

Tuesdays With Murray
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Yom Kippur Yizkor 5768

Shabbat shalom and *g'mar hatimah tovah* - May we all be sealed for a new year of health and peace, joy and fulfillment.

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Do you remember the best-selling book by Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*?

It is a beautiful portrait of a relationship between two men, one at the end of his life, and the life lessons that the younger man learned from the older. It is the true story of Brandeis University sociology professor, the eponymous Morrie Schwartz, and his relationship with his former student, Mitch Albom. The book chronicles the lessons about life that Mitch learns from his professor, who was then dying from Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Around the same time, I had an experience that I will similarly title, "Tuesdays with Murray."

Almost 15 years ago, I went to see a psychotherapist named Murray. In Rabbinical School, we were focused on self-knowledge, and I wanted to understand myself better.

I'll never forget that first visit. Murray's office was on the bottom floor of a brownstone on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. You went down a few steps into a waiting area, and then Murray emerged from his office. It was a spacious, grand living room filled with lots of couches and chairs, a row of bookcases, and odd objects from his travels around the world. And there was Murray, welcoming me in.

Murray was a large man and an even greater personality. He had an immediate charisma apparent from the second you met him. There was a twinkle in his big blue eyes that emerged from underneath his large glasses. He had soft white hair and huge hands. He grabbed my hand, giving it a strong handshake, and welcomed me into his office.

I felt an instant rapport and connection, and over the course of months and years, Murray became my guide, my counselor, and my mentor. He was like a wise old grandfather. Murray helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses, acknowledging and appreciating what I was feeling. I used to head down from rabbinical school every Tuesday in the middle of the day and see Murray for 45 minutes before zooming back to class.

There were times when it was difficult to come back into school. I had such an intense experience in getting in touch with who I was that, immediately afterwards, I felt a bit disconnected from my classmates.

As I continued my work with Murray, who was a guru of group therapy, I eventually joined one of his groups. He was one of the pioneers in this field in New York and taught other therapists this art form. With some trepidation, I joined the Tuesday evening group.

Walking into that room with nine other people was intimidating. They were older than I and far more accomplished. They were CEOs, they owned companies, they ran agencies, they were successful, and I was the new kid on the block – literally and metaphorically.

But the power of being in that room, and having not just one person reflect light back onto me, but having nine mirrors through which I could understand myself better was an incredibly intense and powerful part of my own journey.

Murray would guide the group, occasionally framing the conversation, pushing it in certain directions, and sometimes throwing a curve ball, pulling in someone from the outside. It was an intense ninety minutes of sheer exploration, probing, celebrating, crying, and deepening.

My Tuesdays with Murray were incomparably rich. My time alone with him in the middle of the day and then with him in the group later in the day strengthened me and provided me with a strong foundation for both the personal and professional realms of my life. My ordination and subsequent move to Chicago necessarily marked the end of my experience in this group. I decided to give my senior sermon at the end of Rabbinical School about my group experience.

I invited Murray, his wife Judy, and my group to attend, and they all did – coming to shul and my luncheon. This was rather an unconventional move for a therapist, but Murray was pretty unorthodox.

That day was a meaningful one that launched me on my rabbinate and helped me share such an incredibly enriching experience with others.

When I moved to Chicago, my relationship with Murray changed. I would still occasionally call him and check in with him when I went to New York. Sometimes, I sent Murray my sermons, and, after Talya was born, I went back to show him my beautiful new daughter and to thank him for all that he had taught me.

Over the last few years, I began to lose touch with Murray. I thought about him frequently, but we hadn't spoken in a while. Time passes....

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On the Monday before July 4, I was thinking about Murray and made a note in my Palm pilot to call him the next day. I spent the rest of that Monday thinking about him, and, as I drifted off to sleep on Monday night, I had a dream about Murray. I saw him, as well as the humorous Hirschfeld portrait that all the groups had brought for him on his 75th birthday.

The next morning I awoke, went to shul, and forgot about calling Murray.

Instead, that afternoon, I received a message from a friend of Murray's, informing me that Murray had died.

I was literally dumbstruck. I lost an old friend and mentor. I couldn't believe that I hadn't had a chance to say goodbye. Murray had died Monday night, just as I was dreaming about him. I sat at my desk and cried.

But the voicemail from Murray's friend went on to say that Murray wanted me to officiate at his funeral.

I was overwhelmed.

It was so strange. He had never told me.

I got in touch with his widow, Judy, who told me how much I meant to Murray.

