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There She Goes, There She Comes

A little over two years ago, I received a call early in the morning. My brother Ben and his wife Heather gave birth to their first child, a baby girl they named Sadie.

That evening, we mourned the death of my grandmother, my father's mother, Anne.

Admittedly worn and overused, the words of Ecclesiastes that we read on Sukkot suddenly seemed vivid and right: to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die.

My father held his mother in his arms as she stopped breathing. Earlier that morning he had held his granddaughter, newly born, her breath just starting to form. Trying to hold on to the celebration of new life and the grief of loss at once was dizzying.

Ben and Heather added my grandmother's name, Anne, to their daughter's name. As they later mentioned, my grandmother's name did not go even one minute without being continued.

Over time, many friends have told me similar stories: they gave birth and then lost a beloved family member or friend just hours or days later – or they lost someone they loved and soon after, gave birth.

So often it seems, death and new life are intricately bound together.

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There is a rabbinic tradition that when a baby is in the womb of its mother, angels descend from the heavens above and teach the baby the entire Torah. All of Torah is whispered, letter by letter, verse by verse, into the baby's ear.

By "Torah" I don't mean just the five books of Torah that are written on parchment and sewn into a scroll. In an ancient rabbinic story, Torah means all Wisdom, all Truth, all insight into the inner and mysterious workings of the universe from its earliest beginnings to the infinite future. The story imagines that, before creating the universe, God actually peered into this Torah and found an architectural blueprint for the creation of the world. This is what is whispered into the baby's ear: the Totality of Torah, of Wisdom, of Truth, not just the black words on the white page of the scroll but the white spaces as well, containing all possible meanings hidden within.

For nine and half months, these whisperings of Torah are absorbed by the baby's *neschama*, the unique divine spark in her soul, where they settle and await to emerge into the world as she is born.

At the exact moment of birth, however, an angel comes and strikes the baby on the mouth, causing her to forget the entire Torah, and all of its potential, hidden meanings.

The teaching inspired a tradition, practiced in many communities dating back to Medieval times, of having a special Shabbat meal on the first Friday night of a newborn's life.

The Shabbat meal is called *Seudat Zachor*, meaning a meal of memory. The name for the meal explicitly and intentionally echoes the meal of condolence that mourners eat when they first return from a funeral.

Having been struck on the mouth and therefore lost access to the depths of Torah and Wisdom that was whispered into her soul, the newborn child is seen as a mourner.

The child's loss is the loss of memory. She cannot remember what she once so intimately knew.

I always felt that this was a terrible story and custom: children born into the world already mourning loss felt too tragic. We celebrated with unbridled joy with friends and family the Friday evening we brought our daughter home from the hospital.

But the *Seudat Zachor*, the special meal of memory, is not meant to define the child or the parents' experience. The meal is soon over, and the newborn child begins a life not of mourning, but blessing: she begins a life-long path of discovering on her own the Wisdom that was once placed in her heart.

This image of our souls, the inner depths of our being, listening to the inner depths of Torah as we are forming, and then, once born, mourning that loss by embarking on a life long journey of rediscovery, is beautiful.

This is how we mourn Jewishly: we continuously discover and rediscover the blessings of the family and friends we lost. We often name our children after them, hoping our children will carry forth their legacy and live out their best qualities, bringing the blessings of their lives more concretely into the world. This naming practice reflects our understanding that life and death, birth and loss, are so closely bound up.

The Hebrew Bible, our early rabbis, and medieval Jewish philosophers all grapple with the possibility that death flows into new life. In recorded history there has always been a natural, even instinctive curiosity and imagination about what happens to us after we die.

Like many children, at about three years old, my son Mica started to develop ideas about death. I remember a conversation he had with his sister, our daughter Elie, who was six at the time, in the back of our car. We were living in Israel at the time, driving back at the end of the day from the Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit HaKerem, where our kids attended camp, to our apartment in the neighborhood of Katamonim.

We were quiet after a long day until Mica decided to seek out the wisdom of his sister.

