

Kol Nidre 5777: All I Need to Know About Life I Learned from Funerals

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A young rabbi is officiating his first funeral. He is dressed in his first funeral suit and his first funeral shoes, and it's raining. He is standing at graveside beside the casket, which has not yet been lowered, when his foot begins to slip. Slowly but surely, and maintaining as much dignity as he can, he is moved forward by the mud into the open grave. Not sure what to do, he continues the service.

Much to his shock and dismay, two of the mourners solemnly follow him. When they are all assembled together at the bottom, a family member turns to him and says: "Rabbi, we've never heard of this ritual before, but we're willing to learn..."ⁱ

This is a true story. Not mine, thankfully, but true nonetheless. I heard it this summer in a room of two hundred rabbis, at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem – and you can only imagine us holding our collective breath. But I think of the mourners, telling all of their friends the new thing they learned from the funeral. And I think of the rabbi, who learned to wear more practical shoes – and if nothing else, to stand farther back. But as strange as it may be, the story leads to a deeper truth, and so our subject tonight is this: Everything I need to know about life, I learned from funerals.

First, the disclaimer. I don't approach funerals looking for sermon material. You know me well enough by now, I hope, to know that I am there with you and for you, and that every life – and every loss – is unique. But you will see, when we come to Yizkor tomorrow afternoon, that Temple mourned thirty-five members last year, in addition to the dozens of close family members and friends, with whose funerals we are often involved. We may not have listed these numbers alongside baby namings and bnei mitzvah on the bookmark of our accomplishments, but accompanying families through death and mourning is an essential part of what we do. As your rabbi, alongside Rabbi Lerner and Rabbi Greenspan, I have the sacred responsibility of walking with you through the valley of the shadow. And along the way, I have learned certain lessons about what it means to live a good life. Lessons that are taught not with words but by example; lessons that make memories a blessing. Tonight, with humility, I share those insights with you.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmey rabbah. Exalted and hallowed be God's great name. We say these words so many times. But tonight, I want to look at them more closely. Because tonight, we stand here in what is sometimes known as a dress rehearsal for death. We don't eat, we don't drink, we don't make love (they didn't teach you that in Religious School, but it's true). We repent – why? – because the Talmud tells us to do so the day before we die, and once a year, we take that seriously; once a year, we acknowledge that the mortality rate remains steady at one hundred percent.

So let's look closely, tonight, at those first three words of kaddish. Through them, I want to bring out three qualities: qualities that I have learned from those who lived life well.

Yitgadal: exalted. If you look at the root in the Hebrew, we find a word that is much more familiar: *Gadol* – big. *Yitgadal* – made bigger. This is the same word we use when we name a child: *zeh ha-katan, gadol yihiyeh* – may this little one become big. May he grow.

In the town of Chelm, a magical, mythical place where the people are very pious and very Jewish but not necessarily very smart, two citizens were engaged in an argument about how people grow. One gentleman was convinced that people grow from the ground up; the other was just as sure that they grow from the head down.

Each gentleman was able to cite evidence to support his opinion. The gentleman who believed that people grow from the ground up said, “Just look at the army as it marches by, and you’ll see that I am right. None of the soldiers’ heads is at the same level, but all the soldiers have their feet on the ground. This is proof that people grow from the ground up.”

The other gentleman argued that if you look at the members of the marching band as they pass by, you’ll see that the pants of their uniforms don’t all reach their shoes. Some of the pants are a little long, and some are a little short. That, he argued, surely indicates that people grow from the head down.

Since the two gentlemen couldn’t resolve their disagreement, they went to see the rabbi. Each man explained his belief about the method by which human beings grow. The rabbi listened to them both and said, “My fair gentlemen, it is not that humans grow from the top down or from the bottom up. It is true only that they grow from the inside out.”ⁱⁱ

We grow from the inside out. In Judaism, we are meant to keep growing, from the moment we are born to the moment we die. We see it in the characters in the Torah, who are constantly on the move; we see it in the leaders of Israel, like Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, of blessed memory, who started off as soldiers and grew into warriors for peace. We see it in those who were born in a different time, and yet embrace a child’s non-Jewish mate; understand a grandchild’s gender identity or sexuality; use FaceTime to tell stories to their great-grandchildren.

