

The dialogues began 18 years ago when I was a rabbinic student, and he a seasoned senior rabbi; we read, talked and emailed. When Dad retired 6 years ago, he and Mom began coming here to North Shore Congregation Israel, and the ritual deepened. For the past six years, my father sat in this sanctuary in the days preceding Rosh Hashanah. The room was empty. I stood on the bimah. Dad sat halfway back on the aisle, wearing a Brooks Brothers blue blazer. With my sermon in one hand, and his trademark red pen in the other, he listened, jotted notes and called out critique. These conversations culminated a sermon dialogue that he and I began each summer and carried into these Days of Awe.

This year Dad has guided me in a different way. In recent weeks he and I have traveled through time. I sat with his sermons from over half a century – sermons from his student days in the early & mid 50's in Cincinnati and various small midwestern pulpits through to the first years of this millennium in Short Hills, NJ, where, for 44 years, he served Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a community not dissimilar from our own. In those sermons Dad gives me written snapshots of American and Jewish history, glimpses into the past.

Dad is an eloquent guide with a keen sense of the spoken word. He looks at Jewish history with an eye toward pragmatism and learning. He turns to the key events of a given year and crystallizes Jewish lessons and actions needed. He allows me to time travel as he responds to the events of history and speaks out on issues, among them: segregation and civil rights activism; the Cuban Missile Crisis; the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy; Woodstock and 60's youth activism; the urban-suburban move of the Jewish community; the Soviet Jewry movement and rescue efforts of the 70's and 80's; the fight for freedom of choice; Bosnian genocide; and Israel's ongoing peace efforts.

Dad is a concise guide, teaching me at each historical stop. His only real limitation is that now he leads only on paper. I can't ask him questions or engage him in conversation.

My father died late last December, midway through Chanukah, in the waning days of 2008. His death came as a shock. He was 78. He wasn't sick. And, besides, his father, my grandfather, Morris, lived 'til

he was 102. Dad still, even in his retirement, served his community, acting with unannounced kindness, exemplifying his principles, and connecting people as he did better than anyone. But I of all people know from personal and professional experience that our expectations mean nothing in the scope of life and death. We never know what will happen.

At this season of turning and returning, I return to Dad's Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur lessons from years past, finding his voice at just the right time. As I read through his sermons, I wonder whether our own times will prove as interesting or full of change. Ultimately, I conclude, that isn't the question. It is not so much the history that we live through. Rather, it is how we respond to it in the present – and what we learn from it. This my father taught through his sermons on important issues of the age – just as *we* must respond to compelling circumstances and events of *our* age. Reflecting on Dad's life and his death, I realize that this teaching applies to the private moments of our lives, too.

Perhaps the lesson is best put in a reading in our *Gates of Prayer siddur*: "...in truth, grief is a great teacher, when it sends us back to serve and bless the living. We learn how to counsel and comfort those who, like ourselves, are bowed with sorrow. We learn when to keep silence in their presence, and when a word will assure them of our love and concern."ⁱ Please, don't get me wrong. I am not of the belief that deaths are justified by what we learn. I do, though, believe that we learn from grief as we learn from every experience in life, if we give ourselves the chance. Yes, grief is a horrible teacher, but a great teacher as well.

This Rosh Hashanah, this Day of Remembrance, I stand before you as its student. Yes, I am still a rabbi. But it is as a mourner that I remember and teach insights gleaned from death of a loved one. Certainly death is a topic that most of us would prefer to avoid – it's scary or uncomfortable. So I ask: please don't tune out. Please listen.

Why bring encounters with Jewish mourning to the bimah? First, we all experience loss, and, certainly, throughout our lives, we all want to support friends and neighbors who have experienced loss themselves. Second, because we have taken on a Judaism of

personal, autonomous choice, we have given up many of these mourning rituals as too much or too Jewish, and they have become *counter-cultural*. Consequently, we wrestle with just what to do at times of grief. Society may tell us: move on and be fine. But Jewish ritual, in contrast, places us right in the face of our vulnerability, not for pain's sake, but with a beneficial end. Our Jewish rituals of mourning push us to remain in our grief, directing it so that we can move toward healing and learning.

