

Rabbi Daniel Berman
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The Last Touch

I have been thinking recently about the father of a close friend of mine. He died a number of years ago now, after suffering from profound dementia and confusion during the last three years of his life. His death was both a painful loss and a relief.

After sitting with the family in the closing moments of their father's life in this world, I called one of the leaders of our local *hevra kaddisha*, members of the community who prepare the body for burial. I asked if I could be part of the team that performs the *tahara*, the ritual cleaning and washing of his body.

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This Jewish approach to this process is called *kavod hamet*, meaning honoring the one who has died. Everything the group performing *tahara* does is meant to honor the person whose soul at that moment is in process of leaving the body.

God dwells in that space of washing. It's palpable, more concrete than other experiences. In the rawness of the work, there is contact with the Energy of Life and Death, the One that animates our lives.

In *taharot* that I have participated in, we said very little, unless necessary to support our work. We prayed a lot and sang *niggunim*, wordless melodies. Otherwise, we were quiet.

The *tahara* team follows the proscribed order of tasks, step by step: cleaning and washing, pouring water gently over each part of the person as a ritual bath. The body is never left exposed.

As the group begins the ritual bath, pouring water so it touches every part of the body, they pray, declaring the body pure.

They dress the body in *takhrikin*, the white linen shrouds that Jews have been buried in for thousands of years, reflecting the dress of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest in the Holy Temple.

And place the body gently in the casket.

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As he aged, my friend's father endured severe emotional, spiritual, cognitive and psychological suffering. It felt so tragic - not only because he was such a good man but also because it was a cruel disease. Before becoming ill, he was gentle and kind, with a soft touch. His children couldn't remember any *particular* time he raised his voice in anger. Or if he had yelled, they were sure he felt worse than they did, and he immediately asked for their forgiveness.

As often happens, after his dementia became more severe, he became more aggressive, sometimes rageful. The gentleness that defined his life was rare now.

This was the most difficult aspect of the end of his life. Many of his final interactions were hurtful; at times his family was afraid of him.

I didn't actually know him well, but whenever I got together with my friend, we made a point to also visit his father. One evening, as the sun was setting, he became agitated, confused and angry; he began walking around the room and yelling.

As he walked, I noticed his hands. Even when his body became tense, his hands seemed to stay calm. They didn't close into fists or stretch out with tension. His fingers stayed curved, his palms open. He didn't raise them. As his energy changed beyond his family's recognition, *his hands remained his*

hands, which had brushed hair, massaged necks, warmed feet, and put on neosporin. Hands that cooked and forced on children's hats and jackets, hands with burn scars from smothering flames he thought were too close to his young child's hair.

Now at the end of his life, it was as if his disease stopped short of his hands, as if the moment his fists began to clench, he would no longer be him at all, and his body would let go and his soul take leave from his body.

It took me back to my mother's mother, a nurse who raised her family through the aftermath of the Shoah. She died young from this same devastating disease, losing memory, language, physical ability, recognition of herself and others, but somehow her eyes were still her eyes. That's where we could still her.

For better or worse, we humans tend to relate and seek out connection to those who remind us of people who have impacted us the most. Much of this happens at a subconscious level. It's hard to stand outside of this experience enough to notice how we are responding.

In this case, however, I knew I was relating to my friend's father through the lens of my relationship of my grandmother: her eyes were now his hands, which would never cause pain, which knew only to comfort, until lifeless.

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According to rabbinic tradition, our caring for the dead is modeled on the way that God buried Moses. The ancient midrash, a genre of interpretation of Torah and imaginative storytelling, paints a portrait of Moses praying to God *just before dying*: "Lord of the world! Be mindful of the day when

You revealed Yourself to me in the bush of thorns, and be mindful of the day when I [came up to Mt Sinai] and during forty days neither ate or drank. You, Gracious and Merciful, deliver me not into the hands of the angel of death.”

“God replied: ‘I have heard your prayer. I Myself will attend to you and bury you.’”

God takes Moses’ soul with a Divine kiss, gently closes his eyes and buries him.

This is the Jewish model of caring for those who have died. *Chesed shel emet*, the truest act of love.

I was mindful of this midrash when I asked if I could participate in the *tahara*.

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During the *tahara*, I thought a lot about his hands. Even his death, his hands felt different. Before placing him in the aron, the casket, I took his hands one last time.

I called my friend that night after the *tahara* was finished. It’s a bit disorienting to leave the space of a *tahara*, to come up the stairs to the street of the world we’re used to inhabiting. The street you left feels different than the street you return to. The energy in a town is different late at night.