I had no idea.

She said that Murray's last wish was that, if it were at all possible, the family should try to find me and have me do the funeral – and they did.

I flew down to Washington on Thursday evening to meet the rest of his family; which became a group therapy session of sorts for his wife, his stepchildren, his step-grandchildren, his biological children from previous marriages, his wife's family, and for some of his clients, including those who were with him at his death.

Murray was conducting a group therapy session on Monday evening when his heart began to fail. One of the members of his group went with him in the ambulance and stayed by his side. Murray died doing what he loved. Unbeknownst to me, Murray had begun to suffer from Alzheimer's in the last couple of over the last few months, but he still somehow conducted his beloved group therapy sessions. In a loving tribute, his clients stood by his side even as he began to lose words and even some of his gifted intuition.

That Thursday night I learned a lot about Murray and how complicated a life he led. This was his fourth marriage; the previous three had ended in divorce. He had difficult relationships with his children, two of whom had not spoken with him in years; his strong relationships were with his stepchildren, step-grandchildren, his clients and friends.

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I share with you the stories of my Tuesdays with Murray because there are some deep lessons that I learned and that I think we can all learn together.

But on this occasion, Murray was teaching me in most dramatic Murray fashion. He didn't call me to ask me to do his funeral, but, in essence, taught me five crucial life-lessons from beyond the grave.

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First, I was reminded to "make the call."

My note to myself that Monday night to call Murray the next day just wasn't good enough. Imagine if I had called him that Monday and we had had that final conversation. He might have told me that he wanted me to officiate at his funeral and how much I meant to him, and I could have told him how much he meant to me. It would have been a sharing, it would have had a generosity of spirit, but all these things can happen only if we make the call. As Hillel says in *Pirkei Avot* – "*Im lo Akhshav, Eimatai*, if not now, when?"

And as Robin Williams, quoting the Latin poet Horace, says in the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, "*Carpe diem* – seize the day." There are moments that we cannot let pass, and usually those moments have to do with our relationships with others. Sometimes if we let them pass, it's too late. We didn't say goodbye. We didn't say how much someone meant to us. We didn't tell them that we loved them.

Make the call.

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The second lesson is that we never know the impact we have on people.

Sometimes we make an impression and we don't even know it, and this can cut both ways. We can have a conversation with someone who seems perfectly fine, only to discover sometime later that it was negative for the other person. And, of course, it can happen the opposite way. We don't always realize how powerful our interactions are or how our presence can have an

impact on others. The rabbis teach us that we learn a lot from our teachers, but we learn more from our students. Students teach teachers; teachers teach students. The rabbis knew how powerful all our interactions are.

Apparently I had a big impact on Murray during all of those years. Murray, who grew up in a home that was not religious, but was filled with Jewish culture, was moved by having a rabbinical student come into his practice. His fourth marriage to someone who was more Jewishly connected brought him more and more in touch with his heritage. Although I did not know this while he was alive, he had a folder on his computer with my name on it where he saved my sermons. He would share with his friends and family and others the things that I was doing and what I was teaching with a sense of pride and connection that deepened his own Judaism. His Jewish journey culminated at his funeral, which was a traditional one, filled with all the beautiful, loving rites that help us care for the dead.

The ritual washing of the body, *tohorah*, was done lovingly by the *hevre kadishah*, those who ritually cleanse the body before burial. His body was wrapped in *takhrikhin*, the simple white shroud that ensures that everyone is buried in the same garb, rich and poor – all treated with love and respect, even after the soul has begun its journey to the next realm. Finally, Murray was buried in a wood coffin.

A couple of weeks after the funeral, Judy sent me a card thanking me, along with a picture she had found in his desk drawer among a few pictures of family and friends. It was a picture of Murray and me and Talya. It deeply moved me that he saved that picture right in his top drawer. Sometimes we don't realize the influence we make on others.

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The third lesson is to “know thyself.”

Murray worked hard in his life to get more and more in touch with his own feelings and to break patterns. As it turned out, it took him many tries in his complex and difficult relationships with his parents, with his first three wives, and with his biological children. Murray inspired me get in touch with myself to do the same. That is a life-long journey.

The Talmud states that at the end of our lives, as we approach God's throne, the first question we are asked is: “*Nasata V'Natata B'emunah*: Did you go about your life with faithfulness, with integrity?”

How did you treat others and how did you treat yourself?

