

## Yom Kippur Yizkor 5776—O the Memories...

We gather on a morning unlike all others. We do not eat. We do not work. We wear white. We sit and pray. We ask for forgiveness. We contemplate the meaning of our lives.

“What are we? What is our life? What are the acts of goodness that we have actually accomplished?” Do we have any value in this world?

*“Ma Anu? Ma hayyeinu? Ma hasdeinu? Ma tzidkeinu?”*

We realize how insignificant we really are....

We journey into humility and self-negation in a manner unlike anything else we will do. We remember our past missteps. We ponder our futures. We consider the ultimate fate of every single one of us.

We cannot escape our ultimate destiny...try as we might.... The impulse is real. Some of us go to great lengths to deny our shared destiny. Last week, I [read](#) that a young woman who died of cancer, who had her head cryogenically preserved in the hope that one day her brain could be revived so she could return to the physical realm...and exist.

But, even if her brain could be digitally recreated one day, would it be her? Her brain will never think again as it did. And her soul will not return to her.

Death remains the one finality. I do not believe that there is any way to avoid it.

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Our thinking about death today is markedly different from our shared experience last week on Rosh Hashanah. Last week, we pondered birth, the birth of the universe and the birth of humanity. I spoke about how a

new child brings new hope and Rabbi Fel shared this most personally.

If last week the focus was on birth, this week the focus is on death. We wear white and, while there is a part of that which points to a wedding – a ceremony between God and the Jewish people – there is also the part that reminds us of death.

We wear white, like the *takhrikin*, the white burial shrouds in which every Jew – rich or poor – is buried.

And thus, today is a day that is shadowed by death. “Who will live



and who will die,” the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer intones, in case we have missed the message.

By neither eating, nor drinking, nor wearing leather shoes, we become a little bit like a corpse; we not only contemplate our mortality, but we live it – withdrawing from the physical realm, entering a more spiritual existence.

Last week was about the renewal of life; today we explore its end.

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Death is something that I encounter often. It's strange to say that, but I am surrounded by death. I receive phone calls about people who are dying or have died. I



visit with people before, during, and after death. I have been with many people as they have died.

Last year, I spoke about the holy work of preparing the *met*, the deceased body, for burial. This year, I want to speak about the actual moments of death.

Over the years, I have been blessed – and I use the word purposefully – to have been present with people as they breathed their last. I cannot tell you what a *kavod* – what an honor it is, a sad honor to be sure, but a great one nonetheless.

Invited into this sacred time in a home, in an ICU, in a hospice, I am asked to be present for the dying and for their families.

What do I do?

I listen. I listen to the one who is dying if they are able to communicate. I listen to their families. I sit. I am present.

Sometimes, I participate in the powerful – if little-known tradition of reciting the *Viddui*, the Confessional. If that word sounds familiar, it is. We recite the *Viddui*, the Confessional several times on this Day of Atonement. There is the short form, the *Ashamnu*, and the long form, the *Al Het*.

But I want to explore the other version, the version that is recited before death. The final *Viddui*, the confessional before death contains the same idea – we confess our sins, we apologize. We are taught that we must confess our misdeeds before death – to be at one with God. Ideally, we should be at one with others, as well, and we should apologize to those we have wronged before we leave this realm.

And this is what we do today – we confess before God on a day that is laden with death. We confess before whatever will happen to us actually happens. Rabbi Eliezer said: “שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך, Repent one day before your death” (Avot 2:10) because of course, we do not know which day is to be our last, so we should repent every day.

But the *Viddui* before death does not consist of beating on chests in contrition or, if you understand it differently, removing our misdeeds from our heart as the *Ashamnu* or *Al-Het* do on Yom Kippur.

Instead, it is a prayer where we admit our failings before death. It is a most intense prayer due not only to the words themselves, but to the moment when it is recited.

I have recited the *Viddui* with individuals alone in their homes, I have recited it in hospice homes, and in hospitals with large extended families



holding hands and forming a healing circle around their loved one. During blizzards and other times when I could not be physically present, I have recited it over the phone. And sometimes, I have utilized Skype to

be with a family across the country.

Where does this tradition come from? The Talmud records the following teaching (Shabbat 32a): “Our rabbis taught: ‘If one falls sick and his life is in danger, he is told, ‘Make confession, for all who are sentenced to death make confession.’ [...] For whoever ascends the scaffold to be punished, if he has great advocates he is saved, but if [he does] not, he is

not saved. And these are a person's advocates: repentance and good deeds – *teshuvah* and *gemilut hasadim*.”

And so, we repent one last time before we die. Pointing to the power of this ritual, the *Shulhan Arukh*, the basic code of Jewish Law written in 1565, states that anyone who recites the deathbed confessional, the *Viddui*, receives the reward of a place in the world-to-come.

