

PARSHAT VAYECHI
DECEMBER 14, 2013
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In the first few verses of our Torah reading this morning we learn of something that has never before been described in Biblical literature. We learned after Adam and Eve disobeyed G-d's words that no human being will live forever. Death is simply part of the human experience. From Adam and Eve until our patriarch Jacob, it is simply recounted to us that each of our ancestors passed away. We learn nothing of their very last days and how they spent them.

However, with Jacob, something new is described for us. Jacob is the first person in the Bible to be ill. The Bible tells us that "Sometime afterward, Joseph was told, 'your father is ill.'" Hearing those words, Joseph leaves his busy life as the Viceroy of Egypt and brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to his father's side. Jacob recognizes that he is ill, that his days are dwindling, and that he will not live forever. Thus, he is the first one in the biblical record to be able to prepare for his death and to have an opportunity to say farewell.

While each one of us knows the eventuality of our physical demise, we rarely want to talk about it or even prepare for it. We know that it is important for us to have a will in order to divide our financial assets. But how many of us have a Living Will which tells our loved ones what our final wishes may be? We know that we should have an insurance policy to protect the survivors, but how many of us have told those survivors of our wishes for our final services? I have learned over and over again when I speak to our Bar and Bat Mitzvah families in our Geshar program that most of them do not have cemetery plots. Though each of us knows that our end will come, and none of us know the precise day, many of us are not really prepared for it.

I believe that pre-education is important and, thus, although death is one of the remaining taboos in American society, it is not so in Jewish tradition. In essence we prepare for our death from the moment we are born. Jewish tradition not only has rules and regulations about how the body is to be prepared, but also how our survivors are to act after our death. It also suggests that we create our own legacies in life and translate those legacies to those who follow us. Too often we don't get the chance to do so because death comes quickly, without proper warning, and without proper preparation.

Dr. Erica Brown is a writer and educator who works as a Scholar-In-Residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. She has written a number of important books on Jewish themes and on leadership. Recently, she authored a book entitled *Happier Endings: A Meditation on Life and Death*. She writes that her Aunt Diane and Uncle Roy found her Cousin Alyssa's body collapsed on the floor of her apartment late one Wednesday afternoon in September after no one had answered her phone for many hours. Erica was deeply distressed by this death because she thought Alyssa had died alone, reflecting upon one of our most persistent fears. "We are terrified," she writes, "to die by ourselves, left alone and undiscovered for a long time." Dr. Brown had not really been intimately involved with death, but this time she knew she would have to help her uncle and aunt, as well as her many relatives and Alyssa's friends, get

through this difficult situation. She worked with her uncle and aunt to make the preparations for the funeral and, eventually, was asked to lead the service.

She writes that “Alyssa’s death raised so many questions for me about death.” She contemplated whether people could have a happy ending, and how that might occur. Her book describes what she calls the industry of death, how people cope with it as survivors, and how one can prepare for a happier ending. While Alyssa’s death, at the age of 41, created a vacuum for her in her life and in the life of her family, she writes that it became an opportunity for her to grow as a Jew. She wanted to know what makes for a beautiful death, so she spent her time meeting with people and listening to their stories about the death of their loved ones.

After she recounts many of these stories, in her epilogue she tells the story of a close friend who called to tell her that her grandmother had died two months shy of her 97th birthday. She described for Erica the last moments of her death. She was in a hospital bed with her two sons flanking the bed and each one holding her hand. In the room were the cast of characters who peopled her life: her sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren and great grandchildren. They all said goodbye. They prayed with her and sang “A Woman of Valor”, and then her son said it was time. She closed her eyes and breathed her last breath. Erica writes, “Let that be me, I whispered to G-d when I hung up the phone.”

Each of us intellectually knows that one day we will breathe our last breath and we hope it will come without pain and suffering. We pray that we will have lived a full life that will have been meaningful and that we will have had an opportunity to say words of farewell to those around us. I have stood with families around that hospital bed, in their homes, in the hospital, or in hospice centers. I have been tremendously moved as members of the family have told of their great love for the person lying there and the gratitude they felt for their lessons in life. I have been present when those lying in the bed have offered their blessings to those around them and then taken their last breath. Those moments have remained with me. Erica Brown, in the course of her book, learns not merely about death but about life. She learned not merely how to create a happier ending, but how to create a happier life, not merely how to die, but also how to live.

