

A black and white photograph. A man sitting in a chair in a cemetery, as a light rain falls and the sun shines at the same time. There is a headstone under a shady tree.

There's sod beneath his chair. It was laid down in small square sections, suggesting it had been removed and then carefully replaced. He paid to have the ground dug up, have a cement vault installed, and to have the ground restored.

He is sitting on his own grave. Not because his death is imminent – he's in pretty good shape. And not because he was in a morbid state – he was in a fine mood. In fact, he has had one of the most affirmative days of his life. Sitting there, he reviewed the past: birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, career, the present, and the future. And he took the time to consider the last day of his life. This man is Robert Fulghum and he does visit his own grave every year. When he went to purchase a plot in an old cemetery, he was told that the plot would have to be dug up before it could be sold to him. They needed to be sure that the plot was actually empty and therefore available for sale and so he came to the cemetery on

the day that the workers dug up the grave. And then, on New Year's Day Jan. 1 1994, he returned with his folding chair to sit by the grave and think.

Robert Fulghum happens to be a minister and I was struck by the similarity of his annual visit to his own grave as compared to what we do on Yom Kippur. We approach Yom Kippur as if it were our own funeral. We sit in shul as Robert sat by his own grave. We see the white color of the Torah covers, and of the kittels that some of us wear today, the same color as the burial shrouds that will eventually cover us. Fasting on Yom Kippur can remind us that even though we're alive, we're like corpses for a day with no need for food or drink. Giving up bathing, shedding jewelry and leather shoes, foregoing sex, all of these spiritual practices focus us on scouring our souls. Yom Kippur literally begs us to think about our lives in light of our inevitable death.

The American author William Saroyan said "Everybody's got to die, but I always believed an exception would be made in my case." Saroyan's humor masks our fear of death, but we cannot hide from the words of the psalmist, "What person

lives and does not see death?” We ignore death at our own risk. We ignore it at the risk of missing the bigger question of how we fashion a life worth living.

Today we take stock. We attend to unfinished business, we seek wholeness. We do not do this privately, but rather in community. Instead of sitting alone on our grave, we assemble together. Even though our fasting does indeed make us a bit like corpses, it is ironic that our voices sound fuller on Yom Kippur than on almost any other day in the year. I find this especially ironic in light of Woody Allen’s comment that “it is impossible to experience one’s own death objectively and still carry a tune.” Yet, we do carry a tune today and observing Yom Kippur is one of Judaism’s most powerful ways to “experience” our death, by coming together and reflecting on our lives, showing remorse for what we have done wrong - we vow to do better.

"אלוקינו ואלוקי אבותינו - God and God of our ancestors, hear our prayer, do not ignore our plea," – we begin the viddui, the confessional prayer that is a central part of Yom Kippur. The Biblical high priest once confessed his sins, those of his

household and the entire community, evidence of his priestly privilege. But with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, there are priests no more. Now all of us beat our breasts and utter, “ashamnu - We, / like our ancestors, have sinned.” “V'al kulam elo-ah slihot,” we plead, “for all of these sins, forgive us.” With our hearts and with our words, we actualize the rabbinic idea that Yom Kippur provides atonement when accompanied by repentance. But the rabbinic teaching actually says, “Death and Yom Kippur provide atonement with repentance.” Many of us understand how Yom Kippur can help us atone, but death?

There is another viddui, in addition to the vidduis we say collectively on Yom Kippur. This is the deathbed viddui recited by an individual. In this ritual, the dying person asks for God to accept his prayer, to forgive him for the wrongs he has committed in his life. And the individual asks God to accept her suffering and pain in death as atonement for sinning. The dying person says, “I now live and die with a clear conscience. Protect my family as our souls are bound up together. Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

“L’chaim - to life.” We toast, we cheer - we wish each other well with these Hebrew words in times of joy. The Torah tells us, “Choose life - chai b’hem - live by them,” live by the mitzvahs that God has given us. Of course we are more comfortable talking about life than we are talking about death. But as Michel de Montaigne, the 16th century French writer tells us, “What will it take to deprive death of its greatest advantage over us? Let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it. A man who has learned to die has unlearned how to be a slave.”

Judaism offers many poignant moments in which we may frequent death if we choose. When mourners recite the kaddish in communal daily prayer practice, we frequent death. When we go to a shiva home and comfort a mourner, we frequent death. When we escort the dead to their final resting place, we frequent death. When we remember the yahrzeit of a family member, we frequent death. And all of these are done through community. On Yom Kippur, we do not go to the mountain alone to atone. We do not sequester ourselves in private spiritual

practice. We chant the viddui as one collective, “we.” And so too with kaddish, shiva or a funeral, death and mourning are not exclusively private, they ideally happen in community.