Often, when we gather to recite the *Viddui*, the dying person is too sick to recite the words. In those cases, I recite the words for the one who is dying.

In fact, that is usually the case. Imagine the setting – usually a hospital, immediate loved ones are holding hands with their loved one, or stroking her hair or his head. Even if the dying individual cannot hear or even feel the loving caress, there is such love shared in those rooms.

Once we have made a healing circle with our hands and slow our breathing down to center ourselves, I recite the text in Hebrew and in English:

“*Adonai* our God and God of our ancestors, we acknowledge that all life is in your hands. May it be Your will to send healing to our loved one. Yet, if the end is imminent, may it reflect Your love and atone for all those times that he could have done better. Grant him the reward of the righteous and give him eternal life in your Presence.”

“Guardian of the bereaved, protect this woman and her beloved family, for their lives are interconnected in the bond of love.

“In Your hand lies his spirit. You have redeemed him, *Adonai*, God of truth.”

Then we recite the *Shema* together and close with a prayer, often *Oseh Shalom*.

It is hard to convey the power of this ritual, but I will say this: it is always transformative. It can bring a measure of comfort to the family and to the one who is dying. While I am not sure how much the individual who is dying is focused on confession, there is a need for ritual, a Jewish ritual that marks the sacredness of the moment. Like birth, death is a transition unlike any other. This is a liminal moment – a threshold moment – as one moves from one realm to another.

It is also a moment not to be alone. I can tell you right now, that when my time comes, I hope and pray that I will be surrounded by family to ease my soul into the next realm and my body out of the domain of the living.

Being together and holding hands and singing are so healing and helpful. Sometimes, remarkably so. I will never forget singing the *Shema* with people who were in a coma or totally unresponsive, even for days, and suddenly, there is recognition in their bodies. I have had people who did not speak for days, suddenly start singing the *Shema* along with me. Apparently, certain songs and prayers are buried deep within the memory and long after other parts of a person's mind have faded, these retain their staying power. If you are with someone who is dying, try singing – and try something old and visceral like the *Shema*.

For millennia now, Jews have recited the *Shema* at the end of life – both as a statement of Jewish belief and, perhaps since the person is journeying back to God, to fully experience the oneness of God.

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While I have sat with families and individuals during death numerous



times, I remember the raw intensity of my own grandmother, my Savta's, death the summer after I finished college. My mother's mother, Lillian

Green Lapidus, *zikhrona livrakah* – may her memory be for a blessing – lived her life in greater Boston, but during her final two years, she lived across the street from my aunt and uncle in Providence. When she was dying, her children and grandchildren gathered from around the northeast and Israel.

I delayed my flight to Israel when my parents told me to come up to see her for the last time. I will never forget driving up from New York in a dangerous thunderstorm to be there. When I arrived, the family was encircled around her – holding her hands and stroking her hair, telling her how much we loved her.

When I came into the room, she said weakly “*numero uno*,” what she called me – her first grandchild – “I love you.” While I tried to stay with her for a while, the sadness and grief were so overwhelming that I had to leave her room to cry.

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Last week, I finished one of the saddest books I have ever read. It is a short memoir, a pithy collection of memories, written by Professor Eitan Fishbane, who teaches Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Entitled *Shadows in Winter: A Memoir of Love and Loss*, Fishbane’s book narrates the tragic death of his beloved wife, Leah, at the age of 32. She died suddenly of an undiagnosed brain tumor, leaving Eitan and their four-year-old daughter Aderet behind.

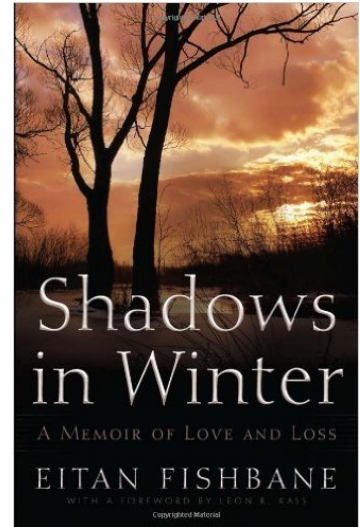
In moving and eloquent prose, Fishbane captures the textures of the love and life that he and his wife built and how it all came crashing down.

The chapters that relate his daughter’s pain were most intense for me. There is nothing more raw than the suffering of a child; a couple of months after her mother died, Aderet sang to her mother:

“I loved it when Imma would take care of me, she would take good care of me.

Please don’t take her away, no, don’t take her away!

I want her back, I love her, please don’t ever say I don’t love her.





Please don't say she's not my mommy, please always let her be my mommy.

