

WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM WRITING EULOGIES

Rabbi Mona Alfi
Congregation B'nai Israel
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I think about death more than most people. At the age of 6 I became aware of the idea that someday *I* would die, and I began to wonder how could I make my life a memorable one.

Because my parents died when *they* were so young, I felt that my life in a sense was a commentary about how they lived, because I believed, that my siblings and I were *their* legacy. And if I was their legacy, then whatever I did reflected not only on me, but also on them. If I did something worthwhile it meant that they taught me well. If I wasted my life, then I would also be wasting theirs.

In essence, I saw my life as their eulogy, and only recently have I realized that what I was concerned about was not only how they would be remembered, but if my own life would be *worth* remembering as well.

The great medieval scholar, Bachya ibn Pakuda wrote: "Days are like scrolls, only write on them what you want to be remembered."

In essence, what Bachya ibn Pakuda was saying is that each life is a Torah for future generations to examine and learn from. And he is asking us to be mindful of what are the lessons that we want to be remembered for.

Of all of the things that I do, the experience that I learn from more than anything else is sitting with a family after losing a loved one. Each person writes their own Torah, their own *sefer chaim*, their own book of life. Some books seem to be cautionary tales, while others provide step by step instructions on how to live a meaningful or a joyous life.

Every time I write a eulogy for someone, I can't help but wonder, what will people say about me when I am gone? What will be said in the official eulogy, and what will be said in all of the unofficial eulogies, the ones that are talked about over a cup of coffee at the meal of condolence, or remembered when my name is said on the kaddish list? Will my grandchildren want to name a child after me when I am gone? Will my family, who knows me best, think I merit such an honor?

Each death is a reminder to me that life is fleeting. I have learned that even 90 years can go by in a flash. Every day provides us with opportunities to connect with others, to do something of

value, and if we spend those days without thought, there is no amount of money that can bring them back to us.

As it has been said, “nothing is more precious than time and nothing is so much abused.”¹

By spending time with others when their loved ones die, I have learned much about life, about being a parent, a wife, a member of a community. And I have learned that more often than I like, I come up short. It is one thing to learn something, but as my husband sometimes reminds me, it is something all together different to put it into practice.

When I write a eulogy I try to capture what was important about that person’s life, what imprint they made on the lives of others, to learn why their time here mattered.

From what I have seen, for the most part, those who know that their death is sooner rather than later, live life more fully. They take the time to fix relationships, to hold hands, to reach out to others, to do things that give them joy. What they don’t do is try to clock more hours at work.

When my parents were killed in a car accident, I learned that any day can be your last day. And because each of us might be closer to death than we know, we shouldn’t take any day for granted.

So these are the top 5 things that I have learned from writing eulogies. They have helped guide me, and I hope you will them of use as well.

#1 - Be equally attentive and loving to your children and to your parents. Both matter. How you treat your parents is directly related to how you will be treated by your children as you get older. Our children pay attention to everything we do, and everything we say, even if we don’t think they are.

Now by being attentive and loving to your children, I don’t mean let them do whatever they want, I’m saying be there for them, be there with them, pay attention to their needs, and make sure that they know how much you love them. Model for them how to be the adults you hope they will become.

Now this isn’t fool proof in terms of how they’ll treat you when you’re older, but it is the best investment you will ever make. Because how you treat your children will also affect how they treat their children, and so forth. So if you want nice grandchildren, be nice to their parents.

#2 - If you are married, make your spouse your best friend. The quality of your life and the level of your happiness is directly affected by the level of their happiness.

¹ Jewish Spirituality, by Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas, KTAV Publishing, p.92

And if you are not married - joy and security can be found in all of our relationships. We can make our best friends our family. We can look out for each other, care for each other, celebrate and comfort each other. And by doing this, we add a richness and a depth to our lives that cannot be measured.

#3 - Invest your time and energy in your friends and your community. People rarely forget a kind word or caring gesture. If you are there for them when they need you, they will be there for you and your family when you need them.

Rabbi Shimon used to say: There are three crowns--the crown of the Torah, the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of kingship, but the crown of a good name surpasses them all. (*Pirkei Avot 4:17*)

How does one acquire a good name? By doing good deeds. A good name has to be earned each and every day, over and over again. We earn a good name by giving tzedakah, by being generous with our time, by being thoughtful with our words, and lavish with our kindness. We earn a good name by participating in the life of our community.