Recently, I officiated at the funeral of a woman, about whom her grandson told the following tale:

“I was visiting her,” he said, “and we went to see an art film. We both agreed it was terrible. But the next time I spoke to her, she said she had watched it again. “Why on earth would you do that?” I asked. “Because,” she replied, “I assumed I must have missed something. There must have been some redeeming value, so I thought I would give it a second chance.”

What a story. What curiosity, what humility, what growth would lead a person to see a terrible movie twice, convinced she had something still to learn. I have been inspired by people pursuing a passion for art, becoming champions at bridge, trying new tricks in a kayak. The man in his 80s who learned Arabic to speak to his doorman, or the woman, raised in English

Montreal, who reached her 90s and decided it was finally high time to learn French. The man who travelled with two suitcases, one full of clothes and the other full of books. The woman who raised her children as a single mother, and persevered to go back to school. The man who signed a new lease on a car at the age when, as his family put it, most people don't buy green bananas.

We grow from the inside out. I was at a seminar earlier this year about the adolescent mind. I confess, it was a bit of a disappointment; it was called, "Surviving and Thriving," and I thought it was to help parents of teens to survive and thrive, but it turned out to be about the kids. Nonetheless. Apparently the adolescent mind is a work in progress; I learned that the brain grows from back to front, which explains why teens feel things deeply but don't always think them through. But as developed as our own minds may be, it is in our feelings that we most often must grow. All our minds are a work in progress. The people who live best understand that there are many chapters to their lives, in education and career but also in family and in love. It is possible to mourn a partner with whom decades were shared, and still to open one's heart to another. It is possible to have years of estrangement, and find a way to wholeness. It is possible to do wrong, and then to do right. It is possible to be forgiven, and it is possible to forgive.

There is a breathtaking story from the end of Genesis, when Jacob has died and Joseph and his brothers are growing old together. The brothers are terrified that Joseph will now take his vengeance for everything they had done to hurt him. He looks at them, bursts into tears, and says, "You are no longer the same people who did those things to me. You have changed." So he comforted them, the Torah tells us, and so he spoke to their hearts.ⁱⁱⁱ They grew, Joseph and his brothers. And they allowed each other to grow.

Yitgadal. We learn from those who grow.

V'yitkadash. Hallowed. Made holy. But in Judaism, what does holiness mean? Shabbat is holy. Marriage is holy. Things are holy when they are special, and they are special when they are in relationship. The relationship between God and Israel, or between two people bound together by love. Abraham and Sarah's tent, open to strangers on all sides, was holy. The chuppah, the wedding canopy with no walls, is holy. The ancient Temple, where we brought the work of our hands to God, was holy; and since its destruction, our synagogues and our homes, the places where we meet, these places are holy as well. Holiness is too often equated with holier-than-thouness, with the things that create distance between human beings. Tonight, I want to suggest the opposite. To be holy is to love.

I think of the woman who died when she was fully engaged with life. Picking her grandchildren up at school. Volunteering and travelling, finally with that freedom. When she suffered the stroke that would kill her, her chicken soup was still in the freezer, ready for the upcoming holiday.

One thing I've learned is that many people are remembered for their cooking – you hear a lot about food, at Paperman's – and sadly, I won't be one of them. I can't tell you what it's like to hear people wax rhapsodic about Bubbe's brisket, then go home to my kids not wanting to eat

whatever I put on the table... But here's the thing. Sometimes, chicken soup is just chicken soup. But sometimes, chicken soup is love. And whether or not we are talented in the kitchen, love is within our grasp.

Many years ago, the story goes, a seven-year-old boy and his family were about to leave their native Poland. The day before their departure, the father took the little boy to the town where the Rebbe lived so we could receive the Rebbe's blessing. They remained overnight in the home of the Rebbe, and the little boy slept in his study. In the middle of the night, the Rebbe entered the room, and the boy, though he was awake, pretended to be sleeping. The Rebbe whispered, "Such a sweet child!" and, taking off his coat, covered the boy to keep him warm through the night. Years later, when the boy became an old man of eighty, and was asked what sustained him in his life, he told the story and said: "I am still warm from that coat."^{iv}

The people whose love still warms us; how can we live in such a way, how can we love in such a way, that others will be warmed when we are gone? I am inspired by those whose homes were the ones everyone came to; where there was always an extra seat at the table. The homes where the mother would answer questions kids couldn't ask their own parents, or the father would take a child's friend under his wing like his own. The parent who treats a daughter-in-law like a daughter, or a son-in-law like a son. The person who asks, "how are you," and cares about your response; the person who can listen; the person who is grateful; the person who can love.

