THE PASSAGE FROM LIFE TO DEATH: GAINING INSIGHTS ABOUT THIS SACRED TRANSITION FROM POETRY, MIDRASH, AND RITUAL

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THESIS ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Passage from Life to Death: Gaining Insights about this Sacred Transition from Poetry, Midrash, and Ritual

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS THESIS:

In this thesis, I set out to understand through texts and personal experiences what people go through emotionally, spiritually, and physically when they know that death is right around the corner. To help me understand this often-scary transition, I studied the poetry of two of Israel's most beloved poets, Carmi and Zelda, in Chapter 1. Although not all of their poems in this thesis deal specifically with the topic of death and dying, I was nevertheless able to glean insights into the dying process and recall experiences I have had with patients in hospital and hospice settings over the past 3 years. Those recollections became a jumping off point to the sections titled, "Pastoral Ruminations."

In Chapter 2, I explore various midrashim that focus on the death narratives of Jacob and Moses. These biblical characters experience death differently and the rabbis highlight some unique characteristics of both. Jacob's story teaches us that preparation for death is essential in order to die peacefully. Moses, on the other hand, does not take the news of his looming death as graciously as Jacob does. However, with the guidance of God, Moses accepts his mortality and in the end, he too serves as a role model for anyone approaching death.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I explore the value of rituals surrounding the dying experience. Currently, in the Jewish tradition there are no rituals in place to make the transitions from life to death a spiritual journey (except for the confessional prayer, *viddui*). Therefore, I suggest a washing ritual that is based on a *tahara* (ritual washing for the dead) as well as a letting-go ritual that is based on the liturgy of *Tashlich*.

THE GOAL OF THE THESIS:

It is my hope that this thesis will provide rabbis, Jewish chaplains and caregivers with a greater understanding of what dying people feel, both emotionally and spiritually. This thesis is also intended to serve as a guide to help make a dying person's transition from life to death as calm, peaceful and meaningful as possible. Most importantly, however, it is to bring a feeling and environment of *kedusha*, or holiness, into every end-of-life situation.

LAYOUT:

I. Poetry

- Zelda
  - Biography, Translations, Interpretations, Pastoral Ruminations
- Carmi
  - Biography, Translations, Interpretations, Pastoral Ruminations

II. Midrash

- Jacob's Death
  - Biblical Narrative, Translations, Interpretations, Pastoral Ruminations
- Moses' Death
  - Biblical Narrative, Translations, Interpretations, Pastoral Ruminations

III. Rituals

- Examination of Current Jewish Rituals Surrounding the Dying Experience
  - Maavar Jabbok, Viddui, Psalms
- How to Prepare for Rituals in an End-of Life Situation
- Innovative Jewish Rituals Surrounding the Dying Experience
  - Washing Ritual (*Taharat ha-Hayyim*), Letting-go Ritual (*Tashlich*)

MATERIALS USED:

This thesis examines selected poetry from Zelda and Carmi, and some midrashim that comment on the death narratives of Jacob and Moses. I used the book *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda* and Carmi's *Selected Poems: 1951-1994* in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I studied 7 passages from Genesis Rabbah, 3 from Deuteronomy Rabbah and 1 from Sifre. In Chapter 3, I reference various biblical passages from the Prophets and Writings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I remember riding the hospital elevator one day in the summer of 2007 at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. It was my first day of visiting patients as part of my Clinical Pastoral Education program. The moment the doors opened on the 6th floor – better known as the kidney and liver transplant unit – my life changed. I was about to enter the rooms of very ill patients and attempt to provide them and their loved ones with some type of spiritual healing. With a few prayers in hand and a stomach filled with butterflies, I made my rounds. After that tiring first day, I knew why I had chosen to become a rabbi – to help guide people through life's joyous, challenging, mysterious and sad times. By the end of that summer, sitting at someone's bedside, holding their hand, and listening to their life story became *tefilah* for me.

My experiences that summer changed the way I look at others and myself. I want to thank my CPE supervisor, Rev. Landon Bogan for guiding me through my first chaplaincy internship. He pushed me to open up and express myself in ways I never had. Since that summer, I had the privilege of working with talented Jewish chaplains at UCLA Medical Center and Kaiser Home Hospice. Rabbi Pearl Bar Lev and Cantor Susan Caro taught me so much about how to care for the sick, dying and bereaved. Their supervision, guidance and advice were always expressed with encouragement and warmth. I thank them for helping me process all of my visits. If I were to find a loved one or myself in their care, I would be absolutely comforted by their presence.

My thesis advisor, Rabbi William Cutter, PhD, was both a joy to work with and a privilege to learn from. When he suggested I look at modern Israeli poetry for my thesis, I thought how fortunate I was going to be to learn from "the master." I always looked

forward to our weekly *hevruta* sessions, as he never failed to give me a dose of his matchless sense of humor and enthusiasm for Israeli literature. Meeting with Bill was a real pleasure. Besides translating and discussing texts, I enjoyed our conversations about the National Pastime and I even got a kick out of the way he needled me about my writing style. Bill is a linguist par excellence and I feel so fortunate to have not only learned texts and chaplaincy skills with him, but perhaps more importantly, how to write what I mean using proper English. I hope someday I will be able to express myself on paper and in person with as much eloquence and elegance as Bill does. Lastly, I will never forget our sessions together since it was in Bill's office that I received a call from my wife informing me that her water broke! Bill will forever be a part of my son's life story.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My wife Nicole deserves my undying gratitude for supporting and encouraging me throughout this process. I know it was not easy for her when I disappeared for hours at a time in order to research and write this thesis – especially because our son Eytan was born just before Rosh Hashanah and at times it probably felt as though I was not always present to change his diapers or just help around the house. There isn't a day that passes when I don't "consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth" to be married to Nicole. I am so blessed. I also want to thank my five-month-old son, Eytan. One of my rabbis wrote me the day after Eytan was born. He said, "God sends us children to teach us what God's given up trying to teach us in other ways. Be good students!" Thank you Eytan for being the best teacher I could ever ask for. My life gets exponentially better each day I am with you. This labor of love is dedicated to you.

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Thesis for Rabbinic Ordination
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INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth-century French poet and fabulist, Jean de la Fontaine, wrote a fable that conflates the end-of-life narratives of Jacob and Moses – though its safe to write that this connection is merely a coincidence. In one of his fables, a woodcutter tries to avoid death, "he even tries to outwit it. But once he realizes that the end is really near, that there is no doubt about it, he stops playing the part of someone who is holding on to life, a part he had to play in order to live, and immediately goes over to the side of death. He adopts the classical attitude of one dying. He gathers his children around his bed for his last instructions and his last farewells..."[1] He says to them, "My dear children, I am going to our fathers. Good-bye, promise me that you will live like brothers. He takes each one by hand, and dies." This "classical attitude" of dying according to Philippe Ariès is one where people in generations past did not protest, fight back or boast that they would never die. They took death calmly – just like Jacob, and in some midrashim, like Moses too. These men and women from ages past did not try to postpone death. They got ready for it by preparing themselves and their families.

In American culture today, simply discussing dying is taboo. Speaking about death, one might imagine, has the power to hasten its arrival. No longer is dying accepted as a natural and, more importantly, a necessary phenomenon. Death, as Ariès puts it so bluntly, is a "failure, a business lost."[2] Just as dying has moved from the home to the hospital in recent generations, so too have people's comfort level with death become more distant.

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[1] Ariès, Philippe. *Hour of Our Death.* New York: Vintage, 1982. p. 16

[2] ibid, 586

Contemporary American Jews, for the most part, feel the same way about dying as the general American public. However, Judaism as a tradition and religion does not shy away from death – though it does not guide its adherents through it either. Judaism structures time very well and this approach to festival observances and other *halakhot* carries over to taking care of the mourners. Jews do this very well. We know how to take care of the dead and how to comfort the bereaved. What Jews do not do so well are guide people through the dying process. Judaism does not have a structure to help someone die in a meaningful way.

Considered the pioneer in the field of death and dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in 1969, wrote what has become the "Bible" on this topic, titled, *On Death and Dying*. In the forward to *Jewish Reflections on Death*, however, she writes, "I have always wondered why the Jews as a people have not written more on death and dying. Who, better than they, could contribute to our understanding of the need to face the reality of our own finiteness?"[3] Jews are, by no means, "experts" on death any more than any other group of people. But, it is odd; nonetheless, that a people who have ritualized almost every life-cycle event imaginable – including the time before and after death – have not contributed more to the actual process of dying. Since the time of this publication in 1974, few Jewish books on the dying process have been published. This phenomenon that Kübler-Ross mentions has affected modern Jewish pastoral care providers. We still do not know how to teach fellow Jews how to die. In fact, the various rabbis manual devote few pages to the end of life – the majority of them focusing on funerals.

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[3] Reimer, Jack, ed. Jewish Reflections on Death. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. p. 2

In American rabbinic seminaries today, many of the students participate (through requirements or their own ambition) in the Clinical Pastoral Education program taught at various hospitals in the country. While this hands-on learning experience gives its students the tools to provide comfort to patients and their families in times of crisis, it fails to do so while looking at chaplaincy through a Jewish lens. Indeed, the program itself is not a Jewish program. When it comes to death, rabbinical students learn how to write eulogies, lead shiva minyans, officiate at funerals, learn burial customs and perhaps how to chant and recite prayers such as *el malei rachamim*, *viddui* and kaddish. What they do not learn is how to lovingly and Jewishly guide someone through the passage of death. This was my main motivation in writing this thesis.

In this thesis, I set out to accomplish a couple goals. The first was to gain a clearer understanding of what people go through emotionally and physically when they know that death is right around the corner. To help me understand this often-scary transition, I studied the poetry of two of Israel's most beloved poets, Carmi and Zelda, in chapter 1. Although not all of their poems in this thesis deal specifically with the topic of death and dying, I was nevertheless able to glean insights into the dying process and recall experiences I have had with patients in hospital and hospice settings. Those recollections became a jumping off point to the sections titled, "Pastoral Ruminations." Carmi and Zelda each had a unique poetic style. Through metaphor, humor, vivid imagery, playfulness with words and biblical allusions, they conveyed many of the different emotions people experience when they or a loved one is near death.

In the second chapter, I explore various midrashim that focus on the death narratives of Jacob and Moses. These biblical characters experience death differently and the rabbis highlight some unique characteristics of both. Jacob's story teaches us that preparation for death is essential in order to die peacefully. Moses, on the other hand, does not take the news of his looming death as graciously as Jacob does. However, with the guidance of God, Moses accepts his mortality and in the end, he too serves as a role model for anyone approaching death.

Finally, in the third chapter, I explore the value of rituals surrounding the dying experience. Since the Jewish tradition, and especially Reform Judaism, does not have any rituals in place to make the transitions from life to death a spiritual journey (except for the confessional prayer, *viddui*) I created a washing ritual that is based on a *tahara* (ritual washing for the dead).

It is my hope that this thesis will provide rabbis, Jewish chaplains and caregivers with a greater understanding of what dying people feel, both emotionally and spiritually. This thesis is also intended to serve as a guide to help make a dying person's transition from life to death as calm, peaceful and meaningful as possible. Most importantly, however, is to bring a feeling and environment of *kedusha*, of holiness, into every end-of-life situation.

CHAPTER 1
POETRY

"In my beginning is my end...In my end is my beginning" –T.S. Eliot, *East Coker*

Why Poetry and Why These Poets?

There are some moments in life that words cannot describe accurately. These moments, such as the birth of a child or the death of a loved one, fill us with deep emotions, and when we try to express ourselves we get choked up or tongue tied. Often, we use metaphor to describe the intense emotional experience, as comparing one thing to another is often easier to do. How often do we hear someone speak of their dying partner in the hospital as a "fighter" in a "tough battle"? We understand what these images suggest. Poetry does just this. It has the ability to paint the scene of a trying or speechless moment by using imagery not necessarily connected to the setting. For example, Carmi writes, "Little by little I turn into an eagle." When we think of eagles, we think of strong birds of prey. But, in this particular poem, an eagle represents a physically depleted old man. Poetry can also depict one mundane situation and turn it into a symbol for the whole experience. With poetry, words can be played with to make a point and rhyme may be used to add beauty to a not-so-beautiful situation. The words can also call attention to a relationship between ideas or themes.

Dying is certainly a time when spoken words simply cannot express the flood of emotions and feelings that are generated by the reality of it all. Many times the dying are not able to communicate or choose not to. In order to guide a person through life's final transition, clergy and caretakers need to have a sense of what the person is living through. Poetry specifically about the end of life or even poetry that hints at the end of

a life can help one grasp what the dying experience is and thus make it easier to guide them in their final days. My thesis proposes some of the reasons for this utility. Although most of the poems I studied specifically reference dying, poems with other themes can also be effective.

The poems I studied for this thesis served as prompts for me. They are not necessarily to be used in an end-of-life setting, yet some may be appropriate to share with a patient or caretaker. Some may be fitting to read aloud to a dying person and some may be more suitable for the dying person to read by him or herself. The poems were primarily used as a way for me to understand more deeply the frustrations, yearnings, pains and thoughts that accompany a dying person as they approach the end of their life. For me, the poems served as a window into the reality of dying. They also allowed me to recall the experiences I shared as a chaplain with people who were in their final days and moments of life. In fact, while reading a Carmi or Zelda poem, I was frequently transported back to the bedside of one of my former patients. Even if the poem was about something completely different, such as "a very old song" or the "wild fragrance" of pine trees, the words and imagery allowed me to reflect on my experiences and see them from different perspectives. The poems stimulated my imagination, while always revealing truths about the dying experience.

Zelda and Carmi may not be the most well-known Israeli poets that ever lived (although being known by one name does suggest some celebrity) but they were greatly respected by the Israeli literary and intellectual community and some of their poems have become part of public consciousness. They are certainly considered giants in the literary world among Israelis. More importantly, they knew something about the end of

life. That is, they knew how to capture the feelings of both the dying and the caretakers of the dying. (Carmi was acutely aware of death since he lost a struggle to cancer at the end of his life. Zelda knew something about the subject as she lost her husband and parents around the same time.) Many times, as is not uncommon in poetry, it was almost impossible to distinguish between the two roles, and at times this seems to have made their poems so rich. While they shed light on the end of life with their words, they also used humor and played tricks with words that only enhanced their works. For example, in Carmi's "It became known to me today that I am terminal," how often does a patient confuse himself or herself with a sufi or a gladiola because those words sound just like (*sofani*) terminal as it comes out of the doctor's mouth?

Carmi

Carmi Charney, whose nom de plume was T. Carmi, was born in New York in 1925 and died in Jerusalem in 1994. Although he grew up in New York, his father, a rabbi, insisted that his family speak only Hebrew in the house, as the revitalization of modern Hebrew was under way in Israel. Carmi therefore became fluent in Hebrew even before he could speak English. After attending Yeshiva at the end of WWII, Carmi moved to France and helped the orphans of Jews who were killed in the Shoah. He later emigrated to Palestine and fought in the War of Independence in 1948. He settled in Jerusalem and lived there for the rest of his life as a poet, teacher and translator.

Soon after making aliyah, Carmi began publishing poems in Jerusalem and acquired a number of followers. He subsequently published several books, winning various literary awards and was also considered an exceptional translator and editor (he edited *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*). David Finklestone wrote in his obituary

to Carmi in *The Independent*, "Intellectuals and lovers of Hebrew pointed to his vivid and unusual diction, combining the inspiration of the Bible, elements of surrealism, contemporary Israeli idioms... He was able to deal with the big national themes of Israeli revival and redemption, but preferred to transmit a personal vision, based on personal tragedies, traumas and agonies."[4] Carmi had an awareness of acute suffering and thus wrote some mordant poems, each touched with a bit of dark humor. Brought up in a religious home and with a Yeshiva background, Carmi also had extensive knowledge of Jewish sacred literature and its presence is felt in many poems. In the first of his poems that I reference, Carmi writes of a world turned on its head, which hearkens back to texts from Micah and BT Sotah: "But the arrogance flourishes, the costliness rises for son spurns father..." This describes what may occur in a household torn apart by the reality of a family member dying and it also describes what will come of the world in the end of times.

The poems I have included in this thesis are somber and realistic at the same time. Either Carmi had been close to death (his or someone else's) or he simply knew how to express the feelings of dying through his art. On the other hand, perhaps none of the Carmi poems that I selected for my thesis are about dying. Nevertheless, Carmi's poetry is as effective in describing the dying process as Leo Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilyich is in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

The last pages of *Ivan Ilyich* are hauntingly vivid. The following is an example of the power of prose from this masterpiece:

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[4] Finklestone, David. "Obituary: T. Carmi." *The Independent*. [London] 16 Dec. 1994. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-t-carmi-1389731.html

"And the pain?" he asked himself. "Where has it gone? Now, then, pain, where are you?"

He waited for it attentively.

"Ah, there it is. Well, what of it? Let it be."

"And death? Where is it?"

He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death.

Instead of death there was light.

"So that's it!" he exclaimed. "What bliss."

All this happened in a single moment, but the significance of that moment was lasting. For those present, his agony continued for another two hours. Something rattled in his chest; his emaciated body twitched. Then the rattling and wheezing gradually diminished.

"Its all over," said someone standing before him.

He heard these words and repeated them in his soul.

"Death is over," he said to himself. "There is no more death."

He drew in a breath, broke off in the middle of it, stretched himself out, and *died.*[5]

Carmi too, with his terse style of writing, paints a vivid picture of someone near death in *An Additional Apology.*

(An additional apology)

She trembled,
What was I able to do?
I covered her.
It's too cold, she said.
I know, I said,
I did what I was able to do,
It was colder than before.
Again I covered her.
Yes, she mumbled,
It really was colder than before.[6]

While both works show what dying feels like to the characters, the first is much more descriptive than the second. Tolstoy brings the reader into the mind of dying Ivan Ilyich and we experience death through his lonely journey. Carmi, on the other hand, is less descriptive, but focuses entirely on one aspect of the dying experience: feeling cold

[5] Tolstoy, Leo. *Death of Ivan Ilyich.* New York: Bantam Books, 1981. Pp. 133-134

[6] Carmi, T. *Selected Poems: 1951-1994.* Tel Aviv, Israel: Dvir Publishing House, 1994. p. 320

and wanting warmth from a blanket. The poem is simple; yet, it is full of truth and as realistic as Tolstoy's description. In fact, because Carmi's poem is so simple, the reader is able to fill in the blanks. For example, what is the relationship between the two people in the poem? Where does the scene take place? How old are the people and what does the room look like? The fact that a reader might have these questions enhances the experience of reading the poem, especially if one is reading this poem to connect with their own situation. By leaving so many questions, the reader can answer them all by herself. The reader can put herself in the poem as the one who is cold. In this respect, while some poems might not be as descriptive as prose narrative, they can spark the imagination of the reader and allow her to collaborate with the poet.

Zelda

Like Carmi, Zelda also went by one name. She was born Zelda Schneurson, in 1914 in Warsaw. Both her father and grandfather were prominent Hasidic rabbis of the Chabad movement and the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson was her first cousin. At the age of twelve, Zelda emigrated to Palestine with her family. Shortly afterwards, her father and grandfather died.

