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Rosh Hashanah 5779 – The Most Important Thing

Late last year, paramedics brought a 70-year old man to a Miami emergency room. He was breathing but unconscious and had no identification and no family present. He had a heart condition, history of lung disease, and diabetes. After he was admitted, his blood pressure dropped dangerously and his kidneys were failing. The doctors faced a problem: Tattooed across his chest were the words “Do Not Resuscitate” and his signature. The word NOT was underlined.ⁱ The doctors later wrote: “We initially decided not to honor the tattoo, invoking the principle of not choosing an irreversible path when faced with uncertainty.”ⁱⁱ

The medical team gave their patient the basic measures to stabilize him but its members were conflicted – it was hard to ignore that tattoo - so they called for an ethics review. The hospital’s ethicist advised them to follow the tattoo’s instructions arguing that clearly this person had thought about exactly this scenario and took the most conspicuous and clear means possible to convey his wishes to us.

I have been in that room before. This past year seemed to bring more of that than usual – sometimes in a hospital or hospice room and sometimes at your home; sometimes I’m there before the person dies, sometimes it’s after. I have never faced that exact scenario and only a few times been called on to help a family or medical team determine the proper course of treatment at the end of life. I am, however, well acquainted with the matter of final wishes.

When David Iselin died this year just before his 29th birthday it was a shock. A lot of our members knew David as a teacher in our religious school and Noar program. I knew him from Albany, NY, where I had my first assistant rabbi position and he was in middle school and on the youth group board when I was its advisor. I knew David’s whole family including his grandparents. His parents coincidentally were visiting that weekend and were supposed to meet David for dinner. I joined them in the Emergency Room at Sibley. It was a fluke, an aneurysm I think was found to be the cause, but totally unexpected. I think he died before he reached the hospital certainly before any of us got there. A lot was hard about that night and I prefer to keep those memories in a shadow box on a table in a room in my mind that receives

few visitors. The unfinished business of a life just entering its mature stage has been one of the hardest things to hold. Promise carried the afternoon of the day he died. David and his parents had gone for brunch and to the jeweler where they picked up the engagement ring he was about to give his soon-to-be fiancée Abby. That made for an easy decision, they gave her the ring. Because he was a teacher and neurotically over-shared things with his parents, David's legacy was not that hard to retell. But death's hand was so stunningly swift and unannounced that it was hard not feel that many things had gone unsettled and unsaid.

Years ago, I stood with a widow in the parlor of her home after her husband, a healthy and active but old man, had been killed in an accident. Talking of the funeral and the purposes of a eulogy, I encouraged her to use the process, whether she spoke or not, to express the most important things from her life with her husband, and, considering the surprising suddenness of his death, anything that had been unsaid. She and her family had been remarkable composed, peaceful and easy spirited the whole afternoon. She took my hand and said, "No, no. There was nothing left unsaid between us. I assure you we shared it all."

Each year on Rosh Hashanah, we imagine the Book of Life open for every name to be inscribed. We begin a ten-day dialogue with our own mortality. I can imagine what you're thinking: "Great! Classically Jewish move to make everything – even New Year's – about us dying." It is a fair point but I'd like you to consider a more constructive and positive dynamic. This should not be a time of dread but a time for what Psychiatrist Irving Yalom calls an "awakening experience," which is a result of death awareness that can lead to major life changes. (Yalom, 30). Whatever else happens during the high holy days, we should feel "prompted to grapple with our fundamental human responsibility to construct an authentic life of engagement, connectivity, meaning, and self-fulfillment." (Yalom, 34). This is, in fact, the intended way of the high holy days. "It is not the death of sinners that I seek," we read in our liturgy, "but that they should turn and live."

So, let us enter this new year with talk about life and how we live so that the day of our death – may it be far from now - finds us well prepared, balanced, clear and without regret. I have some exercises for you to complete and some homework. There are two things I encourage you to do between now and Yom Kippur. One, write a "Dear Friends and Family

Letter” that serves as an ethical will. Two, complete the legal papers necessary to facilitate your end of life care and disposition of your property: a last will and testament, health care proxy, and advance medical directives.

Dr. VJ Periyakoil, the director of Palliative Care Education at Stanford has done some research about approaching the end of life. She wrote: “remember that dying is essentially a social and intimate family event that has become overly medicalized [only] in the past century.” I would add that beyond the medicalization of death is another layer: the professionalized services like funeral homes, cemeteries, catered receptions and of course clergy. But the most important part of any person’s dying is their life. When our temple member Henry Morgenthau died at 101 he left behind a collection of published poems, a writing practice that he had only embraced in the last few years of his life. In “The Last Act,” Henry wrote, “I’m telling you my dear, dying is the most important act of your life. You can rehearse it in your head and with your body. You can prepare for it all your life, you can only do it once, there is no looking back. You can never ask, “Did I do it well?” You will never know. No one will ever know. It will be said, “Surrounded by his loving family, he died peacefully.” Cold comfort for the warm-blooded: a sugar-coated lie.” My goal is to leave something more than cold comfort. It’s not the rabbinic way to encourage tattoos but that patient from Miami sure got something right when he made his final beliefs and wishes crystal clear for anyone to see.

