

**Yom Kippur Sermon 5777**  
**Seth Rich Z'L; How to Comfort Mourners**  
**Rabbi Alex Freedman**

(Before I begin, I want to let you know I'll be speaking about a very serious topic today, the story of a family whose adult child was killed. If you feel listening to this would be too much for you or anyone with you, I want to give you the chance to step out before I start. It's really OK.)

I had never been so scared to knock on a door.

What on earth do I say to these parents whose child was now gone, dead, murdered at age 27?

Fourteen years ago I was a counselor for Seth Rich at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Over two eight-week summers, we got to know each other really well. I had met his parents a few times at camp on Visitors Weekend. When everybody was all smiles and the conversation was so easy: "Your son is a wonderful guy. He's having a great summer."

But then, three years ago, I read the unspeakable news: In the middle of the night on July 10th, 2016, Seth was shot twice in the back in Washington DC. He was one block from home. Then and now the police believe it was a robbery gone bad. Three years later the police still don't have any suspects. And to make it worse, if that's possible? He lingered in pain.

This was my camper, someone I knew well, someone I loved. He was a really bright light. One of the good guys in politics, who was working for the Democratic National Committee at the time. The news really shook me for a long time, as it still does three years later.

My senior rabbi in New Jersey, Rabbi David Kirshner, encouraged me to go for Shiva. So there I was, standing outside this front door in Omaha, Nebraska.

I had been thinking literally for days about how to start this conversation but was no closer to knowing how.

What on earth do I say to his parents, whose son was murdered at 27?

What words can bring him back?

What words can explain the inexplicable?

What words can end this nightmare for them and for me?

What...do...I...say?

The words we say to someone who just experienced a loss can do a world of healing...or a world of hurt. And sometimes these words are remembered forever, for good...or for bad. What we say to mourners, as they stand in the valley of the Shadow of Death, are among the most important words we'll say over the course of our lifetimes. Today I will speak about these words of comfort, and wordless comfort.

As I sat on the plane to Omaha, Sheryl Sandberg's words ran through my head. She is COO of Facebook, and author of the well-known books Lean In and Option B. Four years ago, while

vacationing in Mexico, her husband Dave Goldberg died suddenly at 47 after an accident falling off a treadmill. Periodically she shared her reflections in Facebook posts. One post in particular, on the occasion of Shloshim, the end of the first 30 days, struck a nerve.

This is the part that I was thinking about. It reads:

I have lived thirty years in these thirty days. I am thirty years sadder. I feel like I am thirty years wiser. I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need. I think I got this all wrong before; I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer. A friend of mine with late-stage cancer told me that the *worst* thing people could say to him was “It is going to be okay.” Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not.

I found Sandberg’s words to be very moving... and extremely helpful. Do this, not that. Pastoral care is its own discipline, and while I learned some of this in Rabbinical School it was not nearly enough. I don’t claim expertise in navigating these tough conversations. But I’ve thought about them and had some of them. Today I share my experiences with you because sooner or later we’re all going to sit in that chair face to face with a mourner. I hope my words can provide all of us with direction, so that we all can step into the breach, share their pain, and provide genuine comfort when they need it most.

Let me share what happened to me, and then I’ll share with you what I’ve learned.

I knocked on the door, took a deep breath, and stepped inside. I gave each of Seth’s parents a big, long hug. They needed it and I did too. It was the kind of hug that lasts a long time and leaves you feeling warm at the end.

We sat down on the couch and I said, “I’m a rabbi, I’m supposed to always know what to say, but I don’t know what to say now.”

They nodded and said, “There’s nothing to say.”

Nervously I continued to talk to Seth’s parents: “I’m so devastated by the loss too because he meant so much to me.”

Then I told them stories about their son as a camper. And that’s when I wasn’t nervous anymore. Some were goofy stories because he was a goofy kid, and those made them smile. Like the time campers weren’t allowed to bring any food to camp and he brought two massive George Foreman grills complete with tools, a mustard rack and a spice rack for grilling meats and grilled cheese sandwiches! Separately, of course.

And other stories were touching because he was a sweet boy, and those made his parents beam with pride. Like how often he took the new kid under his wing and set him up with friends, some of whom grew up at Beth El. When you became friends with Seth, you really became friends with everybody.

“What touches us the most,” said his mom, “is hearing stories about Seth that we didn’t know but that confirm who we thought he was. We thought Seth was a star, but all parents think that

about their kids. But to hear other people say the things we thought were true about him, it's priceless."

I shared with Seth's parents that a favorite moment of the week at camp for me and other counselors happened on late Friday afternoons after everyone scrambled to prepare for Shabbat and before Kabbalat Shabbat services by the lake: when we blessed our campers. As you may know, many parents bless their children on Friday nights at home before Kiddush. At camp, for 8 weeks at a time, *we the counselors* are their parents. We looked forward to this moment at camp when we could embrace our campers. Not every camper wanted this *Bracha*. But Seth always did.

So I would hold Seth in my hands like this, like I do to my own three sons now, and say,

*"Yevarecha Adonai VYishmerecha.*

*YaEr Adonai Panav Elecha Vihuneka.*

*Yisa Adonai Panav Eleha VYasem Lha Shalom.*

May G-d bless you and guard you.

May G-d show you favor and be gracious to you.

May G-d lift His face toward you and grant you peace.

I love you, Seth."

When I first heard the shocking news about Seth, I was so stunned I didn't cry. I don't know why. But the first time I recalled these moments on Friday afternoons, I finally did.