Zelda lived in Jerusalem with her mother and attended a religious girls' school and then a teacher's college. At 18, she moved to Tel Aviv and became part of the artist scene there. Zelda later followed her mother up to Haifa in 1933. It was there that she fell in love with the landscape of Eretz Yisrael, which became the subject of many of her poems. In her poem, *The Invisible Carmel*, Zelda descriptively writes,

When I die
to become another essence,
the invisible Mount Carmel –
which is all mine, all
the quintessence of joy,
whose needles, cones, flowers, and clouds
are carved into my flesh –
will part from the invisible Carmel
with its boulevard of pine trees
descending to the sea.[7]

Almost as much as Zelda wrote about nature, she also masterfully wrote about religion and suffering. In *All This Misery – When Will I Die*, these different themes merge to produce a beautiful, yet heart wrenching poem. Zelda writes,

In vain the sea breeze kisses my eyes
and the grasses of the Carmel spoil me
with honey and myrrh.
I despise the hopes of the sun –
and the promises of the blossoms.[8]

After living in Haifa, Zelda moved back to Jerusalem and lived in a religiously mixed neighborhood. Her day job was teaching in a school. During this time, Zelda got married and shortly afterwards, her mother died. Soon after her mother died, her husband became sick and passed away not long after that. Death was not uncommon to Zelda.

It was not until 1967 that her first book of poetry was published, called P'nai (leisure). She followed that book with many others, all released to great acclaim. Zelda had many admirers who came from all walks of life and religious backgrounds. Zelda, however, was not interested in national fame, even though it swept her up and made

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[7] Zelda. *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda*. Trans. Marcia Falk. New York: Hebrew Union College, 2004. p. 81

[8] ibid, 61

her a popular Israeli folk hero. Zelda won many awards, including the prestigious Bialik award. Zelda is a legend in Israel and her poetry belongs to the national canon.

Amos Oz, a former grammar school student of Zelda's, once wrote about her style, that it violated every rule, "mixing feminine and masculine, present with past, noun and adjective - a sloppy, even muddled Hebrew. But what vitality there was in her stories! When a story was about snow, it seemed to be written in words of snow. And when it was about fires, the words themselves burned. And what hypnotic sweetness there was in her tales about all kinds of miracles! As though the writer dipped the letters in wine, the words went spinning in the mouth." It is perhaps in this technique that we find Zelda's poems so delightful and appealing.

The poems I chose for use in this thesis exemplify Zelda's unique style. They are poems that fuse religious lyrics with images of nature and death, such as in *All This Misery- When Will I Die* where Zelda references Psalm 41, while bringing the scent of the Carmel grasses to the page as though it's a children's "scratch and sniff" poem. In many of her poems, the translator Marcia Falk writes, "death and darkness exist alongside nature's constant renewals, which provide relief from agony and despair."[9] Zelda had a close relationship with death. Though this does not mean that her poems about dying come from her own experiences, there is no question that her choice of words and subjects were influenced by her life. Falk writes, "Repeatedly, she (Zelda) pleads for guidance to see beyond the pain and darkness that threaten to overtake her."[10] Zelda's poems served as useful springboards for me to muse on the transition

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[9] ibid, 14

[7] ibid, 22

from life to death, as well as bringing to mind various patients I had as a hospital and hospice chaplain.

Poems: Translations, Interpretations, and Pastoral Ruminations

A note on the translations for Zelda's poems

The Hebrew texts used are taken from the book, *The Spectacular Difference*, a collection of Zelda poems with an introduction and notes by Marcia Falk. Falk also translated the poems. In the research stage of this thesis, I translated all the poems with the assistance of my advisor, William Cutter. The translations below are a combination of the work done by Falk, Cutter and myself.

Zelda Poems

The Seamstress	התופרת
In the daytime, her small house is so lonely, without a friend, without a groom, At night a master rules over her exalted, faithful	בְּיוֹם בֵּיתָהּ הַקָּטָן כֹּה שׁוֹמֵם, בְּלֹא יָדִיד, בְּלֹא חָתָן, בַּלַּיְלָה יִשְׁלֹט בָּהּ אָדוֹן נַעֲלֶה, נֶאֱמָן
Should she grow ill, he will embrace her, when she dies, he will kiss her, when she is dead- he will hold her tight to his cold heart with his hands of dust.	כְּשֶׁתֶּחֱלֶה - יְחַבְּקֶנָּה, כְּשֶׁתָּגְוַע - יְנַשְּׁקֶנָּה, כְּשֶׁתָּמוּת יְאַמְצֶנָּה אֶל לִבּוֹ הַקַּר, בְּיָדִים שֶׁל עָפָר.

In *The Seamstress*, Zelda presents a romantic poem about death. However, it is not clear who the "master" is. It may be a man. It may be God. It may be death itself, or the angel of death. Who else might have a "cold heart" and "hands of dust?" Who or

what rules over us but the inevitabilities of life? Death, therefore, becomes a companion to the woman. She has a relationship with him; he visits her frequently and they gradually become more intimate the closer she comes to dying. Their relationship is not in the beginning stages either. When he comes, she is not surprised, but ready. She expects his visitations. She knows she is going to die and accepts her fate.

The master also only comes during the evening, darkness being an appropriate symbol for death. For many people, nighttime is the loneliest time, but for the seamstress, it is the day, when death or thoughts of death are not keeping her company. She longs for the night, when she is comforted the most. The seamstress is lonely in her "small house." Zelda purposefully writes "small house" instead of "big house" because it makes the reader stop for a moment and reflect on the word choice. Being lonely in a big house might be expected, but not so in a small house. Although, one can imagine this woman; poor, without many personal items, no pictures on the walls, slowly dying in her decrepit home. Dying lonely in this "small house" now seems more miserable.

This poem incorporates three types of rhyme. The first is in the top stanza where the last words of the second and fourth line rhyme (*hatan* and *ne'eman*). The second stanza is very creative linguistically. The first six words all resemble each other in terms of their very tenses (when she does this, he will do this, etc.). Each word is also either four or five syllables long. It resembles a call and response, all recited by the reader of the poem and not unlike the relationship between the seamstress and "man." It is beautiful to hear aloud. Finally, the last words of the final two lines rhyme with one another (*hakar* and *afar*). Perhaps this alteration in prosody is part of what some readers find unsettling.

Pastoral Ruminations

This poem makes me think of a hospice patient, "Jean," who was stuck in her small room in a board and care for the remaining months of her life. About 65 years of age, Jean was suffering from end stage cancer. She was simply waiting to die. Many times Jean said she wished death would "just take her," but for some reason death wasn't ready. Jean experienced both deep despair and the acknowledgement of life's harsh realities at the same time. Jean was not close to her family. Her children felt that she had abandoned them and was never a good mother. They visited her rarely, much less frequently, certainly, than my twice a month visits. She was virtually alone, except for the visits she received from the hospice team, her board and care caretakers and thoughts of death itself. Jean was lonely in her tiny, cramped living quarters ("In the daytime, her small house is so lonely..."), had no friends or companions ("without a friend, without a groom") and, like the seamstress, wanted to be swept off her feet by death ("Should she grow ill, he will embrace her, when she dies, he will kiss her"). She longed for its cold, yet comforting embrace. Thus, the personification of death is something that happens in real life just as it does in the life of the seamstress.

All This Misery- When Will I Die Or **It is Bad When I Die**	רע לי מתי אמות
Woe is me- when will I die?[11] My foolishness, a heavy burden, gentleness, a heavy burden. In vain the sea breeze kisses my eyes and the grasses of the Carmel spoil me with honey and myrrh. I despise the hopes of the sun- and the promises of the blossoms.	רַע לִי מָתַי אָמוּת. מַשָּׂא כָּבֵד כְּסִילוּתִי, מַשָּׂא כָּבֵד הָרֵךְ. לַשָּׁוְא יְנַשֵּׁק אֶת עֵינַי רוּחַ הַיָּם, וִיפַנְּקוּנִי בְּדֶבַשׁ וּבְמֹר עִשְׂבֵי הַכַּרְמֶל. לִתְקוּוֹת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ אָבוּז – וְלַהַבְטָחוֹת נִצָּנִים.

Like the seamstress in Zelda's poem by that name, the subject in this poem also appears to be filled with despair. Nothing brings pleasure to the subject anymore. He or she is ready to die. The sea breeze and the scents of the Carmel try in vain to bring pleasure to the person but it's too late. All these wonderful things that many take for granted and occasionally admire while they are living no longer mean anything - they just make the person feel worse. Perhaps the poem suggests that if we would appreciate these things while living then we would welcome them while dying. The subject would welcome the effort of the sea breeze, grasses and sun. Or, perhaps, the misery and pain block all types of relief. Even sweets do not taste good when we are close to death. So too, Israel's natural beauty will lose its splendor. The "promises of the blossoms" is a metonymy for "the future." I thought perhaps the person in this poem might be experiencing a form of anhedonia, which is the inability to experience

[11] Psalms 41:5-6 "I said, 'O Lord, have mercy on me, heal me, for I have sinned against You.' My enemies speak evilly of me, 'when will he die and his name perish?'"

pleasure from normally pleasurable life events and natural beauty. The reader clearly understands that the subject has lost all hope for life and living. One can understand the taste of a home-cooked brisket not bringing pleasure to her anymore, but not the sea breeze off the Mediterranean and sweet scents of the Carmel. To feel apathetic towards those things, is to resign oneself to death.

Pastoral Ruminations

One patient whom I was visiting was dying from a failing liver. Stanley worked as a museum docent for almost his entire life. Art was his love and the museum was his Shangri-la. I remember talking to him for hours about the Impressionists. My favorite painter has always been Renoir and his was Monet. He had traveled to France a number of times and visited Giverny, Monet's country home and gardens, the inspiration for many of his famous pieces. Stanley had been in the hospital for a few months and so I suggested to his wife that she bring in some pictures to put on the walls to make his room more "homey." She told me she had tried that, but Stanley told her to take the pictures down. He just did not care to look at them. He derived no pleasure from seeing water lilies any more.

Nothing seemed to raise Stanley's spirit. For him, the only relief from his pain and reality of dying would be dying itself. His wife had tried on various occasions to show him pictures from his many art books. In a way, the more she tried, the harder it was for him. Similarly, the subject in the poem, *All This Misery – When Will I Die* is almost annoyed thinking that Israel's natural beauty tries to comfort him. He wants to die and even the refreshing sea breeze, scented grasses of the Carmel, and warmth of

the sun can't lift his spirits. Even if God were making the breeze gently kiss his face, the subject would still turn his cheek away.

Zelda's word choice is part of what make her poetic technique distinctive. The subject "despise(s)" the hopes of the sun and the future. Despise is a very aggressive word. One has to actively despise something. The use of this word demonstrates how hopeless the subject is. For the subject of the poem and Stanley, it seems that the end is so bad that they even despise common pleasures such as the scents of nature and masterful works of art. What may have once brought them joy in their earlier years, now acts like repellent. When visiting patients, it is of utmost importance not to assume they want to experience things they loved so much when they were healthy. However, this should not be the first thought when entering a room. In fact, it makes sense to assume the opposite, but it needs to be kept in mind that people can lack the capacity to still experience pleasure from things they previously loved.

I Banished From My Heart	גירשתי מלבי
I expelled all the words from my heart for the day has passed[12] and my mother dozed off- and my mother will sleep until the messiah comes.	גֵּרַשְׁתִּי מִלִּבִּי אֶת כָּל הַמִּלִּים כִּי פָּנָה יוֹם וְאִמִּי נִרְדְּמָה – וְאִמִּי תִּישַׁן עַד בּוֹא הַמָּשִׁיחַ

[12] Recited in Neilah service on Yom Kippur (p. 503 in Gates of Repentance).

In this poem, it appears that a caretaker/child is talking to him/herself as the mother is passing away. There are two hints that the mother is dying. The first is that Zelda uses the phrase "for the day has passed." This is a line recited during the neilah service on Yom Kippur. It is said as a plea to God to let us in the gates of repentance before they close. There is a sense of closure and finality when this line is recited. In the poem, the day has passed and perhaps even the woman's life. The other clue comes from the last line, "and my mother will sleep until the messiah comes." Though Jews pray for the messiah to come right now, deep down we know that it will be much longer before this miraculous event occurs. Hence, the mother will sleep for all eternity. Zelda could have said, "And my mother died" instead of writing that she "dozed off" as if to imply she is still living. "Dozing off," however, is a poetic way to capture the death of someone. One could say that to die peacefully is to doze off into a deep sleep and never wake. Zelda sometime uses jarring words that sound and look inaccurate to get to what is accurate.

Pastoral Ruminations

I have been on numerous patient visits when no words have been exchanged. In CPE, we learn that sometimes it is best to just sit and be present with someone. Holding a hand may be the only kind of comfort one needs. There are times when words need not be spoken. In some ways this is reminiscent of the story of Job. When his friends learn of his loss and heartache they first weep, tear their clothes and throw dust into the air and on their heads. Then they approach him. What do they do? They sit with Job on the ground for seven days. In this time, "none spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering" (Job 2:13). His friends let Job speak first. This

practice is similar to the Halakhah that we find in the Shulchan Aruch. In Yoreh Deah 376:1, it is taught that one should not begin speaking to a mourner until after the mourner has spoken to them first. The same rule can be applied to a dying person. As chaplains or caregivers, we must respect the patients and not take their autonomy away from them. Allowing them to initiate conversation, providing they can, is one way the patient is able to control their environment when everything else seems to be out of their control.

In *I Banished from my Heart*, the caretaker/child expelled all the words from his heart. He decided it best to not speak to his parent, realizing that sometimes getting words off one's chest is a selfish act. It is not the child's time to heal and find solace while his parent is dying. When making that type of visit, the needs of the dying come first, even when the need to say something is so strong. It might be better to banish those words if there is a chance they could open up old wounds or even confuse the dying person. However, when someone is dying, it is common for loved ones to try to reconcile past disputes and issues. Just as the dying want a peaceful death, so too do their loved ones. In my experiences and in conversations with other chaplains, I have learned that it is appropriate to open up these past wounds if the dying initiate the conversation. That is surely a power that they should have. It is also quite possible that the caretaker is left speechless in this poem. Seeing a loved one so close to death can render one speechless, thus banishing all the words from their heart for either moments or forever.

All Night I Wept	כל הלילה בכיתי
All night I cried- Sovereign of the Universe, perhaps there is death without violence, death that is similar to a flower. All night I pleaded-[13] Though I am dust[14] there will be rest within me to look at the heights of heaven[15] more and more to separate from the beauty All night I thought- Many creatures and different stories live in my painful chest I need to light a candle to look at them before I sleep the sleep of death.[16]	כָּל הַלַּיְלָה בָּכִיתִי רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אוּלַי יֵשׁ מָוֶת שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ אלימות מָוֶת שְׁדוֹמֶה לְפֶרַח. כָּל הַלַּיְלָה הִפַּלְתִּי תַּחֲנוֹנַי אַפְלוּ אֲנִי עָפָר תִּהְיֶה בִּי מְנוּחָה לְהַבִּיט אֶל גָּבְהֵי שָׁמַיִם עוֹד וְעוֹד וְעוֹד לְהִפָּרֵד מִיָּפִים. כָּל הַלַּיְלָה חָשַׁבְתִּי בְּרִיּוֹת רַבּוֹת גְּרוֹת בְּחָזִי הַכּוֹאֵב וְסִפּוּרִים שׁוֹנִים, צָרִיךְ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר וּלְהַבִּיט עֲלֵיהֶם בְּטֶרֶם אִישַׁן הַמָּוֶת.

In *The Spectacular Difference*, many of Zelda's poems are riddled with Judaic and rabbinic references. *All Night I Wept* is no exception. It contains allusions from Daniel, Genesis, Job and Psalms. However, their inclusion does not necessarily reveal anything crucial to the understanding of the poem. Referencing biblical and rabbinic phrases may have been nothing out of the ordinary for Zelda. Although they may not add

[13] Daniel 9:18 in the plural, pleading to God for forgiveness

[14] Gen 18:27 *Abraham spoke up saying, 'Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.'*

[15] Job 11:7-8 *Would you discover the mystery of God? Would you discover the limit of the almighty? Higher than heaven- what can you do? Deeper than Sheol- what can you know?*

[16] Psalm 13:4 *Look and answer me, O my Lord; lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death*

anything in terms of clarity, they do nevertheless add to the richness of her poems simply by being included. Zelda's poems may not appear at first glance to be "Jewish poems," but these classical allusions do thicken their Jewish context. This is surely the case with this poem as biblical allusions are speckled throughout the work. Zelda's Jewish background clearly influenced her unique poetic style.

The last line, taken from Psalms 13, is worth taking a closer look at. In Psalms 13, the speaker beseeches God not to ignore him in a time of need. He feels that God has abandoned him while his enemies have taken control of him. Yet, the speaker has faith in God and prays that God notice the dark place he is in. He prays, "Restore the luster into my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." The Psalm ends with words of praise towards God, "But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance, I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me." There is a shift in this short psalm from rebuke to praise. The poem is similar to the psalm. It is directed towards God and the speaker expresses his fears in what seems to be a private moment of prayer. There is also a sense of calm amidst the chaos. Zelda writes, "All night I pleaded, though I am dust there will be rest within me."

The subject in the poem is afraid of dying, not just of dying but of dying in pain. He therefore wishes to die the death of a flower. A flower comes to its end peacefully, by withering away gradually, not by crying out in agony. Who does not want to experience a peaceful death? Besides being free of physical pain, a peaceful death also includes dying after mending broken relationships, reviewing one's life, knowing that future generations will be taken care, etc. What are the many creatures in the subject's chest? Perhaps cancer cells. Perhaps memories of life's experiences. The subject needs

to look at them with a candle – throw light on them - before he can die. He needs to review his life and reacquaint himself with his past. Or it may be that the person simply needs to come to terms with his illness by facing it directly.

Pastoral Ruminations

In hospice, the caregivers try to assure the patients that their pain will be managed so that they can die in relative comfort. The first thing I am supposed to ask when I visit a patient is "How would you rate your pain on a scale of one to ten today?" Pain management, or comfort care is the single most important goal of hospice work. Pain, however, is not limited to physical pain. People can experience emotional and spiritual pain that only enhance their physical pain. In all cases, patients want to die with as little pain as possible, whether that be unresolved personal issues or acute physical pain.

One of my patients in CPE, "Jim," paged me in the middle of the night just so he could "get things off his chest." I spent a few hours with him, listening to his life story and all the mistakes he believed he had made with his family and friends. I asked myself, "Why is he talking to me and not his loved ones?" It seems that, for Jim, revisiting his demons and other "creatures" that had been burrowed in his chest for years was just the healing he needed, despite the fact that a stranger was on the listening end instead of his friends and family. *Teshuva* was not his goal. Jim died the next day. I imagine that he had finally felt ready to "sleep the sleep of death" only once he had been able to shine a light on his past.

Sun Startled Pines	אורנים נדהמי שמש
Sun startled pines	
emitting a wild fragrance-	אָרָנִים נִדְהֲמֵי שֶׁמֶשׁ
the very stunning strength from the inner most sprouting	הֵדִיפוּ נִיחוֹחַ פִּרְאִי
made the world my home again,	אוֹתוֹ אוֹן מְהֻמָּם מִפְּנִימִיּוּת הַצְּמִיחָה
but the main thing was not told to me;	עָשָׂה אוֹתִי שׁוּב
what divine intention	בֵּת־בַּיִת בָּעוֹלָם,
in the budding and wilting plants.	אַךְ אֶת הָעִקָּר לֹא הִגִּיד לִי;
And also the purpose of my life	מָה הַכַּוָּנָה הָאֱלֹהִית
and the purpose of my death	בִּצְמָחִים צָצִים וְנוֹבְלִים.
I will not know in this world.	גַּם תַּכְלִית חַיַּי
	וְתַכְלִית מוֹתִי
	לֹא אֵדַע בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה.

In *Sun Startled Pines,* Zelda creates a metaphoric relationship between trees and life. Just like trees, lives grow from youth to maturity, small to big, and they also wither and die. The comparisons are plentiful. It is not uncommon for Zelda to use images from nature in order to comment on life's mysteries.