So, here is the first task: write a Dear Friends and Family letter which will serve as a legacy statement from you to them. Think of this as the message you would have tattooed across your chest. The thing you want people to know when you can’t say it yourself. This task actually involves seven things, according to Dr. Periyakoil, who helped to develop the [Stanford Friends and Family Letter Project](#). They have a good and simple website that includes templates you can download for free and even an online tool and app to guide you through this task.ⁱⁱⁱ

The letter is a life review. The Stanford Team found that on completing the process of a life review people achieve a measure of peace. They don’t surrender easily to death but there is love and clarity when it comes. So, try these seven tasks taken directly from the Stanford form.

#1: Acknowledge the important people in your life. It is very important to start the process by identifying key people in your life. Take the time to express your pride in their achievements.

#2: Remember treasured moments from your life. Try to recall the most special, meaningful instances in your life, especially those involving your loved ones from step one.

#3: Apologize to those you love if you hurt them. Most of us can recall a specific past instance or a few when we have hurt the people we love. It is important to the opportunity to ask forgiveness from those you have hurt directly and specifically. Part of doing this step also requires you to forgive yourself for past mistakes and misdeeds.

#4: Forgive those who love you if they have hurt you. This is an opportunity for you to have mercy and grace (*rachamim* and *hesed*) and give solace to those who may have hurt you. You should be direct and specific in acknowledging what they have done, but that you ultimately forgive them. This step releases you and then from old resentments and almost always gives a sense of peace especially at the end of life.

#5: Express your gratitude for all the love and care you have received. In Hebrew this is called “*Hakarat ha-tov*” recognizing the good. Thank your loved ones for their concern through the trying times in your life and for everything else that they have done for you. Many people find it helpful to mention specific instances that you hold close to your heart.

#6: Tell your friends and family how much you love them. Whether you are emotionally effusive and wear your heart on your sleeve or you tend to keep your feelings to yourself, it is important to write to those you love and express how much you care about them.

7: Last task here. Take a moment to say “goodbye.” Occasionally I work with families in which one or more members feels burdened by the fact that they never had a chance for a proper farewell. Sometimes they regret what their last exchange had been and this letter can serve to clarify and supersede any other conversations.

The Stanford team offers a few important guidelines to keep in mind as you complete these tasks. Take your time and carefully review your draft of the letter until you feel that it truly reflects your thoughts and feelings, but don’t let perfect be the obstacle to good. Then print it or share it electronically with your doctors and your key family members or friends.

Review the letter yearly and update it as needed. And remember, this is a sensitive and emotional topic so be careful with yourself.

It is considered a mitzvah to care for your body and seek and receive appropriate medical care throughout your life. “Choose Life” – the Torah commands us, that we may live. Few acts are as simple and as important to that mitzvah than choosing a person who will ensure those decisions are made on our behalf when, God forbid, we cannot.

The other task you should do to start the new year is to complete a health care proxy if you don't already have one and send it to your doctors and family or friends. I have two easy ways for you to complete this before Yom Kippur. One, you can go to the same Stanford Medical School site that I mentioned earlier and click the link for advance directives on the top of the page ([click here for that site](#)). It will take you less than 10 minutes and they will have an advance direct document for you to print and sign in the presence of two witnesses. Or, pick up one of these paper copies of “The Five Wishes” and complete the first wish – who do I want to make decisions for me in the event I am unable to do it myself – and again sign it in the presence of two witnesses. Make sure your named proxies know who they are and share with them your living will (the second wish of this booklet) – your wishes for what they should do if ever called upon in an emergency. To get a copy you can [email our office](#) or [click here to go directly to the Five Wishes website](#).

The Book of Life is open and God sits with pen in hand inscribing life and blessing for each of us in the days to come. In Jewish tradition we believe, if such a thing actually happens, that we have the power to influence what is written by our deeds and our intentions – *teshuva*, *t'lila*, *tzedakah maavirin et roeh ha gezerah*. But who really knows? We never get to see it. So right here, in your hands, The Book of Your Life is literally open for you to write and make assignment and to confirm and to seal. What better what to celebrate the new year than to write those pages of life and blessing that will clarify for you and let your friends and family know the most important things in the life: what you want to happen, who is responsible for doing it, how you feel and what you believe. Write it and choose life and blessing for yourself and your family. *Shanah tovah*.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/learning/do-not-resuscitate.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc1713344#t=article>

ⁱⁱⁱ Visit the website <http://med.stanford.edu/letter/about.html> or read Dr. VJ Periyakoil, "Writing a 'Last Letter'." The New York Times, Sept. 13, 2016, page D4.