

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Temple Reyim
Yizkor Yom Kippur 2019

“Letting Go”

A little less than a year ago I held my friend’s head as he died in his bed. His wife was holding one of his hands and their daughter the other hand.

We sang the refrain of a song he liked as his chest stopped its motion and his breath rested.

Until that moment of last breath, his family did everything they could to keep him alive.

Throughout four years of his illness, a rare cancer, they dedicated their lives to his healing. They researched the illness, called doctors around the world who trained in treating rare cancers, advocated for his inclusion in experimental trials, drove him across the country to the trials, encouraged him and loved him.

Even as we met with the end-of-life hospice caretaker an hour earlier, the family felt he could still open his eyes, begin to breathe normally again.

That hopefulness, which carried the family through four years of his disease, lived in a constant rhythm and tension with acceptance. They are not in conflict, hope and acceptance; they were simply both present, sharing space in the hearts of a family.

And - there are times that we are called on to begin to *let go*.

One of the many blessings of my work is the invitation to be with you and your families during the end of life. These are sacred moments. I also try to perform taharot each year, joining a group of community members in preparing the bodies of those who have died for burial. But very rarely do I hold the head of a person who takes his or her last breath and then lies in my arms.

I know many of you have had this experience, holding grandparents, parents, spouses and siblings, children and friends who die in your arms. It's an act of chesed, compassion; it's frightening and it's transcendent.

Jewishly, it's not intuitive that that's our work. A common understanding of a traditional Jewish ethos about life and death can be confusing. Life is holy. We call God *Chai Ha'olamim*, Life of the Universe, and *Michayeh Hametim*, who re-enlivens that which has died, as if to say God is in the living.¹ "Choose life," Torah teaches us, which has sometimes been interpreted and understood to mean: take all measures possible to keep a person alive. Halachichally, saving a human life, *pikuach nefesh*, establishes an ultimate concern for life, taking precedence over every other mitzvah; any positive Jewish law can be set aside when preserving a life is at stake. Our philosophers clarify that we are obligated to reflect on the meaning of our lives as well: Are we life-affirming? Are we acting in a way that celebrates the gift of a short life we have been given?

So it's confusing when we are holding a person who is breathing his or her final breaths; it might feel like we should be doing something. The truth is that our ancient Jewish teachers teach us about the *gift of letting go*.

¹ Jewish Insights, Harold Schulweis

In the Talmudic volume called Ketubot, we learn about the end of life of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, Judah the prince. Rabbi Yehudah was one of the greatest sages in Jewish history. He compiled and redacted the collection of Jewish oral teachings called the mishna, which became the foundation for Talmud, the development of Judaism as a living tradition.

The story goes like this:

On the day that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died, the Sages decreed a fast, and begged and prayed for Divine mercy so that he would not die. They said: anyone who says that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi has died will be stabbed with a sword.

Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi had a maidservant who cared for him. She ascended to the roof and began to pray: The upper realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and the lower realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, she prayed.

May it be the will of God, she cried out, that the lower worlds should impose their will upon the upper worlds that he may live.

However, **when she saw how many times he would enter the bathroom and remove his tefillin, and then exit the bathroom and put them back on, and how he was suffering with his intestinal disease, she said: May it be the will of God that the upper worlds should impose their will upon the lower world that he may die.**

The Sages, meanwhile, **would not be silent**; they would not refrain **from begging for mercy** so that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would not die.

*Seeing that they continued to pray, the maidservant of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi **took a jug and threw it from the roof to the ground.*** Due to the sound of the shattering ceramic, the Sages were distracted, and **were** momentarily **silent**, refraining for just one moment **from** begging for **mercy**, **and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died.**

There was a rabbi named Bar Kappa, whose opinions often conflicted with those of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi.

The Sages said to bar Kappara: go and find out the condition of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. **He went** and **found that** Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi **had died. He tore his clothing and reversed** them so that **the tear** would be **behind him** and not be noticed. When he returned to the Sages **he said:** The **angels and righteous** mortals both **clutched the sacred ark. The angels triumphed** over the **righteous, and the sacred ark was captured.**

They said to him: Has **he died?** **He said to them:** **You have said it and I did not say it,** *as it had been decided that no one should even say that he died.*

At the time of his death, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, raised his [hand] toward Heaven and said in prayer: Master of the Universe... May it be Your will that there be peace in my heavenly rest. A Divine Voice emerged and said: "He enters in peace..." (Isaiah 57:2).

Wow.

What a story.

This is a story about the tension of hope and acceptance. The Rabbis were terrified, unable to accept that their beloved teacher would die, unwilling to even allow his death to be spoken. Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi's maidservant, at first, also couldn't accept his death, and prayed that the upper realm of acceptance be overpowered by the lower realm, the hopeful prayers of man.

When his maidservant saw his suffering, her prayer changed, and she took the matter into her own hands, throwing a jar that shattered, distracting the sages' prayers and allowing this soul to depart.