The pine trees also emit a sweet scent. Is this true for people? In other words, do we take life so for granted that we don't recognize the sweet scent, or beauty of our existence? We appreciate natural beauty, but perhaps not our own.

Zelda asks a deep theological question in this poem: what is the point of my life and the point of my death? Near the end there are many who seek answers to impossible questions. Patients have asked many times about the role of God and death and also about an afterlife. They have even asked me about my views on the existence of God. My experience and conversations with other chaplains has taught me that patients are not necessarily seeking our own personal answers. They are, however,

wanting to validate their own thoughts through ours. Instead of telling them what I believe, I find it is healthier to find out why they are asking specific questions. There is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions. A chaplain's job is to help the patients feel secure in their own beliefs. However, questions that ponder the point of life and death and God usually do not arise until one is near the realization of imminent death. And it is at this point that they are looking for "answers."

Zelda writes, "And the purpose of my life and the purpose of my death - I will not know in this world." Maybe this is comfort. All the questions we have will be answered in the next stage. Perhaps it is in this world that we think of the questions and then in the next we will find out the answers. Or, perhaps Zelda is trying to say that these existential questions are better left unanswered. Instead, we might just try to enjoy the beauty of creation, such as the sweet-scented pine trees kissed by the sun.

Ancient Song	שיר עתיק עד מאוד
A very old song awakened me to life as it banished the shortness of spirit from me with the lips of the kings. A song of a generation that was silenced ages and ages ago awakened me to life.	שִׁיר עָתִיק עַד מְאֹד הֵקִיצַנִי לְחַיִּים כַּאֲשֶׁר גֵּרַשׁ אֶת נְמִיכוּת הָרוּחַ מִקִּרְבִי בִּשְׂפָתֵי מְלָכִים. שִׁיר דּוֹר שֻׁתַּק לִפְנֵי עִדָּן וְעִדָּנִים הֵקִיצַנִי לְחַיִּים.

Like the poems above, *Ancient Song* may or may not be about dying. But it does stimulate me to think about the dying process and patients I have visited.

Zelda creates an oxymoron in this poem: a silenced song that awakens someone to life. How can anyone be awakened to life if they are dead? The "shortness of spirit" is a clue that the subject has experienced death. However I do not think that Zelda is commenting on resurrection here. In fact, I think the poem might have more to do with the Shoah than the moshiach.

The combination of "shortness of spirit" and "lips of kings" is also noteworthy. Whereas the first conjures images of smallness, the latter does the opposite. Kings are grand and anything but small in prominence.

Pastoral Ruminations

I have found that hearing an ancient song can arouse the subject. Songs from before or during one's lifetime can awaken and open the soul. I have heard from physicians and hospice workers that the sense of hearing is usually the last of the five senses to go. Singing to someone or playing music may be very healing for ill and dying patients. Chanting ancient prayers may also produce the same results. I had one patient who was actively dying, or as the Shulhan Aruch describes, he was a *goses*. "Lee" had lost all of his faculties including speech and sight. It was believed that he still had the sense of hearing. Lee was not a religious man and, though his father and grandfather were orthodox Jews, Lee escaped the life that was expected of him and, in doing so, severed his relationship with some of his family members. I recall Lee's wife telling me that Lee had not spoken to his father for 30 years. Lee's first wife was not Jewish and their children were not brought up in a Jewish home. After his wife's death,

Lee remarried "Sarah," who was Jewish. She brought him back slowly to Judaism, but a synagogue was the last thing Lee wanted to do. As he lay dying on his hospital bed, I entered the room and surrounding his bed were Sarah, Lee's oldest friend and his wife and Lee's younger sister and her husband. They were all waiting, not for me, but for Lee. I was very nervous as I entered the room. What could I do to help usher Lee into the next stage? I immediately embraced Sarah and asked everyone to hold hands around Lee's bed. I began singing Hinei Ma Tov (How good and pleasant it is that we are all here together). The dimly lit room quickly became a holy sanctuary. Near the end of my visit I asked everyone to recite the shema with me and, as we uttered each word in one single breath, tears ran down Lee's face. Sarah kissed him gently and stroked his hair. Lee passed away in peace in the company of his loved ones and in an environment of ancient songs and prayers. Though he died, Lee was also awakened to life – an ancient song awakened in him.

In the Hospital **3. You are Mistaken**	ג. אתה טועה
You are mistaken- even in death's cradle the fog did not dissolve. Even when the end was near, dreadfully near, I was miles and miles away from the riddle.	אַתָּה טוֹעֶה גַּם עַל עֶרֶשׂ דְּוַי לֹא נָמוֹג הֶעָרְפֶּל גַּם כַּאֲשֶׁר נִגַּשׁ אֵלַי הַמָּוֶת קָרוֹב עַד אֵימָה הָיִיתִי רְחוֹקָה תַּ"ק פַּרְסָה עַל תַּ"ק פַּרְסָה מִן הַחִידָה.

Zelda creates a dialogue in this poem. The suffering or dying person says in essence, "You told me this would happen and it's not happening!" and he is rightfully

upset. The speaker is near death and was told that she would have some type of clarity; the fog would dissolve. Yet, the opposite occurred and she tells the person who gave her the false hope how wrong he was. Zelda includes an odd term for distance, describing how far away the patient felt from the riddle. The translation for distance, "miles and miles" literally means "five hundred parasangs[17]" and is a rabbinic expression from BT Bava Kama 82b in which the Land of Israel quakes a distance of four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs because a pig was raised up a wall in a basket to be used for a sacrifice. It is not surprising that Zelda used this Talmudic expression for distance – she was, after all, well versed in Jewish sacred literature. The struggle, however, is finding an English equivalent to the expression. "Five hundred by five hundred parasangs" is much greater than "miles and miles" and the former is really what Zelda wants to convey. There is always a tension when translating texts as some words or expressions even minor ones, tend to get lost on the reader. "Five hundred parasangs, etc." does not so much change the take away message from the poem, but it does add multiple layers of meaning.

Pastoral Ruminations

It is natural to want to comfort people who are in pain or dying. We want them to have no fear, so we say things that we think might be comforting. Sometimes we even lie or say things we don't believe in but which we believe might be helpful, such as, "Yes, I know you will be gathered with your parents in heaven. They are waiting for you now..." But often we forget that our good intentions either may not be comforting or may ultimately appear phony or insincere. Some people want to hear the "riddle." They

[17] Parasang: any of various Persian units of distance; *especially*: an ancient unit of about four miles. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parasangs

want to believe in it, even if they never would in a healthy state. In Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*, Consuela is stricken with breast cancer and the doctors tell her she has a sixty percent chance of survival. She opens up to her former lover David,

> "This can't be real! This can't be happening! How can it go away? I don't want to die! David, I'm afraid to die!" "Consuela dear, you're not going to. You're thirty-two. You're not going to die for a very long time."

David is not a doctor, though he speaks with certainty that masks his own fear. Many of us speak like David, instilling in our loved ones false hope because we can't begin to think how awful it is to lose someone so close. This is contrasted with a scene in Ivan Ilyich, where Gerasim, the young caretaker of Ilyich has a conversation with his master,

> It was a comfort to him (Ilyich) that Gerasim sat with him sometimes the whole night through, holding his legs, refusing to go to bed, saying: "Don't worry, Ivan Ilyich, I'll get a good sleep later on"; or when he suddenly addressed him in the familiar form and said: "It would be a different thing if you weren't sick, but as it is, why shouldn't I do a little extra work?" Gerasim was the only one who did not lie; everything he did showed that he alone understood what was happening, saw no need to conceal it, and simply pitied his feeble, wasted master. Once, as Ivan Ilyich was sending him away, he came right out and said: "We all have to die someday, so why shouldn't I help you?"

The challenge for the chaplain, caregiver or loved one is to find out if the patient welcomes the riddle or not. The words we use around the dying must be thought out, but not seem mechanical and unnatural. If, in fact, we think the patient wants to hear the riddle, then that is what we should say. Otherwise, in my own experience, I have learned that people can see past any sugar coating and actually want to hear the truth. Ivan Ilyich illustrates this principle perfectly when he comes extremely close to shouting, "Stop your lying! You an I know that I'm dying, so at least stop lying!"

A Note on the translations for Carmi's poems

The poems that I examine in this section come from Carmi's final collection of poetry (*Shirim*) that includes 10 poems grouped together reflecting his terminal illness. Though I translated and studied each one, all ten are not referenced in this thesis. The translations provided below stem from weekly study sessions between my thesis advisor, William Cutter and me. During our lively *hevruta* sessions, I was able to glean both the literary and clinical meanings of the poems.

Carmi Poems

1. There is not a slight chance that it (he) will return, said the oncologist, and he did not mean the messiah. But the arrogance flourishes, the costliness rises for son spurns father...[18] Maybe this is so? maybe he tries to encourage his old lips of the ATM? Maybe he lies in one of the alleyways with his hungry donkey- The donkey will arouse the poor man awake?	יֵשׁ סִכּוּי לֹא קָטָן שֶׁיַּחֲזֹר, אָמַר הָאוֹנְקוֹלוֹג, וְלֹא הִתְכַּוֵּן לַמֶּלֶךְ הַמָּשִׁיחַ. אֲבָל הַחֻצְפָּה מְשַׂגְשֶׂגֶת, הַיֹּקֶר מַאֲמִיר, בֵּן מְנַבֵּל אָב, וְכוּ' אוּלַי בְּכָל זֹאת? אוּלַי הוּא מְנַסֶּה לְדוֹבֵב אֶת שְׂפָתָיו הַיְשֵׁנוֹת שֶׁל כַּסְפּוֹמָט? אוּלַי הוּא רוֹבֵץ בְּאַחַת הַסִּמְטָאוֹת עִם חֲמוֹרוֹ הָרָעֵב — הַחֲמוֹר יְנַעֵר וְהֶעָנִי יֵעוֹר?

Carmi presents a situation in this poem where everything is topsy turvy and confusing, yet at the same time somehow realistic. Carmi begins with a concrete

[18] Micah 7:6 "For son spurns father, daughter rises up against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, a man's household are his enemies."

situation and quickly passes into abstract thoughts and principles. The first line is rather creative. I have a feeling that Carmi wanted the oncologist's line to sound ambiguous, as people are conscientiously ambiguous when dealing with life, death and illness. Carmi continues to use ambiguous language in poem #5 below when the patient thinks the doctor is referring to him as a Sufi or gladiola when he really used the word 'terminal' (playing on the Hebrew letters '*samech*' and '*fey*'). In this case, the doctor is being purposely vague and confusing in order not to shatter the patient's hopes, and in poem #5, the patient is the one who misconstrues the doctor's words since the Hebrew for Sufi and terminal are similar. What does it mean "there is not a slight chance it will return"? Will it return or not? And more importantly, what is "it?" Could "it" be the cancer cells or could "he" be somebody other than the messiah? The verb tense of (it/he will return) adds a layer of indirection, as it is unclear in Hebrew if the subject is a person or thing. Carmi's style at times playfully highlights this type of equivocal language and imagery.

The second stanza draws on a tradition that describes what will happen when the messiah finally does return – namely, that everything will be the opposite of what it is now. The cost of everyday items will skyrocket, and instead of a son appreciating his father, the son will spurn him. This image is taken from Micah 7:6 and the biblical text also includes daughters rising up against mothers. Though this might be how the world will look someday, I do not think Carmi wanted to focus on the end of days. Rather, illness and stress combined in a home can make things topsy turvy, and what better illustration of this than the text from Micah. As is the case with Zelda, Carmi also incorporates biblical and rabbinic phrases in order to add another layer to his poems.

Ariel Hirschfeld writes, "T. Carmi often interlaced elements of spoken Hebrew with the many layers of ancient Hebrew drawn from the Bible, the Midrash, and medieval Hebrew poetry. Almost every poem by Carmi strives for the moment of ambiguity where he endows his modern words and phrases with a different meaning than in their original context. Thus, ancient words are revived not as citations but as a living presence."[19] Again, this unusual technique of knitting together various elements of the Hebrew language – from both ancient and modern sources – along with purposefully being elusive adds to the aesthetics of Carmi's poems. This "moment of ambiguity" is present at the end of the third stanza as well.

Immediately following a quote from Micah, Carmi writes about a modern invention, the ATM machine. Just as son spurns father, in this poem, the old and new contradict each other as well. Looking at "his old lips of the ATM," there is another incongruity. The "lips" of an ATM are metal and cannot be opened and yet "old lips" are soft and supple.

Pastoral Ruminations

As a rabbi or chaplain it is important to be aware of family dynamics, but it's better not to allow oneself to become too caught up in them. Helping a patient cope with his or her illness might include encouraging reconciliation or simply beginning a dialogue with loved ones. It is not necessary for rabbis to know about the whole family unit but, in some cases, the complexities of family dynamics are pertinent to helping patients. For example, one palliative care patient that I visited was a Holocaust survivor and had recently lost his wife – she had died weeks before I became involved. He was

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[19] Hirschfeld, Ariel, ed. *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself.* New York: Wayne State UP, 2003. p. 342

also not close with his children and they felt uncomfortable talking about their father dying. I surmised that survivor guilt was operating along with sadness over the recent loss. His children seemed to prefer not to face the realities of their father's situation. Therefore, all of these factors played a role in how I conducted my visits with "Ed." For instance, I did not state how lucky Ed was to have such a loving family and support system. And I did not ask him what he thought the role God has in our lives, especially when it comes to dying. However, I did not shy away from asking Ed about his wife so he could mourn her as he was unable to attend her funeral.

Understanding family dynamics is also important because sometimes the family itself needs more healing than a dying family member. Often, the dying person is at peace, while their family is torn apart and distraught. Tensions can rise and people may say things they regret. A son may resent acting as caretaker to an ailing father. For a family that rarely fights, dealing with cancer or severe illness can easily bring family members to quarrel.

The other lesson for those taking care of the dying, is to talk straight with them as long as one thinks they can take the hard truth. In my encounters with patients, especially in the hospital on numerous occasions, I have heard doctors and family members beat around the bush when talking about prognoses and treatment. Too often we think that patients can't handle the truth when in fact the truth in simple language is what they desire. The first line of the poem reminded me of this principle.

3. Now I am a hotel empty for the time being, for the moment, for the second, but its clear that the capacity will be full. What to do in the meantime: to leave the entrance light on? to make the bed? A time to remember (the taste of coffee) and a time to forget (the taste of dust) a time to die (because the time will come) a time to die (because its surely coming).	עַכְשָׁו אֲנִי מְלוֹן־אוֹרְחִים׃ רֵיק לְפִי שָׁעָה, לְפִי דַקָּה, לְפִי שְׁנִיָּה, אֲבָל בָּרוּר שֶׁהַתְּפוּסָה תִּהְיֶה מְלֵאָה. מָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בֵּינְתַיִם׃ לְהַשְׁאִיר אוֹר בִּכְנִיסָה? לְהַצִּיעַ אֶת הַמִּטּוֹת? עֵת לִזְכֹּר (אֶת טַעַם הַקָּפֶה) וְעֵת לִשְׁכֹּחַ (אֶת טַעַם הֶעָפָר) עֵת לָמוּת (כִּי בוֹא יָבוֹא) וְעֵת לָמוּת (כִּי בָּא).

The mashal Carmi creates in this poem is very clever. A hotel and a cancerous body have much in common. The hotel and the person are empty, void of harmful cells. But they are only "empty for the time being." Passersby will soon lead the manager to turn the outside light on to read "no vacancy" and cancer cells will also rise up from their dormancy to reappear. "To the minute, to the second" illustrates just how uncertain a patient is about the timing of when the illness might come back. The hotel manager also does not know how long the rooms will be vacant. But to both, it is clear that they will be full again, one for the better and one for the worse.

This first stanza incorporates rhyme in the Hebrew (*sha'ah, shni'ah, m'le'ah*). It is not a common rhyming pattern, but one that allows the words to flow off the tongue when read aloud. The second stanza does not rhyme and while the third stanza is

poetic, in that it references Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), Carmi's insertions in parentheses break up the repetitive pattern.

In the second stanza, Carmi asks, 'what is one to do in the meantime'? The hotel manager can leave the outside light on in order to attract travelers. She can also make the beds and get them ready for new guests. But what can a person do to prepare for their illness coming back? Everyone's response may be different, but what Carmi seems to be getting at is that one ought to prepare for the cancer to reappear. Being aware of one's situation is the first step in preparing. Focusing on one's sickness even in health can become a vicious cycle, but being ready for the worst to come can be beneficial. The last stanza hints at what people might think about when they are "vacant" of all illness; one day it will return.

The last stanza utilizes the poetry from Kohelet and it focuses on death, not on the day-to-day business of running a hotel! Perhaps what it is saying is that when one is dying, just the thought of the taste of coffee may seem like a distant memory. With many of my patients, they are unable to taste even the sweetness of fruits. Unlike the sense of hearing, the sense of taste does not remain until the time of death. The use of "coffee" is notable because coffee is not something exotic like a passion fruit, rather it is banal and consumed all over the world every day. Carmi is suggesting that even the most commonplace tastes are longed for when one is dying and not the flavor of the most succulent filet mignon one had eaten thirty years ago.

Just as people may strive to remember the taste of something as commonplace as coffee when they are dying, they also want to forget "the taste of dust" in their lives, which is possibly a metaphor for all the *tsores* one experiences in a lifetime. "Dust" is

also a metonymy for death. Ecclesiastes 3:20 reads, "Both go to the same place; both come from dust and both return to dust." As one dies, he wants to forget all of the petty arguments and trivial matters that caused so much grief along the way.

Pastoral Ruminations

I visited "Reuben," a hospice patient who was actively dying. He was in a hospital bed in a room that he shared with his wife. She was comatose and in a bed of her own at the other end of the room. Reuben's bed was situated up against the wall with a huge window next to it that overlooked a beautiful garden with dozens of colorful rose bushes. Reuben was unable to speak and since he hadn't eaten or had anything to drink for five days, his lips were parched. He was able to nod, although with so much morphine in his system, that too was probably an effort. The awkwardness of the situation led me to point out to Reuben that his view was breathtaking with such gorgeous and aromatic flowers just on the other side of the window. He did not nod affirming my obvious statement. Immediately after I said that, I wondered if knowing the roses were just a few yards from Reuben bothered him or brought him comfort. In other words, if he thought about them, did they bring to mind his wife of 60 years who loved him so much and spent hours tending to the garden? Was it a good memory? Or did the knowledge of the roses so close to him fill him with despair since he would never get a chance to see, smell and touch them again? Did my comment fit into the line "a time to remember (the taste of coffee)" or "a time to forget (the taste of dust)?" The time for dying was quickly approaching and perhaps the only thing on Reuben's mind was that truth.

5. It became known to me today that I am terminal. Not a Sufi- as in satisfied with less, giving over or renouncing. Not a sword- the fiery dazzling twirling sword.[20] Not a gladiola- like an iris, tall or curved. And not a storm- a great wind, to eradicate and purify. Rather terminal. The end of me.	הַיּוֹם נוֹדַע לִי שֶׁאֲנִי סוֹפָנִי. לֹא סוּפִי — מִסְתַּפֵּק בְּמוּעָט, מְתַמֵּכֵּר, מִתְנַזֵּר. לֹא סַיִף — לַהַט מִתְהַפֵּךְ וּמְסַנְוֵר. לֹא סִיפָן — שָׁנִי תָּמִיר וּמִתְקַמֵּר. וְלֹא סוּפָה — רוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה, לְבַעֵר וּלְטַהֵר. אֶלָּא סוֹפָנִי. סוֹף אֲנִי.