My friend noticed I was speaking slowly, and apparently my voice was lower.

We just spoke for a minute, but I’ve never been more humbled than when he told me that he was grateful that my hands were the last hands that would touch his father’s body.

That’s the gift of tahara. Those doing the ritual washing are the last hands to touch another human being.

In the coming weeks, I thought a lot about this.

I began to wonder: how would life be different if we considered *every* touch a last touch?

It turns out his is the subject of a poem by Ellen Bass, poet, teacher and chancellor of the American Academy of Poets.

It is entitled *If you Knew*.

What if you knew you'd be the last
to touch someone?

If you were taking tickets, for example,
at the theater, tearing them,
giving back the ragged stubs,
you might take care to touch that palm,
brush your fingertips
along the life line's crease.

When a man pulls his wheeled suitcase
too slowly through the airport, when
the car in front of me doesn't signal,
when the clerk at the pharmacy
won't say Thank you, I don't remember
they're going to die.

A friend told me she'd been with her aunt.
They'd just had lunch and the waiter,
a young gay man with plum black eyes,
joked as he served the coffee, kissed

her aunt's powdered cheek when they left.

Then they walked half a block and her aunt
dropped dead on the sidewalk.

How close does the dragon's spume
have to come? How wide does the crack
in heaven have to split?

What would people look like
if we could see them as they are,
soaked in honey, stung and swollen,
reckless, pinned against time?

I don't think we can manage the intensity of this perspective every moment of every day.

But what would happen to us if we knew that our touch would be the last one? Would we live differently? Would we be kinder? More compassionate? More patient?

This spiritual insight that comes from this question is the subject of many Jewish teachings, from ancient times to the present. The focus of the teachings is that we must confront end of life in order to really live, to appreciate the gift of breath.

In the Talmudic Tractate called Tamid, we find an amazing story of Alexander the Great asking ten questions to the Sages from the Negev . Questions like which was created first, the heavens or the land? Who is wise? Who is mighty? Who is rich? How can you make yourself popular? Is it better to live at sea or on dry land? And, most poignantly, "what does one need to do in order

to live?" To this question, the rabbis answer: "he must make himself dead." The teaching is interpreted by later generations of sages to mean, one must make oneself low enough to, confront and attend to the limitations and frailty of a human life.

Many centuries later, the theologian and philosopher Martin Buber picks up on this Talmudic teaching. In his anthology of Hasidic stories, he writes about Rabbi Yitzchak from the town of Vorki, Russia. Commenting on the verse from the book of psalms, "*lo amut ki echeyeh*" "I shall not die, but live," 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.

What do these texts teach us?

That we are all

*soaked in honey, stung and swollen,
reckless, pinned against time.*

When you consider death, you will learn how to live. When we see our lives through the prism of how short and sweet they are, we act a bit differently, with a calmer and more holistic frame of mind.

Relationships with people come forward. Things fall back.

Generosity comes forward, bias falls back.

Commitment comes forward, apathy steps back.

Forgiveness comes forward, resentment falls back.

If even for a moment.

Consider the end of your lives and you will learn how to live.

This is Yizkor. This is what we mean when we say the Hebrew phrase “*zichrono livracha*,” may the loss of your loved one be a blessing for you. A blessing that you live meaningfully and fully, that you are genuine and patient, that you see the goodness in others and forgive generously. These are Sacred qualities.

During this Yizkor, may your lives be blessed by the memory of those you have lost.

May their *neshamot* continue to echo through your lives and this sacred space.

Our community suffered many losses this past year.

We remember:

William Zucker, father of Orrin Zucker,

Jerome Stern, father of Mara Bloom

Donald Kaufman, father of Rachel Siegel

Clara Bogomolny, mother of Marina Weisburd

Susan Kron, cousin of Shelley Rossman

Joan Newmark Blitstein, mother of Dianne Solomon

Parviz Darviche, husband of Barbara Darviche and father of Lisa Joseph

Zion Bracha, father of Doron Bracha

Emily Goldberg, mother of Ari Goldberg

Arielle Evans, daughter of Linda Landsberg

Judith Kohane, mother of Daniel Kohane

Herbert Kamowitz, husband of Elaine Kamowitz

Joel Kirschner, father of Roger Kirschner

Richard Galler, husband of Vicki Galler

We remember them dearly. May their memories be a source of strength and blessing.

We turn now to our yizkor booklets, page 2.