The deathbed viddui is no exception, yet one of the least talked about Jewish spiritual practices. As a rabbi, I have been present at many a bedside for the viddui. I have been touched and moved by a family’s openness to this ritual at a time of incredible vulnerability, as I experienced with Rebecca. Thank you to Ruth and Louise, Rebecca’s daughters, who gave me permission to share this with you.

Ruth told me that her mother was dying. Rebecca was resting in her own home, drifting in and out of consciousness. Ruth asked me she should be doing in that very moment. I shared with her the viddui prayer, what it meant and how we gather family around the bedside for this moving ritual. If the dying person is not able to say it on her own, another person can say it on her behalf. I offered to do

this for her mom and asked her to talk about it with her siblings, to see how they felt about being present for this final goodbye around her bedside.

The next day, Ruth said, “Yes.” As I walked toward the open door of Rebecca’s home, I saw a cozy apartment with every open wall lined with chairs. There Rebecca’s peers sat, with their eyes fixed on her. She lay in a bed at the end of the living room. There were at least eighteen people there in addition to Rebecca’s daughters and some of her grandchildren. I had never been to a viddui with so many people present. Each person there, even if he didn’t know what the viddui was, or perhaps had never met a rabbi, was there to be with Rebecca in her final days. I had never been in a room where people were so accepting of death. Granted, it could have been that many of them had already lost their peers, but I have been with many seniors who struggled in facing mortality yet this group was so comfortable in the moment. It was an extraordinary - time almost stood still. I gathered Ruth and Louise, said the viddui prayer and we quietly raised our voices, singing psalms and giving her permission to go. After we concluded, some came forward alone to utter words in Rebecca’s ear. Slowly the crowd

disbursed. On the way out, several of them mentioned to me that this was the first viddui they have ever participated in and how peaceful and wonderful it was for them. Rebecca was ready to transition out of her body. Three weeks later, to the day, we buried Rebecca, escorting her to her final resting place. Ruth and Louise embraced community every step of the way. At times, I imagined they might have wished for some privacy, they did not cede their grief to the private realm.

While many of us can buy into the idea of communal atonement on Yom Kippur, not all of us may buy into Jewish ideal of death and mourning being a part of communal life. What if we want to be left alone in our grief? What if we want our parent's funeral to be private? What if we don't take to the idea of shiva, the idea of turning our home into a place of public prayer when we want to retreat into our private sorrow?

At the foot of the Rocky Mountains, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, runs the Center for Loss and Life Transition. As a grief counselor, Dr. Wolfelt notes the “de-ritualization

trend” in American culture. We avoid mourning, and our culture is an actual roadblock to meaningful mourning practices. In reading what he considers to be the six primary needs of the mourner, I was struck that every single need involved some kind of community. Dr. Woltfelt is saying that we can’t go it alone, regardless of our religious tradition. This is such a powerful concept for him that he coined the term “companioning.”

What does it mean to companion? It means to be present, not to take away the pain. It means listening with heart, not analyzing the head. It means bearing witness to the struggle, not judging it. It is about walking alongside, not about leading. It is about silence, not about words.

Whether it an Irish Catholic wake, or a Janazah Salah for a Muslim, the mourning practices of so many spiritual traditions involve community. During an Indiana University class entitled Grief in a Family Context, a student named Autumn Workman-Newkirk interviewed an abbot of a Buddhist monastery in Nepal.

Here's what he says about the nature of grief according to Buddhist Mahayana practice:

If there's a family with two individuals and they experience a death, the grief only involves those two individuals. But if one is working for the whole community, then that person has to take on the grief of the whole community. One has to think, "I am working for the benefit of all sentient beings, so I am taking responsibility." It is the same for both: the family who does not want to experience sorrow, and for the whole community who doesn't want to experience sorrow.

In Jewish tradition, the rabbis taught in the Talmud: If you're studying Torah and there is a funeral, you stop your study and you join the funeral procession. [Now remember, studying Torah for the rabbis was the most important thing to be doing. . . so all the more so would they say that any another activity would be halted on account of a funeral.] Then they ask the question, "How many people is enough to attend the funeral? How many do you have to have in that

procession in order not to cancel Torah study? Rav Samuel the son of Ini said in the name of Rav: Twelve thousand people. . . . Rav Sheshet said: Its taking away is like its giving. What is the “it” here? The “it” here is a Torah. The rabbis are telling us when a person dies it is as if a Torah left the world. And just as the Torah came into the world at Mt. Sinai in the presence of a myriad of people, so too when a person is taken from us it must be done in the presence of a myriad of people. A Jewish funeral is a ceremony where no one is necessarily invited, but ALL are forcefully encouraged to attend.

But what when a loss is so great, so sudden and so tragic? How does community fit into that? And what do we say to those who can't gather with loved ones to say goodbye, to mark a life with sacred closure when they want to? What does Jewish tradition say about loved ones who are taken too suddenly for a family to even fathom a funeral in the community?