This is perhaps one of the most clever poems in the Carmi collection of 10 poems. It combines his playfulness with Hebrew grammar, rhyme, and a genuine hospital situation. Carmi takes advantage of the word (*sofani*) terminal and manipulates it to have several different meanings. The actual predicament of the subject in the poem is quite heart wrenching as we both find out about his terminal illness. Yet, Carmi has a way of infusing humor into the poem by allowing the reader to swap the word *sofani* with *Sufi,* for instance. "It became known to me today that I am a Sufi." This would understandably be bewildering to the patient, but humorous to the reader trying to figure out the poem. Carmi does not only list the possible words the doctor could have said, rather he elaborates on each of them, describing in short detail what their essence is. For instance, a gladiola is scarlet and tall; a sword is dazzling and

[20] Genesis 3:24

twirling; a Sufi is satisfied with little, like a Nazirite, and a storm is a great wind, ready to eradicate everything in sight only then to purify afterwards. The sword reference might be taken from Nahum 3:3 "Charging horsemen, flashing swords, littering spears!" Though the Hebrew in Nahum differs from Carmi's, this scene in Nahum is about a city where people lay dying in heaps due to crime and violence. The parallel of death is worth noting, even though the diction is different. The sword reference might also be inspired by Genesis 3:24 "God drove man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life." In this instance, the Hebrew is similar in terms of the words for "fiery" and "ever-turning." Adam and Eve actually became mortal beings by eating the fruit and disregarding God's warning. In so doing, they became terminal.

The first and last lines of the poem are in stark contrast to the middle part in that they are anything but humorous. The last line is perhaps the saddest part of the poem. Here the subject equates his terminal prognosis to the complete end of himself. In some ways it can be considered that, when someone is diagnosed as terminal, as many of my patients are, they are given only a few months to live. Their end is just calculated to arrive much earlier than the rest of us. Thus, terminal does not necessarily mean "the end of me." Physically, it will, but one's legacy and essence live on. Some people are afraid to die because they believe it means that it is the end of them and that life will continue to go on as if nothing had happened. Perhaps people want to be assured that their memory will last forever. Judaism teaches that the soul is immortal, while the body returns to the earth. The gravity of being told one is terminal will almost always

come with shock and sadness. Realizing that death is a certainty may also motivate us to prepare ourselves and our families in comfort and love for life's final transition.

Carmi's rhymes add to the complexity of this simple poem. The last words of the four middle lines all end with a *tsere* pronunciation. One may need an extra set of ears to catch all that Carmi does with these words.

Pastoral Ruminations

I have been in hospital rooms when the team of doctors enters, ready to speak to the patient. Many times, the patient is alone and does not completely understand what is being discussed. On occasion, I have been the ears for the patients, relaying the doctor's words to the patient's family. One elderly woman (whose name I have forgotten) was in the hospital for weeks and had been visited by many doctors during that time. As I was getting to know this woman, a physician entered her room and informed her of the outcome of her recent surgery. He asked if she had any questions and she said "no." Soon after he left, she said to me, "What did he say? I couldn't understand that accent of his."

6. (The Last Days) The red strawberry is redder than it ever was. The green apple is greener than it ever was. The yellow banana is yellower than it ever was. The white plates with blue borders shining like a sapphire stone. What a silent dance in white and blue! What latent scent in these fruit! (when bitten into.)	6. [יָמִים אַחֲרוֹנִים] הַתּוּת אָדֹם מִשֶּׁהָיָה. הַתַּפּוּחַ יָרֹק מִשֶּׁהָיָה. הַבָּנָנָה צְהֻבָּה מִשֶּׁהָיְתָה. הַצַּלַּחַת הַלְּבָנָה שֶׁשּׁוּלֶיהָ כְּחֻלִּים בּוֹהֶקֶת כְּאֶבֶן הַסַּפִּיר. אֵיזֶה מָחוֹל דּוֹמֵם בַּלָּבָן וּכְכָחֹל! אֵיזֶה בֹּשֶׂם אָצוּר בַּפֵּרוֹת הָאֵלֶּה! (אִם יִנָּשֵׁכוּ.)

Titled *The Last Days*, this poem focuses on those mundane tastes and sights that most people take for granted on a daily basis, only to appreciate their beauty and simplicity when they are aware that they will never experience them again. The first three lines repeat the same message: the common colors of fruit are even more exquisite when we are aware that it is the last time we will see them. Carmi's talent is often describing what can be said in a rather mundane way with simplicity, metaphor and images all his readers can visualize. The red strawberry is not just red, but it is "redder than it ever was." The colors of the fruits are dazzling, almost Eden-esque. But, while this image seems like a fairytale, Carmi teaches the reader that in fact people who are dying might actually see fruit in this way.

Carmi's images are stunning. Even the borders around the white plates shine like a sapphire and dance off the china. A fine piece of china is beautiful even when its borders are not dancing off the plate. Unfortunately, these sensations are only

experienced in one's final days. This image of a sapphire has a biblical association. In Exodus 24:10, Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Abihu and seventy elders of Israel see God as they are on top of a mountain. Under God's feet, they notice "the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity." This image is mysterious and many commentators are not sure what to make of it. For Carmi, it seems that his intention is to show how dazzling and spectacular an ordinary item, such as a piece of china, can be. Referencing the divine pavement from Exodus achieves this goal. While this poem is not necessarily about any biblical story, this reference adds another layer of meaning to an already very visual poem.

Pastoral Ruminations

As lovely as this sad poem is, it does not completely represent the truth as I have experienced it. Unfortunately, the dying do not always see the beauty in the mundane. A dying man may not look at a piece of china in the cupboard and see the colors dancing together. He may not even think of his wife who set the shabbos table with that china every week for 50 years. Often, the dying block out all that is insignificant to them such as food and household items. What good is a possession if it can't be used? On the other hand, for the dying who do see the beauty that Carmi illustrates, that might be a sign to them that the end is imminent since they never saw such beauty before. However, Carmi writes the ideal scenario for the dying. Instead of not noticing the potential beauty around them, the dying are privy to colors and tastes not even imagined by the living. Who wouldn't want to be ushered into the next phase of life with the bright colors, flavors and animation of simple everyday things?

8. (Imaging) Little by little I turn into an eagle. The crown on my head falls. Alas, what we had, what we will have where are we going? To the place that we needed to be in from the beginning. Naked (and hairy) I came, naked (and bald) I will leave. I bequeath to the world such and such poems and locks of hair for use of transplant.	8. [הַדְמָיָה] לְאַט־לְאַט אֲנִי הוֹפֵךְ לְנָשֶׁר. עֲטֶרֶת רֹאשִׁי נוֹפֶלֶת. וַי, מֶה הָיָה לָנוּ, מַה יִּהְיֶה לָנוּ, אָנָּה אֲנוּ בָּאִים? לַמָּקוֹם שֶׁהָיינוּ צְרִיכִים לִהְיוֹת בּוֹ מִלְּכַתְּחִלָּה. עֵירֹם (וְשָׂעִיר) בָּאתִי, עֵירֹם (וְקָרֵחַ) אֵצֵא. אֲנִי מוֹרִישׁ לַחֵלֶד כָּךְ וְכָךְ שִׁירִים וּבְלוֹרִית לְהַשְׁתָּלָה.

While I prefer not to bring the poet's life into the poems, since anyone can write on any topic and it does not take actual experience to write about suffering, I cannot help but analyze this poem with Carmi's biography in the back of my mind. Carmi suffered from cancer and was a poet by trade. The last lines scream to me, "Carmi!" Yet, this poem does not have to be autobiographical.

The metaphor Carmi uses in comparing an ailing person to an eagle is successful, though not scientifically accurate. While there are both bald eagles and crowned eagles, neither loses their hair nor crown. In fact, at one point in time, "bald" meant "white" and not "without hair." The color white is symbolic of old age. Carmi's playfulness with the words, coupled with the image, works well – he takes the reader on a journey from metaphor and light humor to stark reality. The reader understands that the subject is going through a transition no one wants to experience. Whether one sees the subject

literally losing his own hair or his stature, it doesn't matter. The vitality of the subject is depleted. It is not sudden, but a slow process that the man witnesses every day. By the end of the poem, it is clear that the poem is about a dying man and the changes he goes through, both in terms of his body and his outlook on life.

Pastoral Ruminations

Very often, dying people reflect on their earlier life. They think about where they came from and where they are going. But, often, they also think about how they will be remembered. The midrashim on Moses' death speak at length to the legacy Moses left for the Israelites. For the subject in the poem, his legacy might be his poems, but it might also be his hair that will one day cover another man's head. As rabbis, chaplains and caregivers, we ought to help the dying uncover what they want their legacy to be. Once this step is complete, it is possible that their transition to death may be easier. A midrash teaches something about Jacob in this regard: the rabbis explain how Jacob wanted to be sure that his sons believed in the one true God who was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob was ready to die once he realized that he had instilled in his sons a love for and loyalty to Adonai. Helping the dying to reflect on their lives and understand how they will be remembered are two ways to guide people through an otherwise scary and lonely journey.

9. (An additional apology) She trembled. What was I able to do? I covered her. It's too cold, she said. I know, I said, I did what I was able to do, It was colder than before. Again I covered her. Yes, she mumbled, It really was colder than before.	9. [התנצלות נוספת : When thou hast done] הִיא רָעֲדָה. מַה יָכלְתִי לַעֲשׂוֹת? כִּסִיתִי אוֹתָהּ. קַר מְדַי, אָמְרָה. אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ, אָמַרְתִי, עָשִׂיתִי מַה שֶׁיָכלְתִי, הָיָה יוֹתֵר קַר מִקֹדֶם. שׁוּב כִּסִיתִי אוֹתָהּ. כֵּן, הִיא מִלמְלָה, בֶּאֱמֶת הָיָה יוֹתֵר קַר מִקֹדֶם.

This terse poem does not incorporate Carmi's playfulness with grammar, metaphor or rhyme. It is concise as a whole and in its parts. The poem could be about two people stranded in the snow, but as the ninth of ten poems in this set, most readers would imagine this to be a dialogue between a patient and caregiver. Though he does not say one person is ill, the imagery of a person feeling cold and needing to be covered up points to a bedside setting. Carmi presents a situation that is all too common to people who take care of their sick loved ones. The title, "An additional apology" sums up what many caregivers feel; that there is always more one can do to help. A sense of guilt can easily wash over the caregiver.

The simplicity of this poem is what makes it effective. The short conversation – no one says more than a few words at a time – is emblematic of this real-life scenario. Carmi does not need to write more words for his readers to visualize this more clearly. Sometimes, as the saying goes, "less is more." The curtness of this poem – its dialogue, internal thoughts and narration – allows the reader to imagine this intimate setting

without being besieged by extraneous details, and enables the reader to place herself within the scenario.

Pastoral Ruminations

A hospice patient of mine was near death when I first met her. Unlike most homebound patients I meet, "Sally" did not have around-the-clock paid care. Instead, her 84-year-old husband looked after all her needs and was stubborn about his role. No-one else could do as good a job for his wife as he could. On many visits I would also try to provide spiritual care and support for "Jim." He had become frail from being a full-time caregiver to his wife, a job that is very demanding on the body. In his youth, Jim resembled the Yankee Clipper, Joe DiMaggio. Next to Sally's bed was a framed photo of this dashing Jim. Like the subject in the previous poem, Jim's cap had fallen off his head from the stress of it all. Near the end of her life, Jim would walk in and out of Sally's room while I spoke with her, asking her questions. "Is everything alright dear?" "Would you like another blanket?" "How about some ice chips?" "Is the medication kicking in yet?" Most of the time she simply nodded and he would walk out, only to return minutes later. As I do with all patients, I asked her if she felt any pain. She mentioned how her back was in constant pain and the medication and Jim's rubbing only gave her momentary relief, but she didn't want to complain to Jim. Sally knew that Jim was becoming weak helping her and did not want to demand more of him that he could give. As a chaplain, it is important to gauge how the whole family is doing when a family member is dying. Often, the primary caregivers need their own support, even though they might refuse it so long as there is work to be done. Jim was not going to rest until Sally was no longer in need of his help. There was always something for him

to do, even though he felt he could never do enough. And someday, unfortunately, Sally would no longer need Jim's help.

CHAPTER 2
MIDRASH

Why Midrash and Why These Midrashim?

One might not think of midrash as a resource for trying to understand how to help people through the dying process. Unlike the poetry I studied, most of these midrashim are long, complicated, and full of literary oddities that seem to make sense only to the rabbis who wrote them. Certainly, if one is desperate to figure out what to say to a dying relative or congregant, sitting down and studying some midrash is not the best option. However, if one is interested in feeling more competent in assisting the dying (in non-instant situations), then having an understanding of some biblical stories and their relevant midrashim could turn out to be very useful. But first, before one examines some midrash, it is essential to grasp what this peculiar literary genre is all about.

Midrash is an ancient literary genre and a form of critical interpretation of the Hebrew bible. Throughout history, Jews and non-Jews have studied midrash in order to explain and analyze what seems to be hidden from the biblical text. In other words, midrash fills in the gaps. For instance, many Jews who attended Sunday school learned the story about Abraham smashing the idols in his father Terach's idol shop. But that story does not come from the Genesis text – it comes from a midrashic collection that comments on the ten trials of Abraham. The midrash seeks to understand why Abraham recognized God as the one true God when everyone around him worshipped idols. The Torah text does not explain why God chose Abraham to become the "father of many nations." Therefore, the midrash from Genesis Rabbah depicts Abraham as a rational

and critical-thinking young lad, who showed his father and King Nimrod that idols made from clay have no powers at all. Barry Holtz writes, "The Bible is loath to tell us the motivations, feelings, or thoughts of characters. Rarely giving us descriptive details either of people or places, it (the Bible) is composed in a stark, uncompromising style."[21]

There are specific techniques in midrash that are used to accomplish the goal of explaining what the biblical text teasingly leaves out. A midrashist might employ wordplays or associations with this biblical text. Thus, the logic of a passage might be confusing to the reader but, upon further investigation, new layers of meaning might be uncovered. The rabbis also use puns, letter reversals and even homonyms to interpret a text. All of these methods are what Isaac Heinemann called "creative philology."[22] In addition, the usage of stories, homilies and parables are included to do a number of things. These comprise deriving legal conclusions, moral lessons and even new theological and ethical ideas. There are many ways to understand the biblical text, and midrash concentrates on the more esoteric and deeper meanings. Midrash is often thought of as a commentary on the Bible. On the other hand, some might suggest that the Torah text is merely a condensed version of the Oral Torah, perhaps the most ancient of "Cliff Notes".

The exact origins of midrash are unclear. The consensus is that most midrashim were transmitted and composed in the first few centuries C.E. until the Middle Ages. Some religious Jews on the other hand, might say that since midrash is part of the Oral Torah, then it was all revealed at Sinai along with the written Torah. Basically, their

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[21] Holtz, Barry, ed. *Back to the Sources.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. p. 180
[22] ibid. p. 189

original form was spread orally for many generations before being written down. There are many different types of midrash that have been studied for at least two thousand years or more. An example of one of the oldest midrashic texts is *Sifre*, which comments on the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy. Some of the oldest texts come from the time of the *Tannaim*, or the time of the Mishnah. Another example of an old compilation of midrash is *Mekhilta*, which is a commentary on the book of Exodus. And one of the most famous collections is Midrash Rabbah. One author did not write Midrash Rabbah during a specific time period, but rather it's a collection of ten midrashim from different authors and times. One of these widely known midrashim is Genesis Rabbah. This text is comprised more of Aggadic (homiletical) interpretations on the first book of the Torah, as opposed to Halakhic (legal) interpretations.

Midrash Halakhah, on the one hand, is often used as a proof for the law stipulated in the Torah. It helps the reader understand what might have been meant when the law does not seem clear. Midrash Aggadah, on the other hand, helps to explain the non-legal parts of the Torah that also are in need of further clarification and illustration. It can be argued that the latter type of midrash are more creative since they are not trying to explain biblical laws. Many times, midrash aggadah focuses on the presence of seemingly unnecessary words and letters, parallel language and other textual oddities that are cause for midrashic explanation.

Midrash is not merely a literary form and exegetical technique. It is also, and perhaps foremost, a significant factor in the development of the Jewish religious tradition. Much of the Gemarra is comprised of midrash, in a form sometimes called Aggadah. Dr. Barry Holtz, professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and editor of

Back to the Sources: Reading the Classical Jewish Texts, wrote that midrash also "arose as an attempt to keep a sense of continuity between the ancient traditions of the Bible and the new world of Hellenistic Judaism"[23] during the time of the rabbis.

For this thesis, I concentrated on the midrashim that are connected to the narratives surrounding Jacob and Moses' deaths. "In the Genesis narratives, the patriarchs are depicted as living full lives before dying of natural causes"[24]. Thus, dying was seen as a natural occurrence in the early biblical narratives, and Jacob's experience is a prime example of this perspective. Jacob's deathbed scene may even provide others with a model of the steps that one ought to take when facing imminent death. The biblical text and midrashim on Jacob's death all reinforce this outlook on dying.

It was not just in biblical times that people viewed death more openly and directly than we do now. At some point, however, death became a taboo subject. Perhaps one's fear of death was passed down through the generations as a result of habit and education. Rousseau wrote, "Men are afraid of death the way children are afraid of the dark, only because their imaginations have been filled with phantoms as empty as they are terrible."[25] Therefore, understanding how Jacob and Moses (or more accurately, the writers of the Hebrew Bible) viewed death may give us a new perspective on how to approach this inevitable transition in our lives.

With Moses, the biblical text and midrashim do not seem as congruent as they do regarding Jacob. The biblical text does not paint as lovely a picture of Moses' death as it does of Jacob's, but it does not depict his death as a struggle, either. The midrashim,

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[23] ibid.,181

[24] Pearlman, Michelle D. "Caring for the Dying: Spiritual Perspectives from Early Modernity." Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2005. p. 3

[25] Ariès, 410

however, paint a completely different scene. The rabbis hint at an injustice with Moses' death and show him pleading with God several times to reverse the Divine decree. In the end, students of these midrashim learn that death happens to all of us, even the best of us, as the greatest prophet who ever lived was not immune from death.

Though both of their deaths and the way the rabbis interpreted them are very different, at the same time the account of Jacob's death is more similar to that of Moses than any of the other biblical characters. For instance, just as Moses gives a farewell address to the twelve tribes, Jacob gives a farewell address to his twelve sons. And there are similarities in these two speeches as well.

Similar to the functions of the poetry of Zelda and Carmi, the midrashim from Genesis and Deuteronomy Rabbah and *Sifre*, provide insights into the dying process and the best way for others to guide people through this final transition in life. The biggest difference between the poetry and midrashim, besides the latter being considered *sifre kodesh* and having been written many generations ago, is their use in a clinical setting. Whereas the poetry can certainly be recited to a patient or family member or even taught to family members, the midrashim are much too long and complicated to present to a dying person and his or her support group. However, the insights and teachings from the Torah and rabbis can be paraphrased in order to help people glean some meaning from the deaths of Jacob and Moses. People who participate in text study may, over time, assimilate the values of this literature into their lives.

The Biblical Texts

Death of Jacob (Genesis 47:28-50:14)

The Talmud (BT Baba Metzia 87a) remarks that Jacob is the first biblical character to fall ill before dying. Nowhere does the Genesis text state that he is fearful of dying, although it does imply that Jacob knew that he was about to die. The evidence for this is that Jacob calls his favorite son, Joseph, to his bedside in order for him to hear and carry out his father's end of life preparations.