“Elie,” he said. “What happens when you die?”

Sarah and I looked at each other. We were so curious how Elie might respond.

It took Elie about a second and a half. Apparently she had previously given this some thought. “Well, most people will tell you that when you die, you just die. But I think when you die, you come back into the world and start all over again.”

These are the times when we realize our children are so much smarter than we are.

Unaware of course of the full extent of the theological and philosophical territory she was entering, Elie shared what she understood and imagined, or secretly hoped for.

Not feeling totally understood or addressed, however, Mica tried again: “I don’t mean when someone has lived and died. I mean when they’re dead - before they have been born.”

To Mica, there was little difference between one who lived and died – and one who was not yet born. Both didn’t exist in this world – one not anymore, the other not yet.

This imaginative insight that there might be a shared world among those who have died and those not-yet-born is the subject of the book The World To Come, by the young, Jewish novelist Dara Horn. I am forever grateful to my colleague Rabbi Leonard Gordon for introducing me to this transformative book.

The World to Come is the second of two novels written by Dara Horn that have won the National Jewish Book Award for fiction.

True to its name, the final chapter of her novel is set in *Ha’olam Haba*, meaning the world to come.

To describe what happens when someone dies, she uses the metaphor of the birth of twins. She writes, “when twins are in the womb and one of them is born . . . the twin who remains

behind watches his sole companion vanish and suffers an agony almost too devastating to bear. Only a moment later, he will understand that his twin has not died, but quite the opposite, that his vanished friend is closer to him than he can know. This . . . is also the way of real death and the world to come. Just because we think people have disappeared doesn't mean they have. They are closer than we think." (p. 103)

In an interview soon after her book was published, Dara Horn was asked about the meaning of this passage. "The world to come" is a phrase with multiple meanings," she said. "It's used in the Jewish tradition to mean a future redemptive age. But there are also elements of Jewish legend that discuss a life before birth—and for those who haven't yet been born, I realized, the world we live in now is the world to come. And for all of us, the world to come is literally just the future. In writing this book, I imagined that all of these worlds might be much more similar to each other than we think—that our lives are in fact the after-lives of those who came before us, and also the before-lives of those who will follow, and that we are creating all of those worlds to come with every choice we make in the world we live in."

In her book, the world to come is where new souls are made. People who have died come together to make people in their families who haven't been born yet. They pick out the traits they want the new people to have – they give them all the raw material of their souls, like their talents and their brains and their potential. Of course it's up to the newborns to decide what they'll use and what they won't, but those who have died get to decide what kind of people the new ones might be able to become.

Dara Horn's book has helped me to reimagine the realities of life and death. I can see members of my own family sitting together brainstorming and debating the unique gifts and also challenges each of their children and grandchildren have received.

I imagine my grandmother Anne, realizing there was precious little time before Sadie would be born, hurrying toward her own death so she could be part of the team picking out the traits that this new girl would have, giving her the raw material of her soul, her talents and brains and potential. My grandmother didn't quite make it, dying hours later. But I'm hopeful that her husband of fifty years, my grandfather Max, kept her desires in mind.

Of course we don't know anything about the reality of death. But this is the beautiful essence of the religious and spiritual path: it allows us to let go of our insistence of knowing; we can imagine and hope and even dwell in the mystery that surrounds us. The religious and spiritual path helps us draw meaning and gives us strength to live even with so much pain and loss that we experience.

There is a dramatic moment at the very end of Dara Horn's novel I want to share with you. There are two characters named Daniel – the mortal Daniel, who has already lived and died, and his grandson Daniel, who had been conceived but not yet born.

Just before the grandson Daniel is born, the grandfather Daniel is encouraging him to eat a fruit of the tree of life and therefore experience eternity –he would be born, and would never have to die.

At the moment that the not-yet-born Daniel is about to eat the fruit already dripping juices in his hand, his grandmother Rosalie sees him and screams:

“Daniel!!! Don't you remember, you're supposed to be born tonight.”