Much has been written recently about the Pew Research Center’s study of the portrait of Jewish Americans. It has raised many concerns about Jewish identity, the rise of intermarriage, the lack of dedication to religious observance and, for us in particular, the decline of Conservative Judaism. One of the survey questions asked about the essentials of Jewish identity. Forty-two percent of those surveyed replied that having a sense of humor is essential to Jewish identity. If that is the case, then we have new teachers, and maybe even new rabbis.

If that is so then one of our teachers would be Billy Crystal. Recently, he wrote a new book entitled *Still Foolin’ Em: Where I’ve Been, Where I’m Going, and Where the Hell are My Keys?* Crystal wrote the book as he was turning 65. While he uses a great deal of humor to describe the aging process, he has written a very touching book, one in which he describes his own Jewish identity, his great love for his family, and his success in show business. Part of what makes the book so interesting is that he is not afraid to describe his feelings and discuss some very difficult issues. One of those is his fear of death and the learning process that he has undertaken as he has grown older.

Crystal writes, “Growing up, I was always around the old, the sick, and the complaining... although my relatives were a joyous group a low-hanging fog always seemed to surround them and one-by-one they disappeared into it. My father led the parade by dying suddenly when I was just 15 years old.” Crystal writes that he has missed his father terribly and that it changed not only his teenage years, but his entire life. He writes of his great respect and love for his mother who raised him and of his need to somehow deal with his father’s legacy. “This search for my father always became entangled with the vines of my own aging. We never had a chance to grow old together.” After his father’s death, his Uncle Berns took on a very important role in his life. He had a special relationship with Billy and knew how to talk to him. He was the one who Billy wanted to please.

Berns collapsed at Billy’s daughter’s wedding brunch and he made his nephew his medical proxy. He was in a semi-comatose state for weeks and Billy felt the urge to say to him, “Uncle, maybe it’s time to stop fighting,” but then he would get scared and mad at himself. Some days there were flickers of hope and other times there were very difficult moments. Billy was now 60 years old and growing old with Berns was one of the gifts of his life. He really wasn’t ready to say “no more, that’s enough.”

Crystal writes that he wasn’t there when either of his parents died, and he had been angry at them for not waiting for him. This time he walked into the hospital room and held Bern’s hand. His Uncle moved his head slightly, sensing that he was there, and a huge diamond of a tear rolled down his face onto his gown. He was sure that his Uncle had only a few hours. The next morning his fever broke and he was alert. Billy ran back to the hospital and this time knew that his Uncle was leaving him. His Uncle had waited for him. The family came together and stood around the bed. Billy held his right hand and everyone told him goodbye and encouraged him to go. They sang to him, Berns made a slight motion to turn his head, there was a hint of resignation, a glimmer of a smile, and he stopped breathing. He was gone.

His death touched Billy Crystal in a very significant fashion. This time he was around for his Uncle’s passing and rather than being angry at not being present at the death of his parents and, especially, being frustrated that his father had died so young, he could offer words of gratitude for his Uncle’s life. He knew his Uncle had lived a good life, had passed on his legacy to his children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, and would not be forgotten by them. Billy writes that as he continues to age he thinks often of that moment and, how, he hopes, that his end will come the very same way.

The end of a life is always a sad moment. We search for a manner in which to make it meaningful. We always want more time for our beloved and yet we know that no one will live forever. What can we learn from their death about life itself?

Perhaps it is taught to us at the beginning of our Torah portion before we find out that Jacob is ill. The Torah begins with the words, “Jacob lived 17 years in the land of Egypt, so the span of Jacob’s life came to 147 years.” This is the story of the death of Jacob and, yet, the tale begins with the fact that Jacob lived. What we can learn from this sequence is that the achievements of Jacob’s lives are emphasized, not the fact of his death, for each day was a gift.

What we learn is that each of us can make our days meaningful ones. Jacob's last moments were spent blessing his children and grandchildren. Each of us can live each day to the very last one adding our special blessing.

None of us knows the day of our death, when we will take our last breath. It is our task to make each day a meaningful one, recognizing that it may be our last day on the face of this earth.

I don't know whether we will be granted a happier ending as described by Erica Brown or in the story of Uncle Berns. I also don't know whether we will be taken quickly like Alyssa or like Billy Crystal's father. What I do know that in living each day to its fullest, in making a difference in the lives of those around us, in creating a legacy for the next generation, we will live on in the hearts and souls of those who will remember us. Perhaps, that is the real message of a happier ending, knowing that our spirit will continue to live on in them.

May we be so blessed.