Jacob's first request to Joseph is to bury him with his fathers in the cave of Machpelah. Then, at a later date, when Joseph is told that his father is seriously ill, a *goses* perhaps, he brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim to see their grandfather. Jacob tells them all of one of his encounters with God, occasions where he is promised land and offspring, a la Abraham a few chapters earlier. Jacob then uses his authority to adopt Joseph's sons as his own. By doing this, Jacob includes them in his inheritance. Following this blessing, in which he seems to mistake the birth order of Ehpraim and Manasseh, Jacob assigns Joseph an additional portion of his inheritance, one more than his brothers. Jacob also mentions the death and burial of his wife Rachel, reflecting a bit on his past, and then he blesses Joseph and his sons, giving a final wish that Joseph return to Canaan.

After his time with Joseph, Jacob calls all of his sons to gather at his bedside. At this point, and only at this point, Jacob knows his death is imminent. He tells them each what is to befall them in the future by addressing each son personally and describing their traits. Jacob instructs his sons again to bury him with his fathers in the land of Canaan after telling them who is buried there.

Finally in Genesis 49:33, Jacob dies peacefully. "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people."

The narrative suggests several things we might learn about how to guide people through the dying process. Firstly, Jacob gives specific burial instructions. Secondly, he makes sure family members surround him. Thirdly, Jacob reviews his life with his family, including stories about his personal relationship with God and the history of his ancestors and wife. Jacob also stipulates who will get any inheritance and how much. He is very clear on the matter and ensures that plenty of people are present at his bedside to witness his words. Finally, Jacob blesses his sons and appoints Joseph as a successor in front of all his brothers. Jacob's road to death is clear and smooth. He dies knowing that his children will carry on his legacy and fulfill his wishes. Perhaps, most importantly, Jacob is assured that his children will continue to serve the God of his father and grandfather. One cannot expect a more choreographed death.

Death of Moses

Unlike Jacob, Moses learns of his impending death many years before it actually occurs. God informs Moses that he will not live to cross into the Promised Land because of his transgression at Meribah. Though the exact time and place were unknown at the time, Moses was aware of his imminent death as the Israelites stood on the eastern side of the Jordan, waiting to cross into the land. Like Jacob, however, Moses also prepares for his death in a number of ways, from choosing a successor in Joshua, to blessing the twelve tribes. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Ascend these heights of Arabim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. When you have seen it, you too shall be

gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was. For, in the wilderness of Zin, when the community was contentious, you disobeyed My command to uphold my sanctity in their sight by means of water...' Moses spoke to the Lord saying, 'Let the Lord, Source of breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community...'" (Numbers 27:12-15)

Moses' death is recounted in multiple places in the Torah (Numbers 27:12-14, Deuteronomy 3:23-28; 32:48-5) however, Deuteronomy 34 serves as the text that describes Moses' last moments before his actual death. Deuteronomy, as a whole, happens to be Moses' farewell address prior to his inevitable death on Mt. Nebo.

The death of Moses is seen as the end of the greatest prophet's life and the text does not disappoint. The Torah depicts Moses atop a mountain, looking out onto the land that was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by God. The imagery is vivid and bittersweet. The bitterness of the scene is that Moses, who helped to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, cannot enter the new land himself. Instead, he is forced to die overlooking the land. As far as the text suggests, Moses dies gracefully and retains his dignity rather than putting up a fight.

As previously mentioned, the whole book of Deuteronomy is written as a farewell address. Moses begins by reviewing past events, followed by a warning to the Israelites about straying from the law. Then he presents the wide-ranging laws in chapters 12-26. Afterwards, the *brit* is supported by a series of blessings and curses contingent on obedience or disobedience. Moses then speaks about future implications of the *brit*, followed by two poems. Finally, there is the transition of leadership to Joshua and Moses' death. Immediately following the death of Moses and a period of national mourning, the Book of Joshua begins with the entrance into the Promised Land.

The text preceding chapter 34 and the death of Moses consists of two long poems addressed to the Israelite people. Both of the poems are written in a dramatic way that lead into his actual death. Grouped together, they form a long valedictory address. Due to his divinely prescribed death, Moses knew that he still had opportunities to influence the people and instill in them hope and wisdom for the future. The two poems (called, "The Song of Moses" and "The Blessing of Moses", respectively) lead directly into his death, thus making chapters 32-34 a powerful and unique time in the desert. Taken together, these last three chapters serve as a eulogy to Moses.

The "Song of Moses" in chapter 32 is a didactic poem about Israel's survival in the future. It warns the nation and instructs the people to follow the ways of God, lest they suffer the wrath of God. The poem shows the cycle of Israel's commitment to God that has been relevant to every age in Jewish history. According to Samuel Driver, "The poem begins reproachfully; but, in general, tenderness and pity prevail above severity, and towards the close the strain rises into one of positive encouragement and promise."[26] This poem is unlike many poems in the Torah, and especially different from most speeches by Moses. It resembles the literary style of some of the prophets and even poems in Ketuvim.[27] In any case, it is a powerful poem to give to the whole community before dying on the mountain. After he delivers this poem, Moses is told by God to ascend the heights of Mount Nebo in order to see the land and die.

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[26] Driver, Samuel Rolles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903. p. 344

[27] *Ketuvim*, or Writings. The third book the Hebrew Bible, after the Torah and Prophets.

The "Blessing of Moses" in chapter 33 is quite different from the preceding poem. Most obvious is that in the "Song of Moses," God is the central figure, whereas in the "Blessing of Moses," all of Israel becomes the subject. This blessing resembles the last words of Jacob before he died. There, Jacob addresses each of his twelve sons, but in this blessing Moses addresses the twelve tribes. Though the words and order of the sons are different (Moses does not mention the tribe of Simeon, and scholars believe that this tribe may have been incorporated into Judah by the time of the poem's authorship) both Jacob and Moses give their prediction on how each of the tribes/sons will fare in the future. They also state the geographical location of the tribes' dwelling places. All of these texts that anticipate Moses' death provide an appropriate backdrop to a larger-than-life figure dying a great death.

The biblical narratives of Jacob and Moses' deaths are very rich – arguably more detailed than most death narratives in the entire Bible. There are many lessons to derive from the Genesis, Numbers and Deuteronomy texts. However, the rabbis saw so much more in the final days of these two biblical giants; all of which relate to the trials we go through as our loved ones and congregants die.

Midrashim: Translations, Commentary, and Pastoral Ruminations

1: Genesis Rabbah – Va'yehi, 96:2

ב. (כט) וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת פְּתִיב (תהלים לט, יג) 'כִּי גֵר אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ תוֹשָׁב וְגוֹ' (דה"א כט, טו) 'כִּי גֵרִים אֲנַחְנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ וְגוֹ' 'כַּצֵּל יָמֵינוּ עַל הָאָרֶץ וְאֵין מִקְוֶה' וְהַלְוַאי כְּצִלּוֹ שֶׁל כֹּתֶל אוֹ כְצִלּוֹ שֶׁל אִילָן אֶלָּא כְּצִלּוֹ שֶׁל עוֹף בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהוּא עָף דִּכְתִיב (תהלים קמד, ד) 'כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר' 'וְאֵין מִקְוֶה' וְאֵין מִי שֶׁיְּקַוֶּה שֶׁלֹּא יָמוּת הַכֹּל יוֹדְעִים וְאוֹמְרִין בְּפִיהֶם שֶׁהֵן מֵתִים אַבְרָהָם אָמַר (בראשית טו, ב) 'וְאָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי' יִצְחָק אָמַר (שם כז, ז) 'וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ לִפְנֵי ה' לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי' אַף יַעֲקֹב אָמַר (שם מז, ל) 'וְשָׁכַבְתִּי עִם אֲבֹתַי' אֵימָתַי בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁנָּטָה לָמוּת.
And the days came close for Israel to die (Gen 47:29). The scripture says, (Psalm 39:13) *For like all my forebears I am an alien, resident with you.* (I Chronicles 29:15) *For we are sojourners with You, mere transients like our fathers; our days on earth are like a shadow, with nothing in prospect.* I wish it were so, but it's not like a shadow of a wall or a firmly planted tree, rather it is like the shadow of a fleeting bird- it comes and it goes. It is written, (Psalm 144:4) *Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.* And there is no hope. And none can hope to escape death. All know it and affirm it with their mouths that they will die. Abraham said, (Genesis 15:2) *O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless...?* Isaac said, (Genesis 27:7) *Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you before I die.* Even Jacob said, (Genesis 47:30) *When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial place.* When was this? When he was at the point of death.

This midrash is straightforward. It opens with verse Genesis 47:29 that stipulates Jacob's imminent death, and then moves to two specific points. The rabbis chose to illustrate both how fleeting life is and how prepared Jacob was to die. The first three biblical references from Psalms and Chronicles support this outlook on life and, in so doing, validate Jacob's intentions in his last days. Psalm 39 is a prayer to God in which the pray-er acknowledges how ephemeral lives are in the grand scheme of time. He says,

> *Tell me, O Lord, what my term is, what is the measure of my days; I would know how fleeting my life is. You have made my life just handbreadths long; its span is as nothing in Your sight; no man endures any longer than a breath. Man walks about as a mere shadow...No man is more than a breath. Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my cry; do not disregard my tears; for like all my forebears I am an alien, resident with You.*

There are multiple reasons for the inclusion of this Psalm. The first is that it speaks directly to the point the rabbis are trying to make: that one's lifespan is fleeting when compared to the infinite expanse of time associated with God. The second reason the rabbis chose this Psalm is because it mentions "my forebears" or the Patriarchs. The speaker compares himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by stating that like them, he is also a traveler, a foreigner stopping by for a short time. Sometimes biblical verses are connected to the Torah text because of just one word. The fact that "forebears" is mentioned connects this Psalm verse to Genesis 47:29. It also connects it to the next text the rabbis present in this midrash, to I Chronicles 29:15.

What we find in this passage is King David commending himself for personally supplying much of the resources for the building of the Temple. Then, the people give freewill offerings from the heart and everyone rejoices. Next, King David humbly speaks to God,

> *Now God, we praise You and extol Your glorious name. Who am I and who are my people, that we should have the means to make such a freewill offering; but all is from You, and it is Your gift that we have given You. For we are sojourners with You, mere transients like our fathers; our days on Earth are like a shadow, with nothing in prospect.*

Following this blessing, Solomon is crowned the second king of Israel and David dies "at a ripe old age." This blessing from David is very similar to the text from Psalms. It, too, describes life as ephemeral, as a passing shadow, and then it seems to compare

the passing shadow to how the Israelites were constantly on the go like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The rabbis then state how pleasant it would be if life were more like the shadow of a building or a firmly rooted tree and not like the shadow of a passing bird. Yet, that is not how life is supposed to be and all know it, especially the patriarchs who talked about their mortality.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were conscious that they were mere sojourners in this world, given life for a short time so that they could accomplish what they came to do. They lived within a culture where death was an accepted reality. Therefore they each talked about how they would eventually die. For Jacob, we learn of his acceptance of death shortly before he actually dies, *"And the days came close for Israel to die"*, when he calls Joseph to his bedside in order to pass on his end of life requests.

Pastoral Ruminations

Everyone knows that they are mortal and will not escape death, yet we act as if death will not strike us. The quotes from the patriarchs show us that even the greatest Jews in the tradition understood that they were mortal beings. We can learn much from these characters about how to acknowledge our own mortality.

"Beth" was a new admission to Hospice care and she was 101 years old! The doctors found a tumor and everyone involved decided it would be best to make sure Beth lived the rest of her days in comfort, far away from the hospital and operating rooms. My first visit with her started out very slowly. The silence between routine questions and answers, coupled with her intimidating stare brought droplets of perspiration to my forehead. A half an hour passed and I was still drowning. I was

clearly not warming to her. I remained a stranger, even though I wore a kippah and introduced myself as Rabbi Samuels. Finally, I just went for it. "Are you afraid of dying, Beth?" I felt a huge relief even before she had time to answer. "Oh no. I want to die. I am ready. I've lost all my friends and my family... they're quite busy with their own families. It's time for me to die." I asked Beth if she had been reviewing her life with anyone and she said no. I then prompted her to recall some memorable times in her long life and she paused before saying, "101 years is a long time now, isn't it? But it all feels like it's passed by so quickly...I remember my college formal; that's right, I went to college, but I can't recall for the life of me who my girlfriends were at the time. They've all surely died by now." Beth and I spent a few more sessions talking about her past and about her future. Like Jacob, her days were drawing near for her to die and, yet, she embraced it.

Someone who is close to dying might use the prayer from Psalm 39. It is a humbling prayer and, while not at all optimistic, it is realistic. I do not think that we as clergy and caregivers ought to instill too much hope and optimism into people who are actively dying. However, reciting this prayer or allowing the patient to recite it on their own should only be done if the dying person is at peace with his or her situation. Otherwise it could depress a patient more than necessary. And that is not what pastoral care is about.

2. Genesis Rabbah – Va'yehi, 96:3

ג. וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּתִיב (קהלת ח, ח) 'אֵין אָדָם שַׁלִּיט בָּרוּחַ לִכְלוֹא אֶת הָרוּחַ וְאֵין שִׁלְטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת' רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ דְּסִכְנִין בְּשֵׁם רַ' לֵוִי חֲצוֹצְרוֹת שֶׁעָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁנָּטָה לָמוּת גְּנָזָם הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁלֹּא יְהֵא אַחַר תּוֹקֵעַ בָּהֶן וְהֵן בָּאִים אֶצְלוֹ דִּכְתִיב (דברים לא, כח) 'הַקְהִילוּ אֵלַי אֶת כָּל זִקְנֵי שִׁבְטֵיכֶם' לְקַיֵּם מַה שֶּׁנֶּאֱמַר 'וְאֵין שִׁלְטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת'. דָּבָר אַחֵר 'וְאֵין שִׁלְטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת' כְּשֶׁעָשָׂה זִמְרִי אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה מַה כְּתִיב שָׁם (במדבר כה, ח) 'וַיָּבֹא אַחַר אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֻּבָּה' וְהֵיכָן הָיָה מֹשֶׁה

וּפִינְחָס מְדַבֵּר לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה אֶלָּא לְקַיֵּם 'וְאֵין שִׁלְטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת' וְאֵין מָוֶת אֶלָּא לָשׁוֹן הַשְׁפָּלָה נִתְּנָה הַיְשׁוּעָה לְפִינְחָס וְהִשְׁפִּיל אֶת מֹשֶׁה וְאַף דָּוִיד כְּתִיב בּוֹ (מ"א א, א) 'וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד זָקֵן' וְכִינּוּן שֶׁנָּטָה לָמוּת מַה כְּתִיב בּוֹ (שם א, ב) וַיְקִרְבוּ יְמֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד אֵין כְּתִיב כָּאן אֶלָּא (שם ב, א) 'וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי דָוִד' וְאַף יַעֲקֹב כֵּינּוּן שֶׁנָּטָה לָמוּת הִתְחִיל מַשְׁפִּיל עַצְמוֹ לִפְנֵי יוֹסֵף וְאָמַר לוֹ (בראשית מז, כט) 'אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ' אֵימָתַי כְּשֶׁקָּרַב לַמִּיתָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר 'וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת'.

And the days came close for Israel to die (Gen 47:29). The scripture says, (Ecclesiastes 8:8) *No man has authority over his life breath- to hold back the life breath; there is no authority over the day of death.* Rabbi Joshua of Siknin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: When Moses was about to die, God hid the trumpets that Moses made in the desert so that Moses might not sound a blast and the Israelites would come to him, as it is written, (Deuteronomy 32:28-29) *Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, that I may speak all these words to them and that I may call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined upon you...* This proves that 'there is no authority over the day of death.' Another interpretation: 'There is no authority over the day of death.' When Zimri perpetrated that action, what is written? (Numbers 25:8) *He (Phinehas) followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman through the belly.* And where was Moses that Phinehas speaks before Moses? Rather this was to fulfill the text 'there is no authority over the day of death.' But here is a case of abasement, not death,

salvation given to Phinehas while Moses humbled himself. Even of David it is written, (I Kings 1:1) ***King David*** *was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm.* But what was written of him when he was at the point of death? "The days of ***King David*** were drawing to a close" is not written here (I Kings 2:1) but rather *When* ***David's*** *life was drawing to a close, he instructed his son Solomon.* So Jacob too, when he was about to die humbled himself before Joseph and said to him, (Genesis 47:29) *Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt.* When was this? When he was close to dying. 'And the days came close for Israel to die.'

This midrash also teaches us about humility when facing our own mortality. But it goes one step further than the previous midrash. Here, we also learn that it is important to name a successor, or pass on whatever it is we want someone to know so that they will carry on our legacy and carry out our wishes. This midrash begins with a quote from Ecclesiastes 8:8, however to really get the gist of the message, it is important to read from 8:5b-8,

> *A wise man, however, will bear in mind that there is a time of doom. For there is a time for every experience, including the doom; for a man's calamity overwhelms him. Indeed, he does not know what is to happen; even when it is on the point of happening, who can tell him? No man has authority over his lifebreath- to hold back the lifebreath; there is no authority over the day of death. There is no mustering out from that war; wickedness (or wealth) is powerless to save its owner.*

It is no coincidence that legend has it that an aged Solomon penned this somewhat dark assessment of life. Michael Fox comments on verse 8, reiterating that not even a king is ruler (*shallit*) over his lifebreath (*ruah*). The word for lifebreath or soul and wind are the same (*ruah*). Thus, Fox points out that this verse was perhaps meant to be ambiguous in order to imply an analogy, "Just as no human controls (*shallit*) the wind (*ruah*), so no one, not even the ruler (called *shallit* in 10:5) can

exercise control (*shilton*) over the appointed day of death and keep a grip on his lifebreath (ruah)."[28]

The next few parts of this midrash concentrate on the loss of Moses' autonomy. The story of God hiding Moses' trumpet, and the following passage from Deuteronomy, show how God planned to take away some of Moses' power. The trumpet is thus a symbol of Moses' autonomy. In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses himself acknowledges his future death. The midrash states that these instances prove that Moses has no authority over his own death, rather death is in the hands of God, not man. The rabbis very much wanted to drive home this point, so they included another story about Moses. In Numbers 25 we learn that some Israelites had cohabited with Moabite women and made sacrifices to their god. God was upset and instructed Moses to have all the ringleaders publicly put to death before God. Moses instructed his officials to do just that. Just when Moses gave his instruction, an Israelite brings a Midianite woman over to his friends (probably to take advantage of) who were in the sight of Moses, and Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, took a spear and killed both the Israelite man and the woman. Afterwards, God tells Moses that because Phinehas did what he did in an act of passion, all the other perpetrators were spared. Phinehas' act was pleasing to God and thus he made a pact of friendship and priesthood with Phinehas. This was a turning point in the life of Moses. While Moses was instructing his people, Phinehas acted on his own, reminiscent of how Moses was as a young man in Egypt, full of passion. Phinehas took the initiative and not Moses. Moses had to be instructed by God - a clear sign that he was getting weaker.

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[28] Fox, Michael V. *Ecclesiastes: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (The Jps Bible Commentary)*. Lanham: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2004. p. 56

The end of the midrash is connected back to the beginning passage from Ecclesiastes. According to Ecclesiastes Rabbah, David is called "King David" a total of fifty-two times in the Tanakh, except in I Kings 2:1, when his life is nearing the end, he is just called "David." This is so because on that day, his authority is insignificant, he is just another man. The midrash shows what David is called when he is getting old and when he is nearing death. The elderly David is still called "King David" but the dying David is simply called "David." The omission of the title "King" is thus no mistake. Like Moses before him, David also had no authority over the timing of his own death. And when he was near his death, David charged his son Solomon to be strong, follow God and to succeed his father as king. And that is what the rabbis wanted to teach about Jacob in this midrash. He, too, had become weak, ready to die and needed to bequeath his leadership to Joseph. Moses, David and Jacob, each one a giant of a man, yet none were greater than any other man.