I'm sad because she died.

I like playing princess games with her.

I love you, I love you, please come with me!

Please give her back to me!

Please give her back to me!

I love her so much..." (pgs. 74-75)

And hearing Eitan's and Aderet's pain and loss, it is simply overwhelming grief. And yet, I found his memoir strangely filled with a measure of consolation. That is not to say there is not pain – there is extraordinary suffering, but there are also ways of coping. Our tradition offers us a path forward.

The first is memory itself. *Shadows in Winter* is a book about memory – Eitan retells his courtship of his wife, the relationship they shared: the times, places, and texture of their years together. The joys they shared – their wedding, parenting their daughter, and some of the difficult moments.

As Eitan shares these vignettes, I could not help but think about *shivah* itself. Traditionally, when we pay a *shivah* visit, we come in and express our condolences and sit down and listen. We wait to see what the mourner needs – to talk about their loved one or to talk about something else; it's about listening and being present.

That process of sharing and listening is helpful and healing. Talking or writing about one's loss can have a profound impact.

Then there is grief itself. How human it is to grieve? How often do we give ourselves the space to truly be sad and cry? Our tradition says we need to stop and mourn – that is the core of *shivah* – seven days. Far too often in this day and age we short-change that ritual. We take a few days or even less. The full *shivah* means you can sit and think, you can sit and cry. You can sit and mourn. You can be sad.

Let's not forget "it's alright to cry."

Crying isn't just "alright," it's a blessing. There is healing that comes with tears – letting them flow when they come can be cathartic.

Grief is a vital part of the process; we must allow ourselves the space for it.

It is also noteworthy to distinguish between grief and mourning. Grief can occur anytime and anywhere and it often occurs when one is alone.

Mourning includes the rituals that have evolved over centuries to help mourners through their pain. Mourning must not take place when the mourner is alone, that is why family and friends, the community, come over to make sure that *shivah* occurs.

We eat a meal after the burial – the *seudat havra'ah* – the meal of consolation – at which the mourner cannot work or serve the food. The mourners sit and eat, while others tend to their needs. The tradition builds in ways to care for the mourners, trying to guarantee that their physical needs are met during a time of emotional heartbreak.

Other rituals from lighting the seven-day *yahrzeit* candle to covering the mirrors ensure that this is a very different week. We do not focus on

our appearance – traditionally, we do not shave or get haircuts, we tend to our psycho-spiritual selves.

Let me be clear that the mourning rituals can be challenging – there are times that we want to retreat from others and that is understandable, especially when the loss is acute. That said, we do not want someone to retreat too far, so we create the structure that pulls the mourner back into connection with others.

Ultimately, it is about community sustaining us through those times.

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Professor Fishbane movingly narrates the *Viddui* he recited for his wife:

“Wednesday evening: 6:30 p.m.

Rabbi Hammerman enters Leah’s room with us; we have asked him to guide us through the *Viddui* ritual—the final confession to God before death, the prayer for forgiveness of a person’s lifetime of sins. Rabbi Hammerman is a close family friend—he conducted Leah’s bat mitzvah some twenty years ago, and he was one of the rabbis who officiated at our wedding.

He speaks to her—a small black prayer book in his hand.

Can she hear him? Can she hear us?

I lead the last part of the ritual—the final recitation of the *Shema*, the biblical words that the ancient Rabbi Akiva famously uttered with his last breath: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One....* My voice is trembling and breaking; my eyes cannot contain the free-flowing grief.

[...]

The *Shema* before death: eyes closed like the *Shema* we recited in bed each night with Aderet. These are the last words on our lips before the unconsciousness of sleep descends; and they are the last words on our lips before consciousness disappears forever, before the last inhalation and exhalation of breath.

*Fishbane family, good night.*

*Imma, good night.*

The dying person emulates the ancient sage, the ancient martyr: the words mark a final devotion to God—a love that is not even diminished in the face of deep suffering. But like so many others, Leah cannot speak in her last moments; and so I become the mouthpiece of her final confession, the conduit for her last words. I proclaim God's unity for her: the inseparability of her presence and her absence courses through me like a fierce stream. She is here in the words that I speak, and yet I know that she is already gone.”

*Shadows in Winter*, pgs. 90-92

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But in truth, Leah is both gone and not gone, for through the process of remembering her, Fishbane has brought her to life, given us, his readers, a memory of her, even to those of us who never met her. And so it is, as we now turn to *Yizkor* – the prayer of remembering – that we, perhaps less eloquently and less indelibly, but which, in reality, asks God to remember the souls of our dear ones intensely and in so doing we remember them ourselves.

May we be sealed for a good year, even as our loved ones are sealed in our hearts.