, coulda, what I should have done and endless recitation of all that I have lost.

Judaism fully realizes that no legal system can legislate feelings. We will feel as we feel, but what we do, whether we have the emotional courage to march forward and live as they would want us to live, that is the question and that is Judaism's profound prescription.

It is hard to believe that it has been twenty-five years since my baseball idol, #7, Mickey Mantle, died. The Mick was an incredible ballplayer who was plagued with serious injuries, a powerful addiction to alcohol, and liver cancer.

These are his own words:

My last four or five years with the Yankees I didn't realize I was ruining myself with drinking. Casey Stengel had said when I came up, 'this guy's going to be better than Joe DiMaggio and Babe Ruth.' It didn't happen. I never fulfilled what my dad had wanted and I should have. God gave me a great body to play with and I didn't take care of it. I blame a lot on alcohol.'

Sometime later, Mickey collapsed in pain. A battery of tests showed hepatitis and late stage liver cancer. Miraculously, days later he received a liver transplant. Yet nine weeks after that Mickey would be dead from liver cancer.

Those seventeen months were time enough to experience what few families do—the joys of renewed affinity. Sitting around the table after family dinner, the Mantle sons saw their own reflection beaming back at them. They realized that fame was a lever that could move mountains. After Mickey's death, they led a drive for organ transplants, distributing eight million donor forms in the shape of baseball cards. Within a year the number of available organs shot up two hundred percent.

Particularly at this Yizkor moment, there is an urgency to life. You remember the classic book, *Tuesdays with Morrie* where Morrie Schwartz was weeks away from death and could no longer move his arms and legs. In that book he pleads,

'if there's anyone you care about that you're fighting with now, let it go. Say you're wrong even if you think you're right. Because I promise you that when you get to this point in your life'—he nodded to his dying body—'you won't care who is right or wrong. You'll only want to savor every minute you have with them.'

Rabbi Mitch Wohlberg gave a memorable Yizkor sermon in which he recalls the words of those who knew they were going to perish on 9/11:

The words of 32-year-old Stuart Meltzer who told his wife, “Honey, something terrible is happening. I don’t think I’m going to make it. I love you. Take care of the children.”

Kenneth VanAuken from the 102nd floor of the World Trade Center left these words on the answering machine to his wife, “I love you. I don’t know if I’m going to get out, but I love you very much. I hope I’ll see you later. Bye.”

Martin Bingham, who died on United Flight 93, who called his mother and said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Jeremy Glick, one of the heroes who helped bring down United Flight 93 in the fields of Pennsylvania said to his wife, “Whatever decisions you make in your life I need you to be happy and I’ll respect any decisions that you make.” His wife added, “that gives me the most comfort of all.”

When someone precious dies, we lose so much. But, we can gain wisdom from them as well, crucial perspectives.

Rabbi Wohlberg quotes a man who lived a long, full life. He was not very wealthy but he left three successful sons. In his will, he divided his estate equally among the three of them but he put a certain amount of money aside for each of them to use in a specific way. This is what he wrote in his will:

Every year on the day of my Yahrzeit, if you’ll come to shule and say Kaddish for me, that would be nice. If you give tzedakah in my memory, that would be great. Most important to me is if ever you are in my Yahrzeit if you would use some of this money for the three of you to get together to go out to lunch. Knowing you were together would be the greatest honor you can ever pay me.

Knowing that you are together, burying the hatchet, loving each other no matter what may have transpired, is precisely what this parent and most parents want, that we may find our way back to each other and find peace.

“Dad, please notice: we are together. We will never forget you, but more importantly we will never forget your example.”

We rise for Kaddish.