Pastoral Ruminations

The use of a text from Ecclesiastes is appropriate for the overall message of this midrash. There is a time to die, just as there is a time for everything under the sun and no one has control over any of it, especially one's birth and death. But this reality cannot and should not be the only message derived, especially for those who are actively dying. The goal of pastoral care is not to frighten or depress patients, but to help them understand and cope with their illness, while striving to live the rest of their lives as meaningfully and in as fulfilling a way as possible. The rabbis show how one ought to prepare oneself before leaving this world. One should act humbly like Moses and pass on leadership roles to subsequent generations in the same way as did Jacob and David.

When we die, it becomes time for others to assume responsibility. For some people this process is not difficult, but for others letting go can be challenging. As clergy and caregivers, we often have to help dying people let go of things they are tightly holding on to. Creating rituals around this will help loosen their grasp.

3. Genesis Rabbah – Va'yehi, 96:5

ה. וַיִּקְרָא לִבְנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף לָמָּה לֹא קָרָא לֹא לְרְאוּבֵן וְלֹא לִיהוּדָה וּרְאוּבֵן הוּא הַבְּכוֹר וִיהוּדָה הוּא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהִנִּיחָן וְקָרָא לְיוֹסֵף לָמָּה כֵּן בְּשֶׁבִיל שֶׁהָיָה סִיפֵּק בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לְפִיכָךְ 'וַיִּקְרָא לִבְנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף' וּלְפִי שֶׁהַשָּׁעָה מְסוּרָה לוֹ 'אַל נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם' בְּשֶׁבִילְךָ יָרַדְתִּי לְמִצְרַיִם בְּשֶׁבִילְךָ אָמַרְתִּי (בראשית מו, ל) 'אָמוּתָה הַפָּעַם'.
וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת וְכִי יֵשׁ חֶסֶד שֶׁל שֶׁקֶר שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר 'חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת' לָמָּה כֵּן מָשָׁל הַדְיוֹט אוֹמֵר מִית בְּרֵה דְּרַחֲמָךְ טְעוֹן מִית רַחֲמָךְ פְּרוֹק אָמַר לוֹ אִם תַּעֲשֶׂה לִי חֶסֶד לְאַחַר מִיתָתִי הוּא חֶסֶד שֶׁל אֱמֶת.
And he summoned his son Joseph (Genesis 47:29). Why did he neither call Reuben or Judah, seeing that Reuben was the firstborn and Judah was the king? Jacob disregarded them and called Joseph. Why was this? Because Joseph could carry out Jacob's requests. Therefore, *he summoned his son Joseph.* And according to this, it was Joseph's time to be handed over the leadership duty. 'Please do not bury me in Egypt.' For you I went down to Egypt and for you I said, (Genesis 46:30) *Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are alive.* 'You will deal kindly and honestly with me.' Can there be false kindness that he says 'kindly and honestly?' Why did he say this? A common parable says: When your friend's son dies, bear with him in sorrow. When your friend dies, cast away your sorrow. He said to him, "if you show me kindness at and after my death, that is true kindness."

This midrash on Genesis 47:29 continues where the previous one left off, that is, it concerns the appointment of Joseph to succeed Jacob. The rabbis ask the obvious question, "why did Jacob choose Joseph from all his sons?" As students of the Torah, we have a pretty good idea why he chose Joseph. But not everything to the rabbis is so evident and they often seem to use the occasion to make an additional point.

Jacob gave this commandment to Joseph, according to the rabbis, rather than to any of his other sons because he knew they were not capable of carrying out his wishes. Only Joseph, the proven ruler and confidant of Pharaoh could orchestrate Jacob leaving Egypt in order to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. Jacob's quote from Genesis 46:30 is noteworthy. Jacob was not near death at the time he reunited with Joseph (he had lived in Egypt for seventeen years) yet he said that he was ready to die because he saw that Joseph was still alive. Though Jacob told Pharaoh that he had lived a bitter life (Gen 47:8-9) it was far from complete. He hoped that seeing Joseph one more time would heal all his emotional wounds. Jacob says to his other sons, *My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die* (Gen 45:28). Joseph was not only Jacob's favorite son, but he was also a well-respected leader who dealt kindly with his brothers when many in his shoes may have retaliated.

The parable at the end of this midrash illustrates another reason why Jacob summoned Joseph instead of his brothers. The parable teaches that we ought to empathize with and support living people when they are going through a difficult time, such as when a loved one dies. Bearing with the living in his sorrow shows that we care about his grief and that we are present for him. The parable contrasts this with the event of one's friend dying. When this happens we are taught to "cast away our sorrow", a most peculiar piece of advice. What the rabbis are telling us is that being a friend to someone, being his or her support in tough times is a greater kindness to them than mourning their own loss since they can feel your empathy while living but not while rotting in the ground. For Jacob, Joseph was the only son whom he believed would show him true and honest kindness before and after death.

Pastoral Ruminations

There are countless stories of individuals who hold onto life with every ounce of energy until they are assured their loved ones will be taken care of and will be able to go forth in life without them. I have heard stories from chaplains who witnessed children telling their dying parents that "everything is going to be okay, we will be okay." I have even read of parents reassuring their dying children that they will get along. Moments later, the dying people expire peacefully. These stories might actually be read as a refutation of the previous midrash that states no man has authority over the time of his death. In fact, many caregivers have witnessed people holding on until they are confident that their loved ones will be just fine without them. Jacob was ready to die when he saw his favorite child was still alive. There was nothing else for him to live for.

4: Genesis Rabbah – Va'yehi, 97:1

(מח, א) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְגוֹ' — (משלי יח, יד) 'רוּחַ אִישׁ יְכַלְכֵּל מַחֲלֵהוּ וְרוּחַ נְכֵאָה מִי יִשָּׂאֶנָּה', מִי שֶׁרוּחוֹ נְכֵאָה עָלָיו מִנַּעֲרוּתוֹ וְעַד זִקְנוּתוֹ מִי יִשָּׂאֶנָּה!? אָמַר רַ' יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּרַ' יוֹסֵי: אֲבָנִים שֶׁיִּשַּׁבְנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם בְּנַעֲרוּתֵנוּ עָשׂוּ עִמָּנוּ מִלְחָמָה בִּזְקֻנוּתֵנוּ; רַ' יוֹסֵי הָוֶה מְפַקֵּד לְחַבְרַיָּה: לָא תֶהֱוֹון יָתְבִין עַל מַסְטוֹבְיָתָה דְּסִדְרָה דְּבַר עוּלָה בְּסִתְוָא, דְּהִנֵּין צְנִינָן סַגִּין; רַ' אַבָּהוּא נְחֵת לְמִסְחֵי וַהֲוָה מִסְתַּמֵּךְ עֵל תְּרֵין גּוּנְתַיָּין, חַד מִן יַמִּינֵהּ וְחַד מִן שְׂמָלֵהּ אִתּוֹן לְמַשְׁרוּעַ וְזָקְפוּן, אֲמַרִין לֵהּ: רַבִּי, כָּל הָדֵן חַיְלָה אִית בָּךְ וְאַתְּ צָרִיךְ לְאִלֵּין!? אָמַר לָהֶם: וְאֵין אָנוּ מַנִּיחִים לָנוּ כְּלוּם לְזִקְנוּתֵנוּ!? תֵּדַע לְךָ שֶׁכֵּן אָבִינוּ יַעֲקֹב עַל יְדֵי שֶׁכָּתוּב בּוֹ: (בראשית לא, מ) 'הָיִיתִי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלַנִי חֹרֶב וְגוֹ'' — בֵּינוֹן שֶׁהִזְקִין בָּא לִידֵי חֳלִי, הָדָה הִיא: 'וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חֹלֶה וְגוֹ''. אָמַר רַ' יוּדָה בְּרַ' סִימוֹן: אַבְרָהָם תָּבַע זִקְנָה, אָמַר לְפָנָיו:

רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים, אָב וּבְנוֹ נִכְנָסִים לְמָקוֹם, וְאֵין אָדָם יוֹדֵעַ לְמִי יִכְבֹּד, וּמִתּוֹךְ שֶׁאַתְּ מְעַטְּרוֹ לָאָב בִּזְקֻנָּה אָדָם יוֹדֵעַ לְמִי יִכְבֹּד, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: חַיֶּיךָ, דָּבָר טוֹב תָּבַעְתָּ, וּמִמְּךָ אֲנִי מַתְחִיל, מִתְּחִלַּת הַסֵּפֶר וְעַד כָּאן אֵין כְּתִיב זְקֻנָה, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁעָמַד אֲבִינוּ אַבְרָהָם נָתַן לוֹ זְקֻנָה: (בראשית כד, א) 'וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים': יִצְחָק תָּבַע יְסוּרִין, אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים, אָדָם מֵת בְּלֹא יְסוּרִין וּמִדַּת הַדִּין מִתּוֹחָה כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, וּמִתּוֹךְ שֶׁאַתְּ מֵבִיא עָלָיו יְסוּרִין אֵין מִדַּת הַדִּין מִתּוֹחָה כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: חַיֶּיךָ, דָּבָר טוֹב תָּבַעְתָּ, וּמִמְּךָ הוּא מַתְחִיל, מִתְּחִלַּת הַסֵּפֶר וְעַד כָּן אֵין כְּתִיב יְסוּרִין, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁעָמַד יִצְחָק נָתַן לוֹ יְסוּרִין: (שם כו, א) 'וַיְהִי כִּי זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶיֶן עֵינָיו מֵרְאֹת': יַעֲקֹב תָּבַע אֶת הַחֲלִי, אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים, אָדָם מֵת בְּלֹא חֲלִי וְאֵינוֹ מִיַּשֵּׁב בֵּין בָּנָיו, מִתּוֹךְ שֶׁהוּא חוֹלֶה שְׁנַיִם שָׁלֹשׁ יָמִים הוּא מִיַּשֵּׁב בֵּין בָּנָיו, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: חַיֶּיךָ דָּבָר טוֹב תָּבַעְתָּ, מִמְּךָ הוּא מַתְחִיל: 'וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חֹלֶה': אָמַר רַ' לֵוִי: אַבְרָהָם חִדֵּשׁ זְקֻנָה, יִצְחָק חִדֵּשׁ יְסוּרִין, יַעֲקֹב חִדֵּשׁ אֶת הַחֲלִי, חִזְקִיָּהוּ חִדֵּשׁ חֳלִי שֵׁנִי, אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים, הֶעֱמַדְתָּ אוֹתוֹ עַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ — אַתְּמָהָא!? אֶלָּא מִתּוֹךְ שֶׁאָדָם חוֹלֶה וְעוֹמֵד מֵחֳלָיוֹ, חוֹלֶה וְעוֹמֵד, הוּא עוֹשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: חַיֶּיךָ, דָּבָר טוֹב תָּבַעְתָּ, מִמְּךָ הוּא מַתְחִיל, הֲדָה הִיא (ישעיה לח, ט) 'מִכְתָּב לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה בְּחָלְתּוֹ וַיְחִי מֵחָלְיוֹ', אָמַר רַ' שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָן: מִכָּן שֶׁהָיָה בֵּין חֳלִי לַחֳלִי חֳלִי כָּבֵד מִשְּׁנֵיהֶם.

Some time afterward, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 48:1). It is written (Proverbs 18:14) *A man's spirit can sustain him through illness; But low spirits, who can bear them?* When one's spirit has been broken from youth to old age, who can bear it? Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Yose said, "The stones upon which we sat in our youth acted against us in our old age." Rabbi Yose used to command his students, "Do not sit on the outer benches of Bar Ullah's academy in the winter, because they are very cold." Rabbi Abbahu went down to bathe, leaning on his two servants, one on his right and one on his left. They were about to fall and he held them up. People said to him, "Rabbi! You are strong and yet you need the help of these men?" He said to

them, "Shall we leave nothing for our old age?" This teaches you about our father Jacob and the proof is written of him (Genesis 31:40) *Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes.* When he reached old age, he got sick, thus it says, *Some time afterward, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.'* Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Simon said, "Abraham requested old age, saying before God, "Master of the universe, when a man and son enter a town, no one knows who to honor if they look alike. But if you made the father appear old, people would then know whom to honor." The Holy One, Blessed be God said, "I swear, you asked for a good thing! I shall begin with you." From the beginning of the Torah until here (Genesis 24:1) old age is not mentioned. But when Abraham arose, old age was granted to him. (Genesis 24:1) *Abraham was now old, advanced in years.* Isaac asked for suffering, saying before God "Master of the universe, when a man dies without suffering, judgment threatens him. But if you cause him suffering, judgment will not threaten him. The Holy One, Blessed be God said to him, "I swear, you asked for a good thing and I will begin with you." From the beginning of the Torah until here (Genesis 27:1) suffering is not mentioned. When Isaac arose, suffering was granted to him. (Genesis 27:1) *When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau...* Jacob asked for illness, saying before God, "Master of the universe, a man dies without illness and does not settle his affairs with his children, but if he were sick two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children. The Holy One Blessed be God said to him, "I swear, you asked for a good thing! I will begin with you." (Genesis 48:1) *Some time afterward, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.'* Rabbi Levi said, Abraham introduced old age, Isaac introduced suffering, Jacob introduced illness and Hezekiah introduced repeated illness. He said to God, "Master of the universe, you kept man in good health until the day of his death. How strange! Rather if a man fell sick and recovered from his illness and fell sick and recovered again, he would surely fully repent. The Holy One Blessed be God said to him, "I swear, you asked for a good thing! I shall begin with you." Thus it is written (Isaiah 38:9) *A poem by King Hezekiah of Judah when he recovered from the illness he had suffered.* Rabbi Shmuel son of Nahman said, "From here, we learn that between one illness and another, he had an illness more severe than both."

The starting point for this midrash is Genesis 48:1, when Joseph is told that his father is ill and close to death. The common thread that weaves its way through this midrash is illness, and the fact that it is a part of life and even necessary. The first text cited is from Proverbs. The connection to Jacob's illness might just be the fact that the Proverb includes the word "illness." But there is a deeper connection. The proverb teaches that we can endure all kinds of physical afflictions, but when our spirit is wounded, it can be very painful, so painful that the sting is present from youth to old

age. A wounded spirit may be caused by negative words or actions against the person or a loved one. A wounded spirit can be devastating. However, like a physical ailment, a wounded spirit can be healed through the help of other people. Jacob had a wounded spirit all the days of his life until he was reunited with Joseph. Jacob's spirit was first wounded when he worked many years for Laban in order to marry Rachel. Jacob's spirit was wounded again when Rachel died and it was wounded a third time when he believed his son Joseph had been killed by wild beasts. From youth to old age, Jacob's spirit was continually wounded. This is exactly what the rabbis teach in the lines following the Proverbs quote and in the subsequent rabbinic anecdotes. "Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Yose said, 'The stones upon which we sat in our youth acted against us in our old age.'" Thus from youth to old age, there is no getting around the pain. It follows you everywhere.

Now the rabbis tie this all together by coming back to Jacob's life via Genesis 31:40. In this scene, Laban catches up to Jacob after Jacob has fled with his family. The son and father-in-law have one of the most honest and emotional conversations in all of Genesis. After years of keeping his frustrations inside of him, Jacob comes to a boiling point, saying,

> *These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. Of the twenty years I served in your household, I served you fourteen years for your daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and again...*

The rabbis focus on Jacob stating how he was often physically uncomfortable and emotionally drained while working for Laban. This broken spirit in his youth

carried over into Jacob's old age as we know from the beginning verse of this midrash. The rabbis made Jacob's experience an example of the proverb and the stories from Ishmael, Yose and Abbahu.

After beginning with Jacob's physical illness and then progressing to his emotional strife, the midrash focuses again on his physical ailments. Rabbi Judah teaches that each of the three patriarchs, as well as Hezekiah, made unusual requests to God. Abraham asks for old age, Isaac for suffering and Jacob for illness. Each was the first to experience what they requested, according to the biblical text. Jacob's reasoning for his request is noteworthy. He says

> *Master of the universe, a man dies without illness and does not settle his affairs with his children, but if he were sick two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children. The Holy One Blessed be God said to him, 'I swear, you asked for a good thing! I will begin with you.' (Genesis 48:1) Some time afterward, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.'*

Jacob's focus is on planning for a peaceful death and reconciliation. In the biblical text, Jacob orchestrates the actions preceding his death so that when he is gone everything will be in order, from his sons understanding their inheritance to his burial wishes. For Jacob, settling his affairs is of the utmost importance. The parallel action to this nowadays would include many of the same issues but would add writing a living will. Jacob was thus not only assuring that he would die knowing that his affairs were in order, but that his family was taken care of as well. Jacob requests illness so that there will be time for others to carry out his wishes. If death comes unexpectedly, there may not be time to prepare for death. In addition, the requests of the dying have elevated status, however complex they may be, according to Jewish law. This idea is developed in the Gemarra. In BT Gittin 13a and in Bava Batra 151a, "we learn that the last wishes of a

dying person must be obeyed as long as they do not contravene Jewish law. Deathbed instructions are given the same force in Jewish law as a legal contract that has been both written and delivered... The dying person is continually afforded a place of respect in Jewish law."[29] Therefore, we learn from this midrash that Jacob requested illness so he could die the way he wanted to die.

In his book, *The Midrash Says*, an anthology of rabbinic literature, Rabbi Moshe Weisman understands this midrash as a guide for how we ought to live today. He writes, "If we would be allowed to utter one wish to Hashem, for what would we ask? We would most certainly express our desire for eternal youth, health, happiness, and so on. The midrash tells us that our forefathers demanded just the opposite: they demanded to look old, to be given suffering and illness!

"Why did they react differently? The answer is that we attribute major importance to wellbeing in this world. Our forefathers, however, were constantly aware that the goal of our existence is *olam haba* (the world-to-come). They therefore requested whatever would promote spiritual wellbeing and rejected anything that might be detrimental to the welfare of the *neshama* (soul)."[30] This take on the story is from a specific (Orthodox) point of view – one that might not resonate with less religious Jews. However, this traditional point of view helps explain why the patriarchs requested such odd things. This is midrash. Even though many of us today might exclaim, "No one in their right mind would want to look old, become ill and suffer," it is nevertheless helpful to understand these biblical stories from multiple points of view. That said, I have never met any patients who wanted to feel worse than they were

[29] Pearlman, 19

[30] Weissman, Moshe. *The Midrash Says*. Brooklyn, NY: Benei Yakov Publications, 1980. p. 441

already feeling. Thus, this is not a teaching that should be presented to suffering people. What might be taught is how Jacob hoped to die peacefully, after reconciliation and thoughtful preparation.

