

The Heart of the Matter
Kol Nidre 5771
Rabbi Paula Marcus

All of us go through profound experiences that change our lives. Now is the period in the Jewish calendar when we are gifted with the opportunity to reflect on those experiences. I would like to share one of these experiences with you.

10 years ago my grandmother lay dying in NY. My Nana and I were very close. She and I shared a bedroom in her home on a lake in New Jersey, where we spent every summer of my childhood. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Nana was a second mother to me. To all of us kids, really.

Rabbi Rick was on sabbatical and I took a few days to fly back east. It was right before Thanksgiving and I needed to see my Nana before she died. Naturally, I was torn between my obligation to our congregation and my deep desire to spend time with my grandmother and say the words remaining in my heart that I needed to share with her before she died. So I went. And when I came back to California, I prayed that my grandmother would make it through until after Chanukah so that I could be with the congregation through the holiday while Rabbi Rick was still away. She died a few days after the end of Chanukah and I was able to fly back to NY after the end of the holiday.

During our last visits her spirit gradually moved away from us as the days passed. She was spending more time there, wherever there is, than she was. My beloved grandmother had begun her journey of moving away from us and on to the next journey.

This experience guides me as I am with people who are dying and their family members. Letting go of my grandmother's physical presence in the world helps me as I help others navigate this profound and painful time. For me letting go didn't mean that I forgot my grandmother, or ever could. It meant only that I could choose how to stay connected with her spirit while releasing her body. It meant that I drew upon the love we shared over many years. This love was the bridge I hoped to traverse between this world and wherever it was she was spending her time. This love was a source of strength and I was relentless in my efforts to be sure that she knew how much I appreciated her influence in my life.

Yom Kippur is often described as a rehearsal for death. On Yom Kippur we fast from food and drink, we don't wash and many refrain from wearing leather, all in an effort to distance ourselves from our physical needs, our bodies. We look at ourselves in the mirror of our prayers without the outer garments, because we're looking at our insides. Surrounded by our community, we don't need anything to cover up the truth of our lives. Many traditional Jews, and some in our congregation, wear a kittel, shrouds, in which they will eventually be buried. On Yom Kippur we are motivated to behave as if it is our last day on earth. As if it is our last opportunity to face what is real in our lives and forgive others and ourselves for missing the mark. In the words of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Shefa Gold, "Yom Kippur reminds us that we are all dying. There is no time for regret, worry, fear, no time to put off facing the truth, or to delay thanking our beloveds. On Yom Kippur each moment takes on urgency. We walk through most days only half-alive. Yom Kippur, like every real encounter with Death, urges us into the fullness of living." What a great gift this is; our yearly opportunity.

Have your encounters with death helped you come into the fullness of being alive? Have they helped you to remember what is important in life? In my experience, death and dying teach us the value of love and community to the living. I see how people in this congregation support each other when loved ones are sick or dying. This sanctuary has held many tears of grief and will continue to be a place where we can bring our wounded hearts. As our community continues to age and mature, more of us will depend upon each other to help us carry the pain of our losses. And we know how to do this.

Most of you know that just a few months ago, my husband Aryeh suffered from sudden cardiac arrest. We had been planning to leave for Israel on a Wednesday morning in July. But on Monday afternoon I received a voicemail from his doctor, to call right away. When I returned the call, I learned that Aryeh had passed out in the doctor's office and was being rushed to the ER in an ambulance. It was quite a journey and our family felt that we looked into the face of life and death. Gratefully, Aryeh is recovering, and we have been amazed by the love and support we have received from Rabbi Rick, Rabbi Shifra and members of our congregation.

As I drove to the ER, I thought about so many of you and so many others who have loved ones that have died. I thought about the brave wife and daughters who cared for their beloved husband and father, in the living room of their home. I remembered so clearly going to visit for the last time before he died, reading poetry and prayer, listening to his mother, a devout Catholic, say good-bye to her son. This man knew he was dying and he permitted his family to care for him in their home. This family's grace and courage have stayed with me.

When I got to the ER I realized, that Aryeh was lying on a gurney, in the same area I had come to only one month before, to be with a TBE member whose sister was dying. Her sister had lived way beyond the prognosis she was given seven years before. This woman had lung cancer, and it had metastasized to other parts of her body. She was a single mom and her son was on his way from Fresno to say good-bye. Now, you have to understand that this woman was not communicative. She seemed to be asleep. But we have an idea that hearing is one of the last senses to go, and her sister and nephew kept talking with her, telling her they loved her and that her son was on the way. Finally, they were able to move her to her own room upstairs and other members of the family arrived. She hung on for hours and finally, her son came into the room. He sat with her for almost an hour. And then her sister realized that it was time to say the final prayers before death. They called me back into the room, and we said the vidui, the confessional, which we say together on Yom Kippur. Both her sister and her nephew told her it was time to go, she was a good person and everyone loves her. After two more breathes, she died. She died with her sister's arms wrapped around her knowing she was well loved. And she died knowing that her son was going to be OK.

In each of these stories - and there are many - the essence is love. In each, there is a reminder of how precious relationships are. How we look to those around us to hold us up when we are hurting. Here at Temple Beth El, we know how to hold each other up. We bring food, we call, we send e-mails, we visit those who are sick, and we make a minyan to help each other mourn our beloved dead.

I remember another story.

It was Sunday morning and I was on call. I received a message from the answering service and called back to find out that someone was dying in the ICU. Her daughter asked if I could come see them. I only had the mother's name and didn't know exactly whom I would find at the hospital. I proceeded to ICU and found a woman I had known for many years. She told me that her mother was dying and a number of family members were surrounding her bed. I walked in to find a circle of love around the dying woman. I invited each family member who was able and willing to share some words with her and let her know that if she was ready to die, they could let go of her physical presence in their lives. After some time, I began to feel that it was too hard for this woman to die with her loved ones so close so I suggested that they leave the room for a while to see if that might make it a bit easier. We all left the room and sat together in a small room near the ICU. After a few moments, one of the daughters said that she didn't really feel that she was able to watch her mother die. It was just too painful. We spoke about the many hours, days, months and years this daughter had cared for her mother and affirmed her choice to leave the room. We were able to recognize the great bond of love between this mother and daughter, expressed through the caring shared in life. About an hour must have passed, when suddenly the daughter looked at me and said, "She's gone". About two seconds later, the ICU nurse came towards the room and told us that the woman had died. This daughter knew the exact moment her mother had taken her last breathe. Their love was so strong that this daughter felt her mother's spirit leave her body from a different room. There's no logical way to explain this except to see it as an expression of their love.

When a loved one dies, we are faced with the reality of our own fragility. We have an opportunity to examine our lives and remember

that we won't live forever. In the words of Psalm 23, we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." We don't stay in that valley, we keep walking forward. And eventually we can help others walk through this valley. So many of you sitting here today have guided others through this painful terrain. And you have shared your stories of loss with love and care.

When this Yom Kippur service concludes we will begin Yizkor. The Hebrew words yizkor means remember. We'll open our hearts to the memory to all of our friends and family who have died. This remembering affirms the continuing presence of our love and keeps that memory alive.

It is that release of love that we crave. It is the eternal spark that survives the struggle. When the battle is over, and we mourn our losses, we cry for what will not return, for our loved one's physical presence is gone forever. But the wonder of the human spirit is that we can keep going. We can find our way back to the joy of living. As our mourning progresses, we still remember all we have lost, and yet we move forward with courage and a renewed sense of gratitude for life. That is what awaits us on the other side of our tears.

And that is my prayer for all of us on this Yom Kippur.