That starts with the basic lesson of knowing thyself. The Talmud in my mind is playing off of the great statement in Genesis when God instructs our earliest ancestor, Avraham, who was the first to uncover the essential oneness of the universe, with the words: "*Lekh-lekha*." The Hasidic tradition teaches us that that Avraham is told "*lekha-lekha*" to journey into himself.

It is a difficult journey, but it may be the most important we ever take.

Know thyself, and then we will be able to understand how we live.

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The fourth lesson is perhaps the most difficult. We need to place our personal lives before our professional lives. Too often in our world, we focus on our professional lives at the cost of our own personal lives.

I think Murray was speaking to me from beyond the grave by asking me to do his funeral. I knew that his personal life had been troubled. He'd shared with me some of the experiences of one of his divorces and some of his difficulties with his children. But after conducting that group session on that Thursday night and hearing from his biological son to whom he had not spoken in a number of years, I learned how deep some of the fractures in his personal life were.

Murray is speaking to us all: do not place work and career aspirations before our partners and our children.

That's a difficult lesson for all of us and for me. I love what I do. I love this shul and care deeply about all of you.

But we must make time for our family lives.

As I was pondering what I learned from Murray, I was searching for Jewish parallels. While I could easily find texts to illustrate all the other lessons, I could not find one that clearly instructs us to make our personal lives a priority.

Why not? I realized that this dichotomy is relatively new. In rabbinic times, and for much of the Jewish history, there wasn't this divide between the personal and the professional. It was a much more holistic approach to living. The personal and the professional were one and the same. The classical period doesn't contain this dichotomy, and maybe that's something towards which we should aspire – a more holistic approach to our lives, work, family, and personal time, so that these can be seen as a more integrated whole.

In addition, for most of human history, men and women worked in different spheres and, for the most part, men did not focus as much on their families. In any case, it is up to all of us as a community and as a world to make sure that

our personal lives come first – where men and women can devote themselves to each other and to children and friends.

This summer I read numerous articles about how we as Americans don't take enough vacation – and when we do go on vacation, we don't really take it – we need to be fully present with ourselves and our families and make sure that this is a priority.

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The fifth and final lesson that I learned, is that our impact continues beyond death. I have been thinking a lot about the soul and what exactly the soul is. Just a couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to share a few teachings about views of the soul in *Harry Potter* and Judaism.

One idea in our tradition is that the soul comes into existence at birth. It is a level of consciousness and awareness. The Midrash teaches us that God kisses the soul gently into us as we emerge into the world, taking our first breath. But looking at the way in which a fetus develops, perhaps that consciousness develops earlier in the womb, where one can already hear sounds, feel the tapping of someone outside, and begin to slowly interact with the world. I remember tapping on Sharon's stomach as she carried Matan last year and feeling him tap back. That soul and that consciousness develop; they are nurtured within us.

According to the Hasidic masters, the soul is a divine spark, found within us all. And then, upon death, that spark returns to God, the repository of all souls.

In Judaism traditionally there is a belief *in olam haba*, in the world to come, in another realm, our soul somehow continues even if our physical body does not. I believe that the soul does continue to exist, although it's hard to fully comprehend.

While these descriptions are metaphors, the soul's continuation has an impact on our world.

When we remember our loved ones, they can inspire us towards goodness. We can feel their presence in our lives.

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Even after Murray's death, I can feel his presence, how he would encourage me and how he would challenge me; how he could support me, yet guide me all at the same time. Murray reminded me of the importance of

humbling oneself and of journeying into our own wilderness, whether alone with him or in a group.

Sometimes, it felt as though he were splitting me into pieces, but then I came back together, even stronger.

There are so many people in all of our lives who have passed on, who, as we close our eyes and remember them, continue to have an impact on us, and perhaps that feeling will make us more aware of our impact on others during our lifetimes. We do live on, sometimes in our children and families, sometimes in our friends and students, and sometimes in the simple impact that we have on others.

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It was a couple of months ago on a Friday afternoon that I, along with Murray's family and friends, buried him in a cemetery outside Washington, DC. His wife, his clients, his stepchildren, his estranged son and daughter, we were all there together. I tried to hold them and we tried to hold one another as we gently shoveled the earth on top of his coffin.

A few hours later, I was back in our shul for Friday night services. As I began to lead *Minhah*, I felt that same strong, smiling, teddy-bear presence shining down on me from above, saying goodbye and still teaching me the lessons I need for my life.

Shabbat Shalom and *g'mar hatimah tovah*.