5: Genesis Rabbah – Va'yehi, 98:3

ג. (ב) הִקָּבְצוּ וְשִׁמְעוּ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב רַבִּי בֶּרֶכְיָה זְמִנִּין
אָמַר לָהּ בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי חִיָּא וְזִמְנִין אָמַר לָהּ בְּשֵׁם רַבָּנִן דְּתַמָּן
מִכָּאן שֶׁהָיוּ מְפֻזָּרִין וְיָרַד מַלְאָךְ וְכִנְּסָן אָמַר רַ' תַּנְחוּמָא
מִכָּאן שֶׁהָיוּ מְפֻזָּרִין וְכִנְּסָן בְּרוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

וְשִׁמְעוּ אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם רַבִּי יוּדָן וְרַבִּי פִּינְחָס רַבִּי
יוּדָן אָמַר שִׁמְעוּ לְאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם וְרַבִּי פִּינְחָס אָמַר אֵל
הוּא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם מַה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא בּוֹרֵא עוֹלָמוֹת
אַף אֲבִיכֶם בּוֹרֵא עוֹלָמוֹת מַה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְחַלֵּק
עוֹלָמוֹת אַף אֲבִיכֶם מְחַלֵּק עוֹלָמוֹת אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אֲחוּי אָמַר
מִכָּאן זָכוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיָה יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ
נִסְטָר מִן הָעוֹלָם קָרָא לִשְׁנֵים עָשָׂר בָּנָיו אָמַר לָהֶם שִׁמְעוּ
אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם אֲבִיכֶם שָׁמָא יֵשׁ בִּלְבַבְכֶם מַחֲלֹקֶת
עַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אָמְרוּ לוֹ (דברים ו, ד) 'שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל'
אָבִינוּ כְּשֵׁם שֶׁאֵין בִּלְבָּךְ מַחֲלֹקֶת עַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא כָּךְ
אֵין בִּלְבֵּנוּ מַחֲלֹקֶת אֶלָּא (שם שם, שם) 'ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד'
אַף הוּא פֵּרֵשׁ בְּשִׂפְתָיו וְאָמַר 'בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ
לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד' רַבִּי בֶּרֶכְיָה וְרַבִּי חִלְבּוֹ בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל הָדָא
הוּא שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל מַשְׁכִּימִים וּמַעֲרִיבִים בְּכָל יוֹם וְאוֹמְרִים
'שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל' אֲבִינוּ מִמְּעֲרַת הַמַּכְפֵּלָה אוֹתוֹ דָּבָר שִׁצִּוִּיתָנוּ
עֲדַיִן הוּא נוֹהֵג בָּנוּ 'ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד'.

Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob (Genesis 49:2). Rabbi Berechiah sometimes said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya and sometimes in the names of the rabbis of Babylon: From here this teaches that they were scattered and an angel descended and assembled them. Rabbi Tanhuma said: From here this teaches that Jacob assembled them by means of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Israel your father (Genesis 49:2). Rabbi Judan and Rabbi Phinehas differed. Rabbi Judan said "Listen to the God of Israel your father." And Rabbi Phinehas said "Your father Israel is as a God. As The Holy One Blessed be God creates worlds, so does your father create worlds. As The Holy One Blessed be God divides worlds, so does your father divide worlds." Elazar son of Ahaway said, From here Israel merits the reciting of the Shema. When Jacob our father was dying, he called his twelve sons and said to them, 'Listen, is the God of Israel in heaven your father? Maybe in your hearts you are conflicted about God.' They said to him (Deuteronomy 6:4) *Hear O Israel!* Our father. Just as there is no conflict in your heart about The Holy One Blessed be God, so there is no conflict in our hearts. (ibid) *Adonai is our God, Adonai alone.* So Jacob whispered saying "Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever." Rabbi Berechiah and Rabbi Helbo said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel "This is whence Israel gets it that in the morning and evening they say everyday 'Hear O Israel' Our father from the cave of Machpelah, what you commanded us we still practice 'Adonai is our God, Adonai alone.'"

Jacob's life comes to a close following his long, personalized blessing to each of his sons. However, before drawing his feet into bed, breathing his last breath and being gathered to his people (Gen 49:33) Jacob summons his family to his bedside. Anthony Saldarini, a leading scholar of Late Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, writes, "Like the patriarch Jacob, the sages (also) do not die alone. In many cases they are surrounded by their students during their final moments."[31] A rabbi's students often served as a surrogate family in the rabbinic period. In this midrash, the rabbis place divine capabilities onto Jacob for his convening of the tribes. The rabbis state the reason Jacob had to "summon" his sons is because they were scattered about the land. The obvious question would then be: how could a dying man's voice reach his sons who were strewn throughout the land? Rabbi Berechiah believed that Jacob had the assistance of an angel to collect his sons. Rabbi Tanhuma, on the other hand, believed that Jacob took advantage of his close relationship with God. Though it does not appear

[31] Saldarini, Anthony J. "Last words and deathbed scenes in rabbinic literature." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 68:1 (1977). p. 30.

relevant how Jacob assembled his sons, it is relevant that he did assemble them. Jacob knew exactly how he wanted to die and the final component of this drama was to speak to each of his children while they all stood around him as a united family.

In Genesis 49:2, Jacob says, "Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob; Listen to Israel your father." The last 5 words can be arranged in various ways according to the Hebrew. Rabbi Judan translates the texts as "Listen to the God (el) of Israel your father." Thus, Jacob is telling his sons to listen to God. Or, he is telling his sons to listen to the God of the people Israel, who is Jacob. Rabbi Phinehas sees it another way. He translates the text as "(Listen) Your father Israel is as a God." The biblical text appears to mirror Rabbi Judan's first interpretation; Jacob telling his sons to listen to God, who is the God of Israel, aka Jacob their father. However, the rabbis enjoyed manipulating certain words and, in this case, they focus their attention on the Hebrew preposition, *el*, meaning "to" but in other contexts, *el* can be translated as "God."

Elazar, son of Ahaway, mentions that it is from this biblical verse that the Shema originates, the central prayer or mantra of Judaism. Interestingly, the words of the Shema prayer come from Deuteronomy 6:4, when Moses speaks to the Israelites reminding them of their covenant with God and of the mitzvot they are bound to observe.

Elazar tells a wonderful story about how the prayer originated. As Jacob was on his deathbed, he asks his sons if the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is their God, too. He does not, however play with the arrangement of the words, *el* and *Yisrael*, as the other rabbis do. In this story, the "God of Israel" is the "God of Jacob." Jacob follows his question with what seems to be a test, giving his sons an out if they don't believe.

However, to Jacob's delight, the sons declare their unyielding faith in God with the words, *Shema, Yisrael...Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* (Listen, Israel/father. Adonai is our God. Adonai is one). Quietly Jacob says to himself the second line from the prayer, *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed* (Blessed is the name of God's magnificent kingdom for ever and ever). Thus, we have a custom to recite the Shema aloud and whisper the following declaration, or Jacob's response. After Jacob's sons recited the Shema, he was then, and only then, ready to bless his sons before his death. The bitter life that Jacob claimed to have lived suddenly appeared to him to have been less harsh.

Pastoral Ruminations

"David" was just hours away from dying when I arrived at his house one early afternoon. His French Morroccan wife, "Sheila" was virtually creating a moat by walking back and forth from David's hospital bed in the living room to the kitchen as she brought him ice chips, compresses, and any other thing she could gather to make her husband more comfortable. From the look of him, all David needed were the soft caresses from Sheila's hands. The wastebaskets were filled to the brim with tear soaked tissues. She stopped her routine to talk to me. Sitting on the couch in the adjacent family room, she said, sniffling, "What can we do to help him go?" David was only 46 years old and had developed tumors on his lungs. Nevertheless, he smoked until he couldn't hold a cigarette any longer. Sheila also smoked, but swore that she was giving it up. "I've been reading some of the Psalms to him every so often. My friend told me that's what Jews do." "Do you think David is comforted by the Psalms?" "I don't know. At least he can hear my voice." "Tell me about his Jewish upbringing. Do the two of you belong to a synagogue?" "He was bar mitzvahed and has a lot of feeling for Judaism, but isn't

religious. We don't go anywhere. David was always so tired when he got home from work on Fridays." "Maybe the Psalms sound a bit foreign to him, though I am positive he loves hearing your voice. You know, they can hear us up to the last moment. Perhaps there is another thing you can recite for him that is more familiar. He must know the shema." "Of course he does." "Why don't you hold his hand and sing the shema continuously. The repetition and familiar mantra might be comforting to him." Sheila chanted the shema over and over to David. She finally connected to him. I said my goodbyes a while later and early the next morning I was notified that David had died peacefully just a couple hours after I left their home.

As a pastoral caregiver, it is often a challenge to know what to say and when to say it. For some people, comforting words come easily. I have found that familiar prayers or mantras such as the shema, or even Shalom Aleichem, coupled with repetition, bring a calming presence into any ill person's room. The repetition slows things down and also gives the caregiver a break in trying to come up with new thoughts to share. Just as a new parent might sing a song over and over in order to soothe a crying baby, so too a caregiver can bring a sense of peace to a dying patient by using the same practice.

Malka Shaked, an accomplished contemporary Israel poet and professor, wrote a poem, titled, *Shema*. Rabbi Janet Marder said of this poem, "*Shema*, reminds us that prayer has a visceral hold on us at moments of extremity."[32] This poem beautifully connects the midrashic story of Jacob and his sons with the everyday experience that no

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[32] Comments from a 2004 Healing service sermon at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, where Marder is the senior rabbi. <http://www.betham.org/sermons/marder040326.html>

one wants to be familiar with. Sheila and perhaps David might have found comfort in Shaked's exquisite poem.

Shema by Malka Shaked

My simple faith had died
some time before
while (the idea of) raising the dead
was (for me) a deception for fools and
children
buried in the ground.
But, as when my tiny daughter
had become a plucked and scared bird
in the corner of her bed
covered by the rough hospital blanket—
My cry trembles once again.
As in the monotonous mantra
I rehearse for the thousandth
Time
The *Shema*.
My lips don't move.
My voice isn't heard.
But 'His Name'...and so
forth I
bless silently in a whisper
silently.
Still closing my eyes.
As when kissing.
I examine my memory.
Give it signs.
Offer conditions.
Limp on.
Rehearse.
Tune the pitch like a violinist
before a concert.
Refine my voice at "*Echad* -- One."
Concentrate on strange thoughts
(Is Lord our God an object
or a subject?)
I subject God to a test:
Can He
save you.

[Trans. William Cutter]

6: Deuteronomy Rabbah – Va'yeilech 9:4

ד. דָּבָר אַחֵר אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אַחַר כָּל
אֵיתוֹ הַכָּבוֹד וְאוֹתָהּ הַגְּבוּרָה שֶׁרָאוּ עֵינַי אֲנִי מֵת אָמַר לוֹ
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מֹשֶׁה (תהלים פט, מט) 'מִי גֶּבֶר יִחְיֶה וְלֹא
יִרְאֶה מָוֶת' מַהוּ 'מִי גֶּבֶר יִחְיֶה' אָמַר רַ' תַּנְחוּמָא 'מִי גֶּבֶר'
כְּאַבְרָהָם שֶׁיָּרַד לְכִבְשָׁן הָאֵשׁ וְנִצַּל וְאַחַר כָּךְ (בראשית כה, ח)
'וַיִּגְוַע וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם 'מִי גֶּבֶר' כְּיִצְחָק שֶׁפָּשַׁט צַוָּארוֹ עַל
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאַחַר כָּךְ אָמַר (שם כז, ב) 'הִנֵּה נָא זָקַנְתִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי
יוֹם מוֹתִי' 'מִי גֶּבֶר' כְּיַעֲקֹב שֶׁנִּתְפַּגֵּשׁ עִם הַמַּלְאָךְ וְאַחַר כָּךְ
(שם מז, כט) 'וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת' 'מִי גֶּבֶר' כְּמֹשֶׁה
שֶׁדִּבֵּר עִם בּוֹרְאוֹ פָּנִים בְּפָנִים וְאַחַר כָּךְ 'הֵן קָרְבוּ יָמֶיךָ
לָמוּת'.

Another explanation (of Deuteronomy 31:14- **And God said to Moses: Behold, the time is drawing near for you to die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may instruct him.**) Moses said to God, "Master of the Universe, must I die after all my eyes have seen, all that glory and power?" God said to Moses, "Moses, *What mighty man can live and not see death* (Psalms 89:49)?" What is the meaning of "what mighty man?" Rabbi Tanhuma said "what mighty man" is there like Abraham who went down to the fiery furnace and was saved? And afterwards, *And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin* (Genesis 25:8). "What mighty man" is there like Isaac who stretched out his neck over the alter and afterwards the Torah says, *And he said, 'I am now old, and I do not know how soon I may die'* (Genesis 27:2). "What mighty man" is there like Jacob who wrestled with an angel and afterwards (the Torah says of him) *And when the time approached for Israel to die* (Genesis 47:29). "What mighty man" is there like Moses who spoke with his creator face to face and afterwards (the Torah says) *Behold, the time is drawing near for you to die* (Deuteronomy 31:14).

In Moses' death narrative in the Torah, Moses prepares for death in a manner similar to Jacob. He gathers all of the tribes around him, blesses them and says his farewells. Moses then summits Mount Nebo, looks out at the land and receives one last message from God. "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I will assign it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there." Moses dies following these divine words. From the sound of it, Moses

accepts his death and dies peacefully, without fighting. The rabbis, however, saw it differently. In this midrash, Moses asks God why he has to die, especially since his life was unique. God responds by quoting from Psalms, "What mighty man can live and not see death?" The Psalms' focus near the verse is the brevity of life. For instance, the text says, "You have cut short the days of his youth... O remember how short my life is." While the speaker asks God why this is, in the end he blesses God. Perhaps, the rabbis saw this as a natural way for someone to deal with his or her own death. First, people fear dying and plead to God for life, and after they cope with their terminality, they bless God.

God acknowledges that Moses is indeed a mighty man, and Rabbi Tanhuma points out that even the patriarchs, in spite of being mighty men, also died. Abraham, who was saved from a fiery furnace, accepted death and died peacefully. Isaac, who was almost sacrificed on the altar, accepted death and died peacefully. Jacob wrestled with an angel and died old and contented. Tanhuma shows how these patriarchs also witnessed the power and glory of God, like Moses, and also died. Moses should be no different. Even though Moses spoke to God face to face, his destiny was no different than that of his ancestors. Hence, no man is greater than any other.

Pastoral Ruminations

In her groundbreaking volume *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross proposes that the process of death unfolds through five psychological stages: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.[33] It seems that the rabbis also had an understanding of a coping process, albeit less clinical than Kübler-Ross'. In this

[33] Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillian, 1969

midrash, we see Moses bargaining with God - perhaps corresponding to Kübler-Ross' 4th stage - yet we do not see this in the Torah text. Moses does, finally, accept his fate.

"Steven" was diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer just weeks before I met him. Each time I visited, I spent more time talking with his wife, "Kathy" than talking to Steven about his own condition. He did not even speak to his wife about how he felt about his diagnosis. Kathy told me that ever since he had that consultation with his doctors, he had become withdrawn and stopped communicating with his family. While Kubler-Ross' five stages are not always followed in order and some stages are never experienced, I still had a feeling that Steven would transition from his "isolation" to another stage during my time with him. I wanted to help him understand that his feelings were perfectly acceptable, even if it meant that his family would get upset with his withdrawn behavior and occasional offensive comments.

Steven barely opened up to me. After four visits I did not think I had made any progress with him. However, during my fifth visit, Steven finally expressed himself. Surrounded by plaques with little pins and medals stuck on them, he spoke at length about his service in the military during WWII and how he had been the commander of a fleet of hundreds. He spoke with pride. He had been one of the pilots who flew over Auschwitz immediately before it was liberated. He told me how brave "his men" were and the tremendous good he was a part of. Steven said one thing that reminded me of Moses' depiction in this midrash. He said, "After all I've been through, I'm going to die from this disease that's turning me into a rotting old man."

I have witnessed this sense from a couple of other senior citizens as well. They all seem to imply how much they would prefer departing this world in a valiant last

hurrah, and not in their hospital beds wearing incontinence pads and doped up on morphine. If only we could all script out our death scenes, I think we might have an easier time accepting death. I suggested to Steven that he gather his family around and tell them stories from his military days, stories they had never heard. Steven had lived an extraordinary life and could not bear to think that he would die an ordinary death. Reliving his days as an air force commander allowed Steven to slowly accept his fate and enjoy time with his family as well.

Steven was not unlike Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He flew over and helped liberate Jews from a "fiery furnace" and lived to tell the story. Steven also escaped grave danger many times, like Isaac on the alter. And like Jacob, Steven wrestled with his own demons, and in the end, he was strengthened by his experiences. Steven was a mighty man who eventually saw death.

7: Deuteronomy Rabbah - Va'yeilech 9:9

ט. דָּבָר אַחֵר מַהוּ 'הֵן' אָמַר רַ' סִימָא הַיּוֹם קוֹבֵל לִפְנֵי
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אָמַר רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אֵינִי זָז וְאֵינִי שׁוֹקֵעַ
וּמֹשֶׁה קַיָּם. דָּבָר אַחֵר רַבָּנָן אָמְרֵי בְּיוֹן שֶׁיָּדַע מֹשֶׁה שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ
לָמוּת בְּאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם מַה עָשָׂה אָמַר רַ' יַנַּאי כָּתַב י"ג תּוֹרוֹת
י"ב לִי"ב שִׁבְטִים וְאַחַת הִנִּיחַ בָּאָרוֹן שֶׁאִם יְבַקֵּשׁ לְזַיֵּף דָּבָר

שֶׁיִּהְיוּ מוֹצְאִים אוֹתָהּ שֶׁבָּאָרוֹן אָמַר מֹשֶׁה מִתּוֹךְ שֶׁאֲנִי עָסוּק
בַּתּוֹרָה שֶׁכָּלָה חַיִּים הַיּוֹם שׁוֹקֵעַ וְהַגְּזֵרָה בְּטֵלָה מַה עָשָׂה
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא רָמַז לַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהָיָה עוֹמֵד וּמִתְקַשֶּׁה כְּנֶגְדּוֹ
אָמַר אֵינִי שׁוֹקֵעַ וּמֹשֶׁה קַיָּם בָּעוֹלָם לְפִיכָךְ אִיּוֹב מְפָרְשָׁהּ
(איוב ל, כה) 'אִם לֹא בָכִיתִי לְקֹשֵׁה יוֹם' שֶׁנִּתְקַשָּׁה הַיּוֹם כְּנֶגְדּוֹ
'הֵן' מַהוּ 'הֵן קָרְבוּ יָמֶיךָ' כְּאָדָם שֶׁאוֹמֵר לַחֲבֵרוֹ פְּלוֹנִי קָבַל
עָלֶיךָ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ (דברים לא, יד) 'קְרָא אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ' אָמַר לִפְנָיו
רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם יִטֹּל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אַרְכִּי שֶׁלִּי וְאֶהְא חַי אָמַר
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא עָשָׂה לוֹ כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה לָךְ מִיָּד
הִשְׁכִּים מֹשֶׁה וְהָלַךְ לְבֵיתוֹ שֶׁל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ נִתְיָרֵא יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְאָמַר
מֹשֶׁה רַבִּי בּוֹא אֵצְלִי יָצְאוּ לָהֲלֹךְ הָלַךְ מֹשֶׁה לִשְׁמֹאלוֹ שֶׁל
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ נִכְנְסוּ לְאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יָרַד עַמּוּד הֶעָנָן וְהִפְסִיק בֵּינֵיהֶם
מִשֶּׁנִּסְתַּלֵּק עַמּוּד הֶעָנָן הָלַךְ מֹשֶׁה אֵצֶל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְאָמַר מַה
אָמַר לְךָ הַדִּבּוּר אָמַר לוֹ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כְּשֶׁהָיָה הַדִּבּוּר נִגְלֶה עָלֶיךָ
יוֹדֵעַ הָיִיתִי מַה מְדַבֵּר עִמְּךָ אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה צָעַק מֹשֶׁה וְאָמַר
מֵאָה מִיתוֹת וְלֹא קִנְאָה אַחַת וְשִׁלְמָה מְפָרְשָׁהּ (שיר ח, ו) 'כִּי
עַזָּה כַמָּוֶת אַהֲבָה קָשָׁה כִשְׁאוֹל קִנְאָה' אַהֲבָה שֶׁאָהַב מֹשֶׁה
לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ וּמַה שֶׁקִּנֵּא מֹשֶׁה בִּיהוֹשֻׁעַ כְּיוֹן שֶׁקִּבֵּל עָלָיו לָמוּת
הִתְחִיל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְפַיְּסוֹ אָמַר לוֹ חַיֶּיךָ בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה
הִנְהַגְתָּ אֶת בָּנַי אַף לֶעָתִיד לָבוֹא עַל יָדֶיךָ אֲנִי מַנְהִיג אוֹתָן
מִנַּיִן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה סג, יא) 'וַיִּזְכֹּר יְמֵי עוֹלָם מֹשֶׁה עַמּוֹ'.