I decided to ask these questions of someone special in my life: my sister, Pam. I told her about this sermon that I was preparing and asked her how the deathbed

viddui would sound to those of you who never had the chance to say goodbye to someone you loved. Why did I ask her? Because she has known the excruciating reality of a life taken too soon and the overwhelming urge for privacy in light of a tragic loss. But before I share with you what she said, you first must know about her tragedy in order to understand what she taught me.

I will never forget where I was when she called me on October 5, 2010. Coming out of an office building in Beverly Hills, I checked my voicemail, heard her message and doubled over in pain. As I staggered across the office plaza, I heard her faraway voice, numbly telling me that my twenty-three year old nephew, Rod, was gone, shot to death on the porch of his home in the college town where he was finishing up his senior year of college.

What can a mother say? How can the idea of a deathbed confessional have anything but cruel resonance for her? She couldn't say farewell to her only son. Her emotional pain was physically debilitating. How did she find any way to let the community in at this moment?

When I asked her these questions, she told me that with a death like Rod's, there is no control. But, she told me, the place to exercise some degree of control is in how one responds. She couldn't bring her son back but she could control her choices in light of this tragedy which made me think about how Judaism sagely responds to death and dying. The Jewish way helps us regain some of the loss of control that death brings. The irony is that by relinquishing our control in that moment and submitting to spiritual framework of our tradition, we actually gain some degree of control. Just like we can't delay or reschedule Yom Kippur, she knew that she couldn't delay mourning publicly and immediately after his death. Even though she didn't want to, she did it because she knew that when she would be ready, that her community would already have moved past it. She knew that

she would later need to draw upon the reserve of strength that she shored up during the initial period of mourning. In order to be able to go on to other stages in the mourning process, she had to grasp that moment. She mourned in community, in the face of fear, vulnerability, anger and pain.

Many people tell me, “Rabbi, I can’t sit shiva for him.” Or “She didn’t want me to mourn for her.” But you know what? Shiva is not for the dead - it is for the living. While the dead may express their wishes about end of life issues or how their body returns to dust, once the body is gone, the mitzvahs of mourning and shiva belong to the mourner. This is why Jews-By-Choice, or those who convert to Judaism are encouraged to embrace the mitzvah of sitting shiva for close relatives, just like born-Jews are encouraged to do so. It is ok to say to someone you love, “I am going to need to mourn you. I am going to need my community around me. I know that Jewish tradition wisely insists on taking time to process loss and to allow space for mourning.

On this Yom Kippur, I pose a variation on the questions that Robert Fulghum asked himself as he sat on his grave: Who will be there to bury you? What community will escort you to your final resting place? Who will say kaddish for you? Will you have the important conversations with your family and close friends, to let them know what you want at the end of your life? To ask them what they want at the end of their lives? Will you allow the Jewish community to comfort your loved ones? Will you let us in at this moment of vulnerability?

I want to be there for you when you reach out to me at a time of loss, when you let me into your life and the life of your family. Even when I don't know the person who I am burying, I come to know them through what you share with me, to hear their stories, to understand their foibles. I want to do the mitzvah of escorting of your loved one to the next world and then to comfort you through the days, weeks and months ahead. As Dr. Vivian Rakoff writes, "mourning is essentially a process of unlearning the expected presence of the deceased." This is what a rabbi does, this is what a sacred community does. We are there with you when you say, "I was at my parents' house. . . wait a minute, my father is

gone. . .now it is my mother's house now. . . or. . . “I drove by Rod's school. . . wait . . it's not his school anymore.” When you are a part of a sacred community, you are not alone in unlearning the expected presence of the ones you love.

I credit much of this sermon to the inspiration of Rabbi Erica Brown. In her book Happier Endings, she inspired me to share from my heart and to give voice to this idea: At some point we can all be inspired at the inevitable juncture of life and death. For some of us it does happen at bedside as we lovingly surround our parent and say goodbye. For others it might be the spiritual unleashing of gratitude upon hearing our sibling's eulogy. For others it might happen at a spouse's graveside service, when you realize the power of a present community when you lose your life partner. It may be during shiva, when the cathartic retelling of stories soothes the soul and leaves you inspired by what you learn from others about the person you loved so much. Or it may be after the formal mourning period, where, like my sister, you are inspired by the love poured out on you even when you lose a child.

This spiritual framework allows you to companion others and to be companioned. Make this a year of opening yourself to the tradition and trust what Judaism has to say about death, dying and mourning. The tradition will hold you and it will free you. By doing this, you will choose life, even when faced with death. We can companion and be companioned in so many different ways, including humor.

This reminds me of a joke. Bernie was on his deathbed when he smelled the wonderful combination of cinnamon and yeast wafting its way upstairs to his bedroom. Bernie called for his daughter and in a plaintive voice said, “Ethel, give a dying man his last wish. Bring me a piece of your mother’s delicious babka.” Ethel went downstairs but came back up empty-handed. “Sorry, Pa. Mom says it’s for after.” Shanah Tovah.