This story is a foundation of Jewish ethics on end of life, guiding and allowing us to tell someone we love who is suffering and ready to die, "you may go."

There is a beautiful midrash, an ancient rabbinic story, about the interaction between the Israelite people and Moses at the time of his death. In Torah, it is "*b'etzem hayom*" - the middle of the day - when God tells Moses that he will die in the wilderness, and not cross over to Eretz Yisrael. The midrash claims it was essential that his death be during the *day*, not alone at night, so that the people could encounter his final moments. They were summoned to the deathbed of Moses to witness the loss of their spiritual leader.

How would they react? Would they cry out? Protest? Pray for his life? Try to hold him back before he stepped away from them to ascend the mountain and die there? No words are recorded in Torah - the text gives us only silence. So what were they summoned for? The ancient midrash, prescient and wise, suggests that they were summoned to watch him leave, and in their quiet, give him permission to step back from them and allow him to return to God and to the earth.

The midrash is even bolder than this, imagining that God, too, was in mourning and expressed regret, crying out in prayer, “who will stand up for Me now? Who will stand up for the Israelites if I, God, became angry? Who will seek mercy and forgiveness when they have transgressed?”

The midrash ends with God’s acceptance: God kisses Moses, and draws out his soul with that kiss.

In a beautiful essay called “Saying Good-bye” that comments on this midrash, Rabbi Steven Saltzman, a thoughtful and beloved rabbi of a congregation in Toronto who died 5 years ago from cancer, wrote that we learn three things from the Israelites’ encounter of Moses’ death:

First, that our presence with someone who is dying is sacred.

Second, that we cannot do or say anything that will change the reality of loss. But we can hold the moment graciously and lovingly.

And finally, we learn the essential theological teaching of Judaism about death: that we don’t die alone, that God is with us. We might say it this way: the force of life that brings us into the world also carries us out. When a child is born, we listen closely for the sound of her first cry, a first breath. We can learn to *just as lovingly* hold a person who is breathing her way *out* of this world.

This kind of loving embrace and acceptance is a unique *gift*.

Endowing the end of a life *with a sense of gift-giving* helps us to endure the pain of the loss.

There is much ancient Jewish wisdom about *embracing our living and our dying as a gift*.

Our rabbinic and mystical traditions teach: the world’s greatest gift is the *neshama*, the reflection of the Divine that dwells in each person. The Hebrew word *neshama* comes from the word *linshom*, to breathe. The *neshama* is the breath that God breathes into our bodies, animating our being. It is an

eternal breath, never extinguished. *We do not earn these gifts, and we do not own them. We receive gifts and we let them go.*

Letting go is not giving up, or quitting, or deciding one has had enough - that is the language of war, which has unfortunately become very common language for dying. We “battle disease” and “fight to survive.” We need to change our language to reflect a spiritual process.

Letting go is an expression of agency, of readiness, of openness to begin the process of dying.

Affirming this readiness, giving permission for a loved to leave is our gift to them. We can say, “I love you. You can let go. I will be ok. My life will be immeasurably diminished, but I will go on until it is my time to be with you. Until then, I will remember you every day.”

This affirmation is Yizkor.

This has been a hard year for our loving community. We sustained many losses. May your lives be blessed by the memory of those you have lost.

We remember:

Martha Usden, sister of Caroline Essig

Edward Shade, father of Steve Shade

Daniel Solomon, husband of Dianne Solomon

Ruth Fargotstein, step mother of Cyd Josephy

Hella Hakerem, mother of Gita Foster

Samuel Hatch and Freda Hatch, father and mother of Tracy Schneider

Richard Levy, husband of Karen Shaffer

Richard Metcalf, uncle of David Metcalf

Lorraine Mayer, mother of Robin Stein

Helen Lefkowitz, sister of Arthur Kaufman

Stephen Burwick, father of Michael Burwick and father-in-law of Nicole Greene

Clara Sowalsky, mother of Joel Sowalsky

Harold Cedar, father of Jori Grossack

Saul Cohen, father of Amy Kruglak

Vivian Soltoff, mother of Steve Soltoff

Marjorie Smith, mother of Wendy Smith

Mary Georgagi, mother of June Rubin

Ann Radding, sister of Alan Radding

Roz Brunell, mother of Rick Brunell

Judith Listernick, mother of Joan Listernick

Robert Moger, uncle of Tatiana Radonsky

Phyllis Cylinder, sister of Wendy Scheinfeld

Esther Grunwald, sister of Jean Max

Freda Hatch, mother of Tracy Schneider

Lisa Percy, wife of Martin Kolker and

Rachel Vainman, mother of Vlad Elgart

During this Yizkor, may all those you are remembering be a blessing for strength, for healing and for meaning. May you be enriched by their memory, even as you live with the pain of their loss.

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