4 - Put your work into perspective. Do you want to be remembered for working all the time or for being there when people needed you? And if you are remembered for your work, will it be for being ethical and honest, for mentoring those coming up behind you, or for being more concerned with making money than how you treated people?

And even if you are not able to have the job of your dreams, find meaning in what you do. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. once advised that “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.” No matter what it is that we do, we should strive for excellence, and work with integrity. We should be known more for our work ethic than our line of work.

And finally, #5 - Something nice can be said about *everybody*. When we take the time to look at a person’s life from *their* perspective, when we take the time to understand *their* hurts and *their* joys, and *their* yearnings, we discover that a person’s intention is often much better than their ability to carry those intentions out. There is no one who goes through life unscarred by pain or sadness - but how we respond to our personal tragedies will determine how we are remembered.

Each day before we go to sleep, we should look at what we did that day and ask, if I were to die in my sleep tonight, is this how I want to be remembered? If it’s not, then it is not too late to do something about it.

We speak a lot about *teshuva* at this time of year. But in truth, *teshuva* is supposed to be a daily process, not an annual activity.

While *teshuva* is often translated as repentance, what it also means is returning, returning to a place where we can begin anew. *Teshuva* is not only the act of self-reflection, it is reflection combined with action. When we engage in *teshuva*, we have the ability to recalibrate our actions, redirect our steps, and repair our relationships with others and with ourselves.

When we engage in *teshuva* each day, we are also being given the opportunity to rewrite our own eulogies.

While Yom Kippur may be the day that God sits in judgement on us, our funerals are the day that our lives are judged by those here on earth.

One of the saddest things I've learned from writing eulogies is that we should not wait until someone has died to find out how special they were. Too many times I have found myself wishing that I could have known someone better, spent more time with them, or listened to their stories more.

Don't wait until you hear someone else's eulogy to say "Gee, I wish I had the chance to know them better." Do it now. Listen to your great-uncle's stories. Ask your neighbor over for a cup of coffee and talk. Take the time to really get to know the people in your life.

All too often people experience themselves as being simply tolerated, not celebrated, for who they are. Look around this room, there are so many people that we might easily overlook because of their age or ours, their shyness or ours, and what we will miss out on is how each person is special in their own right. Each person a reflection of our Creator, each person is here to reveal their own inner light, their own purpose for being.

While ultimately other people might put the words on the paper, or speak them at our funerals, I have learned that we, in truth, write our own eulogies. We write our eulogies each and every day. The way we live, how we speak to people, how we engage in business, if we are charitable with our time, our money, or our words, how we treat our children and our parents, our brothers and sisters, our friends, and our enemies, all of these things, and so much more, influence how we will be remembered.

At the High Holidays we read the words "who shall live and who shall die?" Only God can answer that. But the question that only we can answer "is how will we choose to live?" And how we answer *that* question determines how we will be remembered after we die.

God may be the Ultimate One to determine if our names are to be sealed in the Book of Life, but we are the ones who are writing the text inside that book.

At Yom Kippur we are reminded not to wait until it is too late to live the type of lives we know that we are capable of. We speak of own mortality not to be morbid, but so that we remember to seize life while we can.

I want to conclude with something written by Rabbi Harold Schulweis. It is called "It is never too late."

The last word has not been spoken
the last sentence has not been writ
the final verdict is not in
It's never too late
to change my mind
my direction
to say "no" to the past
and "yes" to the future
to offer remorse
to ask and give forgiveness

It is never too late
to start all over again
to feel again
to love again
to hope again

It is never too late
to overcome despair
to turn sorrow into resolve
and pain into purpose

It is never too late to alter my world
not by magic incantations
or manipulations of the cards
or deciphering the stars

But by opening myself
to curative forces buried within
to hidden energies
the powers in my interior self.

In sickness and in dying, it is never too late
Living, I teach
Dying, I teach

how to face pain and fear
Others observe me, children, adults,
students of life and death
Learn from my bearing, my posture,
my philosophy.

It is never too late--
Some word of mine,
some touch, some caress may be remembered
Some gesture may play a role beyond the last
movement of my head and hand.

Write it on my epitaph
that my loved ones be consoled
It is never too late.