Let us take a few minutes to look at both perspectives, mourner and comforter, considering the traditions and purpose of our Jewish wisdom on mourning. Whatever our vantage, mourner or comforter, a turn to Jewish ritual is constructive. For the mourner, death is hard. We have to somehow function in our lives. At the same time, we need help and assistance if we are really to confront our grief. The wisdom of our Jewish tradition can help mourners figure out what to do, and guide the comforters, telling them how to support the mourners – in Hebrew, *nichum avelim* – even as they may be uncomfortable or uncertain.

So first, SHIVA: Jewish tradition is clear. Mourners are to stop, literally stop for burial and shiva, the Jewish period of mourning. Traditionally that is 7 days, for many among us today it is 3 or (sometimes) another number of days. We are told to stop working, to be with family, and even to stop doing unnecessary things in our homes. Sure this challenges us – even as it is meant to help. Shiva allows the family of the deceased to mourn, reflect, pray & be surrounded & supported by community.

In fact, Jewish practice calls on the community to comfort the mourners, making it a mitzvah or obligation. An important act of consolation occurs when friends provide a meal of condolence for the mourners on their return from the cemetery. So, have deli sandwiches or salads or whatever on the table for the family when they get home. Why? It's practical – make sure they eat. And, yes, food nurtures as it nourishes! Ironically, this tradition is flipped on its head as mourners worry about feeding the visitors coming to their home, as if hosting a social occasion. Yes, this ritual flies in the face of host mentality, allowing us to be undistracted in our grief, and that is okay.

A primary action of shiva is what we call a shiva or condolence call – that is, visiting the mourners at the shiva site to say “I am sorry” or share a story; to give a hug, or even to sit in silence. Frankly, this can be an awkward time; many wonder: What do I say? What do I do? Jewish law is explicit on this subject for both parties. Mourners are not to get up and greet even the most important visitor! And comforters are not to speak until the mourner does!ⁱⁱ What does that tell us? Talk if they want to talk; don’t if they don’t. Take the mourner’s lead. The visit is about the mourner. The short shiva visit is not a social call or a time to entertain or worry about niceties.

Consoling the mourner means prayer, too, coming to count in the minyan, the 10 people needed for prayer. That is, standing aside the mourners, saying with your presence: we are here with you as you say Kaddish. These important actions, alongside – of course – presence at a funeral service, are spiritual paths of consoling the bereaved.

Moving from spiritual toward practical, we remember the power of the written word. Calls, emails and notes tell that you are present even if you are physically across the country – just don’t ask the mourners to call you back! Specific memories of the deceased and lessons learned from the deceased can provide comfort that his/her life mattered. *Tzedakah* is always an appropriate act of remembrance.

On the most practical side, comforting the mourner can entail things we might not think about – like grocery shopping for the family, putting dinner on the table before the funeral ever happens, making airport runs to pick up out-of-town mourners – even just coming to play with the deceased’s children or grandchildren to give parents *time* to grieve or breathe. Most importantly, be concrete. Sincere, open-ended offers are lovely – that is, what can I do to help? – but very few of us will actually call back and say, well, actually, you could go to Target and buy diapers, or, help shovel my walk, or just make sure I have dinner or company Friday or Saturday night.

In the end, what is the purpose of shiva? Shiva allows the mourners to grieve without distraction. Shiva allows us to be in our grief, as we

allow the community to feed and support us, to stand with us for prayer and comfort. Living in our grief, and focusing on it is certainly not easy, but it is the first step toward healing.