Tonight?

Rosalie then turns to her husband: “What was the point of this? Are you just teasing him? So he'll spend his whole life wanting something he can't have?” You really expect him to eat it . . . You actually, genuinely, want him to be born and never die?”

“Why not, Rosalie? Why can't he have what we didn't have? Why should his children have to watch him die? Why should –“

“Because that's what makes it matter.” Rosalie breathed.

This is the heart of the book: the unequivocal and non-negotiable truth that we will die is what makes our lives matter.

Encountering death – our own or the deaths of loved ones – reminds us, typically forcefully, that there is little else that truly matters all that much. The unyielding bond between life and death helps us to live more meaningfully, even more patiently and generously.

In his anthology of Hasidic teachings, the theologian and philosopher Martin Buber includes the teaching of Rabbi Yitzchak from the town of Vorki, Russia. There is a verse in the book of Psalms that we chant and sing during our Hallel service on holidays and the first day of each new month. The verse says, “*lo amut ki echeyeh*” “I shall not die, but live.” Commenting on the verse, Rabbi Yitzchak teaches that in order to really live, one must confront one’s death. But when he has done so, he discovers he is not to die, but to live. The encounter guides us to live more fully, acutely aware of how short our lives in this world are.

The Hebrew word “*zachor*,” meaning remember, and which shares a root with the word *Yizkor*, appears repeatedly in Torah, as if making sure we truly understand: whatever you do, however you move forward, do not forget to remember! Remember your foundational stories. Know who came before you. Know where you come from.

This constant instruction to “*zachor*,” to remember, implies that memory is as powerful and vital as living itself; that our experience of finality, of saying good-bye to someone we love, never again to feel their warm embrace, is an illusion; that death in fact is not final; that family and friends we have lost continue to influence us and shape those not yet born in the world; that the divine light that each person reflects during his or her life is eternal.

The Yizkor service allows us to imagine this for a few moments. Before we begin the memorial prayers, take this time to remember those you have lost. What did they look like? How did they laugh? What was the tone of their voice?

In the year to come, we will continue to find ways to remember their lives.

We might do this with stories, pictures, with conversation. Or we might take on a practice that was important to them.

A friend of mind lost her brother last year. He used to love reading mysteries. My friend had no patience for mysteries until he died. She reads them regularly now; still finds the stories unbearable, but she tells me he's with her on every page, which gives her hope and keeps him close as she continues to mourn his loss.

Find a way to bring the memories of our loved ones to life.

As a community we will continue to remember the members of our Temple Reyim family who died during this past year.

We lost two of our synagogue's first rabbis, spiritual leaders who led with their hearts and helped this community through intensive challenges and changes in the nation and world.

Today we remember:

Rabbi Harold Kastle and

Rabbi Philip Kieval.

We also remember three beloved members of our community:

James Michel (Michelle),

Mr. Reyim, Bernie Zigman, and

Leonard Serkiss, who died just this past Wednesday evening.

Although I did not know them, I have heard so much about them from many of you, and I feel connected to their spirits, which continue to echo through this sacred space.

We recall all those family and friends who have died this past year.

And we remember everyone we have loved and lost.

I want to end my talk today with a parable written by an American Jewish soldier who died in the Israeli War of Independence:

“I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails in the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch her until at length she is a ribbon of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says, “There, she’s gone!” Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side, and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her, and just at the moment when someone at my side says, “There! She’s gone!” there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, “There! She comes!”

That is dying.ⁱ

May we stay open to the possibility that those whom we have lost are not alone

May their memories inspire us and be sources of strength and blessing.

May they pick out good traits for our children or children’s children, unique gifts and talents – and challenges to endure, to teach us the meaning of our lives.

May we carry their lives forward as best we can, and find healing and comfort as we remember them.

V’nomar, and let us say, Amen.

Those whose custom it is to leave during Yizkor, please do so now.

In just one moment we will stand and begin our Yizkor service on page 290.

ⁱ (Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning, p. 313)