This summer, I read a remarkable book by Susan Silverman (she's the comedian Sarah Silverman's sister, and she's a rabbi). It's called *CASTING LOTS: Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World*. She writes about creating her own family through birth and by international adoption – as she puts it, in her family, they grow girls and import boys. And she shares her conviction that we should shift our thinking from focusing on families who need children, to children who need homes and love. Adoptive families, blended families, families untraditional and traditional alike – I can tell you from sitting with families before funerals that there is no family which is uncomplicated. But it's not the configuration that matters. What matters is the love.

Family matters, and friendship matters. It's wise, I've learned, to have friends of all ages, so that if you outlive your peers, there are other relationships that keep you connected. The rabbis of the Talmud tell the vivid story of Honi, the Jewish Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep, and awoke to a world in which he had outlived his children and grandchildren and all of his peers. He goes to the house of study, and everyone is quoting him but no one recognizes him. *O chavruta o metuta*, companionship or death, he cries – and with that, he dies.^v The saddest funeral I ever officiated had not a single mourner present. There is so much here that we can't control; but there is so much that we can.

Yitkadash. We learn from those who love.

Shmey rabbah. We translate this: God's great name. But curiously, God is not actually named in the kaddish. God is only implied. It's a powerful implication – that we look to bring God in at the times we struggle most, even at the times when it might be most difficult to say God's name.

But tonight, let me translate more literally. Here, greatness is not growth as it is in *yitgadal*. Greatness is not love as it is in *yitkadash*. Rather, it is expansiveness: being part of something bigger than ourselves.

Shmey rabbah. Connecting and contributing. I am inspired by those who die having made this world a better place. The physician diagnosed with lung cancer, who worked to lessen stigma and raise money for a cure. The elder statesman who built bridges so that we could find a way towards “*vivre ensemble*.” The little boy who brought joy to others in all too few years on this earth. All of these people lived with purpose. And the Book of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow, teaches that core Jewish lesson: that an encounter with God means getting a mission from God. That to be a Jew is to act.

Author David Brooks critiques commencement addresses in which graduates are told only to look inside and find themselves. He writes:

Most successful young people don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. A relative suffers from Alzheimer's and a young woman feels called to help cure that disease. A young man works under a miserable boss and must develop management skills so his department can function. Another young woman finds herself confronted by an opportunity she never thought of in a job category she never imagined. This wasn't in her plans, but this is where she can make her contribution.

...Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it's nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself.^{vi}

Our aim is to live a life of purpose, knowing that we may not accomplish everything for which we strive – if it was good enough for Moses, who didn't reach the Promised Land, it's good enough for us – but trusting that others will continue the work, and that our contribution will count. And so the kaddish ends with that great call for peace: peace in our world, and peace in our lives. Peace so we can rest in peace, when our time is done.

Shmey rabbah. We learn from those who contribute and connect.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmey rabbah. Growing. Loving. Connecting. These are the ingredients of a life well-lived. But here is the great lesson that comes with every funeral, and comes on Yom Kippur. We don't have forever. We don't know which goodbye could be our last. Talking about sin on this day isn't meant to mire us down in self-flagellation; it's meant to wake us up, so we can try to get it right. To grow into our best selves, repair our relationships, live with purpose, make peace. All I need to know about life I learned from funerals.

May we go into another year of life, and may we live it well.

ⁱ As told by Elana Stein Hain, “What is a Religious Jew? Exploring the Ritual Self,” Shalom Hartman Institute, July 13, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Adam Wohlberg, “How We Grow,” in Laney Katz Becker, ed., *Three Times Chai* (Springfield, NJ: 2007), p.28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 50:15-21, with commentary by the Sefat Emet.

^{iv} Dov Peretz Elkins, "Still Warm from an Old Jacket," in Elkins, ed., *Yom Kippur Readings* (Woodstock, VT: 2005), p.191.

^v Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a

^{vi} David Brooks, "It's Not About You," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2011.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html>