Seth's parents thanked me for sharing something about him they didn't know. I asked about what Seth did in college and beyond, and they asked how and what I was doing. After an hour I had to go to catch my plane back home. We hugged goodbye and I left the house absolutely sure that I made the right decision to go to Omaha. I felt our conversation was deeply challenging at the start yet satisfying at the end. And ultimately comforting.

Here's what I've learned from this and want to share with you:

I learned in the middle of that hug that whatever I said, mattered less. That a big hug all the way from New Jersey mattered more. Presence, being there, even in silence, especially in silence, cannot be underestimated. In fact, the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law, instructs us to be silent until the mourner begins the conversation with us. Our tradition is guiding us to listen more than we speak. Maybe that's why G-d gave us two ears and just one mouth.

I learned that the farther I traveled to Shiva, the more my visit comforted. And the less expected I was to be there, the more it was appreciated. If you ever ask yourself, Should I go to this Shiva, because I'm on the fence and don't know the family so well? Go. The less expected you are to visit, the more impactful you are.

I learned that the Jewish tradition affirms that when we comfort the mourner with our presence, we are doing nothing less than emulating G-d. The Talmud teaches that G-d comforted Isaac after his father Abraham died. So when we comfort somebody after a death, we are acting G-d-like in the world (Sotah 14a).

At the cemetery, we demonstrate this comfort when we form two parallel lines, *Shurot*, and surround the mourners as they leave the grave. We tell them in deed, not in word, that they are surrounded shoulder to shoulder by people who love them. We do not allow them to feel alone.

I've learned that in moments of intense loss, everyone's focus must be on comforting. It's *not* the time for explaining. When people try to explain why a tragedy happened, it never goes well.

Usually there's no satisfying explanation. And even if there is, it doesn't change the reality that the person is gone forever. In moments of loss, we must respond with presence and comforting.

I've learned, from Shiva houses in Omaha, New Jersey, and Chicago's North Shore how powerful stories are. So frequently I've heard mourners say, "I was so touched when people told me stories about my loved one. Especially stories that I didn't know."

I've learned that mourners don't want comforters to take away their pain. They want confirmation of the tragedy, the right to cry. Questions go far:

“What are some stories about him that you'll never forget?”

What values did she teach you?

What were some words he lived by?”

I've learned that you can have this important conversation if the house isn't crowded. But in a packed Shiva house, there may be time only for a hug and a comment:

“I'm so sorry for your loss.”

“I wish things were different.”

“What a terrible loss.”

“I miss her too.”

If there isn't time to say what you want, write a condolence letter. That's permanent.

I've learned that mourning doesn't end with Shiva or Shloshim. For many people, it's when the house empties out that more intense grief sets in. We must continue to be present for them after Shiva as well.

I've learned that every death is different. Not every death is *tragic*, like Seth's, but every death is sad. Profoundly sad. Sometimes adult congregants who have lost a parent in their 80's or 90's seem to feel guilty for crying and feeling devastated because they lived to a full age. *No*, I tell them. The passing of your parent after a full life is still deeply sad. No matter how old you are,

when your parent goes you are a child again who has lost Mommy or Daddy. Even when the passing itself is a relief because it ends suffering, there's still sadness.

I speak to you about Seth on Yom Kippur for a few reasons.

First, because on Yom Kippur we think about mortality. Each of us will have chances to comfort friends, family, and community who will lose somebody in the future. We never know who or when, so we should be prepared.

Second, because this incident is a foundational experience for me as a rabbi. It influences and enhances my ability to listen and comfort congregants in difficult circumstances. Like I was there for Seth's family in Omaha, I'm here for you now and in the future. I know Rabbi Schwab and Hazzan Tisser are also here for you in this important way.

Third, I speak of Seth because you may have heard his name before as the subject of sensational rumors and conspiracy theories. I want to set the record straight for my friend, Seth. *All* the conspiracy theories have been shown to be false by serious journalists in the podcast Conspiracyland.

I remember Seth for the goofy, generous guy he was. And the unlimited potential he had.

The Talmud teaches that every life is exponentially valuable. It famously says, he who saves a single life saves the entire world (Sanhedrin 37a). And he who destroys a single life destroys the entire world. We learn this from the fact that G-d created Adam alone, not a whole community all at once. Since Adam was the only man on earth in the beginning, if you took his life, you took all of humanity. His entire family tree - us - would be wiped out, his children, their children, and so on. That's why every life is exponentially valuable. And that's why Seth's passing is so sad. He was just getting started.

The Yom Kippur Torah reading actually begins with a tragedy: Aaron the High Priest loses two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, in a tragic accident. Elsewhere it notes his response: *VaYiddom Aharon*, Aaron was silent (Lv. 10:3). He sat in shocked silence. Moses urges Aaron and his remaining sons to return to their sacred ritual work as priests, but Aaron silences him, saying: "Now that such things happened to me, if I were to eat these sacrifices, would G-d approve?" (ibid. 10:19). We know the answer is No. Aaron isn't ready to move on. That is, Moses learned the hard way that silence was the best response. For him and for all of us.

Seth, I miss you very much.

I share with you now the same words I shared with you on those late summer Friday afternoons at camp as we all prepared for Shabbat. I meant every word of the *Bracha* then. And I mean every word of the *Bracha* now too, but in a completely different way. This is for you and for Sheryl Sandberg's late husband Dave, and for all those gone too soon from our world:

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*YaEr Adonai Panav Elecha Vihuneka.*

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