Then, AFTER SHIVA: The continued journey of mourning and healing moves along the wise path of our tradition, through the first month or shloshim, and the first year, up until the 1st yahrzeit – the anniversary of the death, often when a stone is set on the grave. Even now, mourners may still find rituals helpful in finding structure and comfort. Some Jews say Kaddish for the month after the death; some who have lost a parent continue to say Kaddish for 11 or 12 months, weekly on Shabbat or even daily. For many Jews, a walk around the block signifies the end of shiva and re-entry into the world.

Mourners continue to benefit from communal support. So often it is after shiva, when the rest of the world has turned back to their lives that the mourners need support and relish check-ins or offers of assistance. It is never too late to reach out with your presence, with a condolence note, or with a practical piece of assistance. Offer to address envelopes for thank-you notes. Or fix things around the house or set up files. Know a parent with out-of-town children? Offer to come to synagogue with her during that first month of saying Kaddish; provide a ride and company.

And finally, KADDISH: Our Jewish mourning prayer, Kaddish, is the link among all of these practices. Containing no mention of death, it is the ultimate Jewish act in the face of a death, *and* it requires community; you need a minyan to recite Kaddish. Why say Kaddish? Kaddish gives us words when we have none. It links us Jews – even if you are not sure how to say it, the community surrounds you and speaks with you. Kaddish gives us ritual to remember and grieve. It allows us to stand in an unbroken chain of tradition, with a powerful, comforting action.

Kaddish allows us to be vulnerable in a safe way; we can show up to synagogue and join in the words. In the end, so much of our attitude and actions in the face of death have to do with vulnerability, as do our Jewish traditions in this realm. For mourners, vulnerability means accepting helping hands and letting others see us grieving. For

comforters, vulnerability means coming up against our own fears of death as we try to comfort others.

For all of us, vulnerability lies in the fragility of life. Each year on Rosh Hashanah we are reminded: “*Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom...Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day...How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who will live and who will die...*” That reminder can paralyze us for sure – and leave us believing that all is beyond our control. And, while it might be, how we respond to life and death *is* in our control.

As for time traveling? I truly wish I could... I listen for Dad’s voice, turning to his writing, seeking wisdom, imagining insights of the past applied to pages of history yet unwritten. And I learn. In the margins of those pages, though, are the greatest teachings of his life: the unwritten and unannounced acts of kindness that he performed every day, touching lives and creating community. These teachings of word and deed, are, ultimately, lessons of presence, being present. These are the lessons of my father’s life: kindness, community and presence. May they be lessons for all of us in this new year. May we in this new year strengthen ourselves and strengthen one another with acts of kindness and community. May we strengthen with our very presence.

Amen

The birth of this sermon is due to the gracious, unceasing patience of Jonathan Polish and Rabbi Wendi Geffen. Jon’s love and support at this season ever allow me space, encouragement and just the right questions. In these past nine months he has intuited and encouraged my needs to grieve, learn and create. Wendi’s friendship and acute editorial skills always make the difference. This year, more than ever, her faith and encouragement gifted me beyond measure. My gratitude to Noa who understood that yet again Mommy was disappearing to the third floor to write a sermon and tried to convey this to David and Talia.

That I wrote this sermon at all is still beyond painful. The messages of community, kindness and presence are ongoing; this is Judaism’s essence. Even the goal of teaching mourning practices is one I have held for some time. Just to type words saying that Rabbi Barry H. Greene can no longer sit in the sanctuary and tell me to slow down and enunciate, or assure me that my ending still isn’t there yet brings tears to my eyes. I can, though, say that I often hear Dad’s voice urging me sharpen my language and hear the spoken word and see his face as I speak.

This sermon is a tribute to my father. And it is an expression of gratitude to family, friends, community and colleagues who have exemplified the lessons of this sermon and supported my family and me as we have mourned and found comfort in community, ritual and personal traditions. In a year of great sadness, the acts of *hesed*, love and friendship bestowed upon us have been truly awesome blessings. -LSG

ⁱ *Gates of Prayer*, p. 623.

ⁱⁱ *Code of Jewish Law/Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, v.4 “Laws Concerning the Comforting of Mourners.”