Another interpretation: What is the meaning of "Behold?" Rabbi Simah said, "The day cried out before The Holy One Blessed be God saying, 'Master of the Universe, Am I not to move nor set so long as Moses lives?'" Another interpretation: Rabbis say when Moses learned that he was to die on that day, what did he do? Rabbi Yannai said, "Moses wrote thirteen scrolls. Twelve for the twelve tribes and one to be placed in the ark. Should anyone ever attempt to forge or falsify any part of the Torah text, the original Torah in the ark would be consulted for verification. Moses said, "Through my being engaged with Torah, all of which is life, the day will set and the decree will become nullified." What did God do? He signed to the sun and the

sun stood still, refusing to obey God, saying, "I will not set and leave Moses alive in this world." Therefore Job explains, *Did I not weep for the refusal of the day?* (Job 30:25), meaning that the day did not obey him. What is the meaning of "Behold your days approach?" It is like a man who says to his friend, "So and so has complained against you to the king." **Call Joshua and present yourself in the tent of meeting* (Deuteronomy 31:14). Moses said to God, "Master of the Universe, let Joshua take over my position and I will continue to live." God replied, "Act towards him as he acted towards you." Immediately Moses arose early and went to Joshua's house. Joshua was frightened. Moses said to him, "My teacher, come with me," and they set out to go, Moses walking on Joshua's left.[34] When they entered the tent of meeting, a cloud came down and separated them. When the pillar of cloud disappeared, Moses approached Joshua and asked him, "What was revealed to you (by God)?" Joshua replied, "When the word was revealed to you, did I know what God said to you?" At that moment, Moses shouted, "Better to die one hundred times and not be jealous once!" Solomon expressed this clearly, *For love is as fierce as death, jealousy as cruel as Sheol* (Song of Songs 8:6). This refers to the love Moses had for Joshua as well as the jealousy he had towards Joshua. When Moses resigned himself to death, God began to appease him. God said to Moses, "By your life, in this world you led my children, so too in the time to come I will have you lead them." Where is this stated? For it is said, *Then they remembered the ancient days of Moses who pulled His people out of the water* (Isaiah 63:11).

Moses lived his life as a servant to God and as a leader to the Israelites. He was their mediator, spokesman and lawgiver. One thing he was not was a follower. In this midrash, Moses is seen bargaining with God in order to live just a bit longer. It turns out that when he gets his wish, death would have been a better option than seeing his wish realized. As the saying goes, "Be careful what you wish for." In Deuteronomy 31, Moses is getting ready to die and God summons him and Joshua to the Tent of Meeting. According to the midrash, their roles change at this point in the story. The rabbis have Moses ask God to make Joshua take his place as leader in order for Moses to live. This seems like a fine idea for Moses until he realizes just how awful it would be not to be 'Moses the Leader' any more. Moses plays the part of the follower for a short time, even walking on Joshua's left, a sign of obedience. Moses even also calls Joshua, "my teacher."

[34] The disciple walks on the left of his teacher.

But after they emerge from the Tent of Meeting, Moses cannot come to terms with Joshua having a personal relationship with God and not himself. Moses exclaims in agony, "Better to die one hundred times and not be jealous once!" Moses was losing his control and the rabbis illustrate just how distressing that was for him when faced with death and loss of status. The midrash is surely universal in this regard.

The inclusion of Song of Songs 8:6 seems to have multiple meanings in this midrash. The rabbis claim that the verse is a description of the love Moses had for Joshua, as well as his jealousy. That understanding fits in well with the commentary. However, this verse from the Song is also about death. Though Sheol is often represented as the netherworld in Isaiah, Psalms and Habbakuk, it is also used as a synonym for "death."[35]

In Numbers 27:12-23, Moses is shown in a different light. God instructs Moses what he has to do before he dies, such as ascending a mountain, looking out over the land, etc. What comes next is fascinating in light of the midrash. Moses tells God to appoint a successor to lead Israel after he dies. God chooses Joshua and Moses ordains him as his successor by laying his hands on him before Eleazar the priest. Moses is thus accepting of his loss of power and is even eager to appoint a new leader. It would seem to make more sense for God to appease Moses with the last words of this midrash because of Moses' actions in Numbers than from his bargaining and jealousy expressed in the midrash. However, in the midrash God appeases Moses after his fit of jealousy and immediately after the text states that he has resigned himself to death; in other words, Moses has finally accepted his death and the appointment of Joshua as his

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[35] Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch. *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. p. 213

successor. This teaches that God rewards those who have gone through some type of suffering, transformation, or stages a la Kubler-Ross and have finally accepted God's decree. The rabbis could have rehashed the selfless Moses from Numbers and had God appease him as well. But the rabbis saw a need to make Moses more human, in spite of his larger-than-life persona.

Pastoral Ruminations

In BT Berachot 5b, Rabbi Yochanan pays Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba a bikkur holim visit. Yochanan asks Hiyya, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Hiyyah replies, "Not them nor their reward." Rabbi Yochanan then becomes ill and Rabbi Hanina pays him a visit. Hanina asks Yochana the same question and Yochanan answers Hanina exactly how Hiyya answered him. Finally, Rabbi Elazar becomes ill and Yochanan visits him. The pattern does not change. Finally, Yochanan says, "Give me your hand." Elazar gives him his hand and Yochanan raises him up, or alleviates his suffering. Though this is a much-abbreviated account of the story, a central theme runs through each of these visits. The rabbis believed that suffering led one to Olam Habah, the world to come. This is partly illustrated in the midrash about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob requesting old age, suffering and illness, respectively. This theodicy is very much a part of the Jewish tradition. However, we learn from this story in the Gemara that when these rabbis actually became ill, they did not welcome their suffering or even the reward they believed it would bring them. What did help the sick rabbis was the extended hand of their colleague.

Many times when we enter the room of a sick patient, we rack our brains trying to think of things to say. We might even choose to talk about what Judaism teaches

about illness, suffering, dying and life after death. As rabbis or Jewish caregivers we might want to help someone by teaching them what our Jewish tradition says. However, there are times when we need to assess whether or not that advice will actually help someone in emotional and/or physical pain. Through my own experiences in hospital and hospice chaplaincy, I have found that a caring and empathetic presence is all some patients need. They could not care less about what Judaism teaches, however religious they are. Telling someone that their suffering is good because it will ensure them a place in the world to come could get that caregiver tossed out of the room for good! While Judaism has many pearls of comfort and wisdom to impart about illness and dying, often it is exactly something not Jewish that "raises" them up. A perfect example of this is the story about Rabbi Yochanan from Berachot 5b.

8: Deuteronomy Rabbah - V'zot Habracha 11:8

ח. בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ יְמֵי מֹשֶׁה לִפְטֹר מִן הָעוֹלָם אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא (לא. יד) 'הֵן קָרְבוּ יְמֵיךָ' אָמַר לְפָנָיו רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אַחַר כָּל הַיְגִיעָה הַזּוֹ אַתָּה אוֹמֵר לִי 'הֵן קָרְבוּ יְמֵיךָ' (תהלים קיח. יז) 'לֹא אָמוּת כִּי אֶחְיֶה וַאֲסַפֵּר מַעֲשֵׂי יָהּ' אָמַר לוֹ אִי אַתָּה יָכוֹל (קהלת יב. יג) 'כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם' אָמַר מֹשֶׁה רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם דָּבָר אֶחָד אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ מִמְּךָ לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי שֶׁאִכָּנֵס וְיִבָּקְעוּ כָּל הַשְּׁעָרִים שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם וְתְהוֹמוֹת וְיִרְאוּ שֶׁאֵין זוּלָתֶךָ מִנַּיִן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ד. לט) 'וְיָדַעְתָּ הַיּוֹם וַהֲשֵׁבֹתָ אֶל לְבָבֶךָ וגו' (כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת אֵין עוֹד') אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ 'אֵין עוֹד' אַף אֲנִי אוֹמֵר (שם לד. י—יב) 'וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה וגו' לְכָל הָאוֹתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים וגו' וּלְכֹל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל'.

When the time came for Moses to depart this world, God said to him, **Behold the time is drawing near for you to die** (Deuteronomy 31:14). Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, after all my labor, you say to me, *Behold the time is drawing near for you to die*; *I shall not die but live and proclaim the works of Adonai* (Psalms 118:17). God said, "You cannot prevail. *For this applies to all mankind*" (Ecclesiastes (12:13). Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, one thing I ask of You before I die is that I enter and all the gates of heaven and the depths break open and everyone sees that there is none but You." As it is said, *Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other* (Deuteronomy 4:39). God replied to Moses, "You say 'there is no other,' I also say *Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses whom the Lord singled out face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel* (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).

This midrash is quite similar to midrash #7 above. The opening verse is exactly the same in both, but Moses' response to God differs somewhat. In the previous midrash, Moses says, "Master of the Universe, must I die after all my eyes have seen, all that glory and power?" And then God replies, "Moses, *What mighty man can live and not see death* (Psalms 89:49)?" Here, Moses says, "after all my labor, you say to me, *Behold the time is drawing near for you to die; I shall not die but live and proclaim the works of*

Adonai (Psalms 118:17). God then replies, "You cannot prevail. *For this (decree) applies to all mankind* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). It is interesting that while this midrash is about how no-one can escape death, even Moses, a mortal himself, the verse after Psalm 118:17 says, *The Lord punished me severely, but did not hand me over to death* (Psalm 118:18). This verse harmonizes well with the midrash directly above and the story from Berachot 5b that stresses a certain theodicy about suffering and divine reward. However, the proximity of verse 18 to the one included in this midrash raises the question why Moses would not have just added that verse in his plea before God. If he wanted to continue living, a fitting verse to use as a proof text that he need not die would be one that says exactly what 18 says. The rabbis' goal is all the more clear: to inform us that no one is greater than any other man. We all die and should not only accept this fact but praise God all the while.

The rabbis show Moses acknowledging his death and praising God with the words from Deuteronomy 4:39. Now, when someone is dying, he might make promises to God that he will not be able to keep because he is so desperate. Moses might be doing that here. However, the midrash shows that he indeed keeps his promise by proclaiming the works of Adonai. God, in turn, blesses Moses saying that there was no one else like him. God does not save Moses from death. Even though Moses had a special relationship with God, he was not spared death. The common person may never achieve Moses' holy aura or even think of himself or herself as being like none other, but in the end, he is no different. Thus, it is in our non-likeness that we are all similar.

Pastoral Ruminations

This particular midrash brings to mind people who either tiptoe around telling a patient the truth or do the complete opposite by trying to protect the patient's emotional state through ambiguous language (see Carmi poems 1 and 5). With Moses, God does not dance around the fact that Moses is going to die nor does God tell him that he is any different from anyone else. This might have been a jolt to Moses' ego. For many people in today's world, hearing the straight truth is difficult. I have found, however, that the patient's family find it much harder to hear the truth than the patients themselves. Yet, family members insist on sugarcoating the reality of the situation. Death is still a taboo subject in American society and the less we talk about it, the better. The problem with this thinking is that it keeps us from being honest with each other. Many dying people know they are dying and some are less afraid of dying than their families are.

I visited "Naomi" every other week at the board and care home where she was living after her children moved her there upon turning 100 years old. She was very sharp in her old age, though she had end stage dementia. I never minded answering the same question four times during a visit. Every so often, Naomi gave me life advice based on her experiences. She used to ask if I enjoyed my work, visiting dying people, because she thought it must be so depressing for me. I responded by telling her how much I enjoyed my visits with her and that not everyone I sit with has fears about dying and many have no pain at all, like Naomi herself. I tried, unsuccessfully, to ask her about her own feelings about dying and Naomi either dismissed the questions or changed the subject. I still do not know if she did that intentionally. One time, in the middle of our

conversation, Naomi said, "I wish I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I can't. I am ready to see it, but my kids and the people who work here never say anything about me dying. They just try to take care of me and keep me comfortable. I am in no pain, but how much longer do I have? I only watch television because that's all I can do." Just when I saw an opening to discuss dying with Naomi, she began asking me about my work and family, as if she had forgotten what she just said.

Naomi and I never had the opportunity to have that conversation and she never brought up the tunnel metaphor again. What I understood from that particular visit was that Naomi thought about dying and may have tried talking about it with others, but they would skirt around the issue, trying to settle her. Naomi's children and caretakers were protecting her from the taboo subject of death when, in fact, she was at a time in her life when she wanted to discuss it with those close to her. However, not everyone who is dying is open to talking about the end of life. There are many who would rather do anything else than think about their own mortality. It is a scary thing to think about, but as clergy and caretakers, we ought to start the conversation with people or at least figure out if they would be open to talking about dying. I have found that patients often feel more comfortable confiding in clergy or strangers than with their own family. Though this is a whole issue in itself to understand, it also means that we have an opportunity to help guide people through their fears and questions about death or just to be an active listener.

9: Sifre – Nitzavim, Piska 304

(לא יד) ויאמר ה' אל משה הן קרבו ימיך למות. רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר ברוך דיין האמת אדון כל המעשים שאין עולה ומשוא פנים לפניו וכן הוא אומר [9]אל תאמינו ברע ואל תבטחו באלוף.

משיב משה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבונו של עולם הואיל ואני נפטר בנסים גדול מן העולם הראוי אדם נאמן שיעמוד על ישראל שאצא ידיהם לשלום וכן הוא אומר [9]אשר יצא לפניהם ואשר יבא לפניהם ואומר ויאמר ה' אל משה קח לך את יהושע בן נון ואומר [9]אחות לנו קטנה ושדים אין לה ארבע מלכיות מושלות בהם בישראל ואין בהם חכם ואין בהם נבון בימי אחאב מלך ישראל ובימי יהושפט מלך יהודה היו ישראל נפיצים על ההרים כצאן אשר אין להם רועה [9]ולא תהיה עדת ה' כצאן אשר אין להם רועה סליק פיסקא

God said to Moses 'The time is drawing near for you to die' (Deuteronomy 31:14). Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai said, "Blessed is the true judge, master of all deeds, before Him there is no injustice nor favoritism." And so scripture says, *Trust no friend, rely on no intimate* (Micah 7:5).
Moses replied before God, "Master of the Universe, since I leave this world in great agony, show me a trustworthy man who will rule Israel so I can leave in peace of their hands." As it is said, *Who shall go out before them and come in before them* (Numbers 27:17). And it says further, *And the Lord answered Moses, 'Single out Joshua son of Nun'* (ibid 27:18). And it also says, *We have a little sister, whose breasts are not yet formed* (Song of Songs 8:8). This points to the four kingdoms that ruled over Israel in which they had not one wise or discerning person to lead them. Such was the case in the days of Ahab, king of Israel and in the time of Jehosephat, king of Judah when Israel was scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd. *So that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd* (Numbers 27:17).

This midrash continues the themes from the two previous midrashim which teach that no person, even one as great as Moses, is immortal. After the opening biblical quote from Deuteronomy 31:14, Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai uses a common phrase found in Jewish liturgy surrounding the death of a Jew. He says, "Blessed is the true judge." He continues, "Before Him there is no injustice nor favoritism." God did choose Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and he chose Moses as the only human able to see God face to face, or at least, God's backside. So, perhaps there was a bit of favoritism on God's part, but Moses may not have felt that when he realized that he was going to die. The supporting text given is from Micah 7:5, *Trust no friend, rely on no intimate.* This

seems to be an odd text to connect to what comes before. Maybe the connection is between the words "true" and "trust." However, there are other places in the Tanakh that share this link. It is worth mentioning that Carmi utilizes Micah 7:6 in his poem "There is not a slight chance it will return." There, Carmi writes about an individual's world gone topsy-turvy due to a terminal illness with the undertone of a messianic manifestation. Micah 7:6 says, *For son spurns father, daughter rises up against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law; a man's household are his enemies.* According to Carmi's reading of the text, this section from Micah is about the agony we go through when confronted with illness and death. In fact, Micah 7:1 states, *Woe is me! I am becoming like leavings of a fig harvest, like gleanings when the vintage is over.* In other words, I am becoming like a dying object.

In this next paragraph, Moses asks God to provide him a successor so he can die in peace and feel comfortable in knowing that the Israelites will be taken care of. This is reminiscent of Jacob calling his son Joseph to his deathbed in order to give him his last instructions and transfer his authority to his favorite son. Like Jacob, Moses was not ready to die until he knew he had a trustworthy successor. The midrash includes three biblical verses to show this transition of power. The first two are from the actual account when God appoints Joshua as Moses' successor. But the third verse does not appear to have any connection to Moses and Joshua. However, in midrash Va'yeilech 9:9 above, Song of Songs 8:6 is used as a proof text that describes the relationship between Moses and Joshua. Perhaps, this is why 8:8 is incorporated into the midrash. But, the rabbis could have just used 8:6 instead. Or, perhaps the reason that it is included is because it connects to Numbers 27:17 with the words, "Sheep with no shepherd." These

words are not actually in 8:8, but are used by the rabbis in explaining the verse. The thought is that without Moses, the sheep, or Israel would no longer have a shepherd. Israel would be scattered like the people during the reigns of Ahab and Jehosephat. The image of a "little sister, whose breasts are not yet formed" could allude to this same fear of not having a competent successor, or at least one who is very immature. Joshua, it turns out, was neither incompetent nor immature. It was God after all who chose Joshua to lead the Israelites into Eretz Yisrael. The rabbis are teaching that choosing someone to perpetuate one's legacy after he or she dies is no small matter. The dying want to make sure that they choose someone who is capable, responsible and loyal to their wishes. Joseph and Joshua were exemplary successors to two giants.

Pastoral Ruminations

I met "Lucille" in the hospital one week before she died. Her doctors were amazed that she had survived all of her treatments, and then some. According to her grown children, Lucille only had a couple of months to live. She ended up living just under a year after she was diagnosed with a form of cancer. Also, in the hospital during Lucille's last week, but on another floor and unit, was Lucille's granddaughter "Jessica." Jessica was not sick. On the contrary, she was about to give birth to a child. This baby was going to be Lucille's first great-grandchild. Jessica's parents spent most of their time with Jessica but visited Lucille each day and gave her a full report on the birth process. I remember Jessica's parents telling me that the only thing keeping Lucille alive that year was the thought of meeting her great-grandchild. A few hours after the baby was born, the family took him up to meet his great-grandmother. I was not there but I heard that she was overwhelmed with joy and cried "like a baby" as she kissed him and

caressed his head. Less than two days later, not long after her granddaughter was discharged, Lucille passed away peacefully.

Lucille was not unlike Moses in this midrash. She wanted to die on her terms and that meant after meeting her great-grandson. Though we may not be able to control the time and circumstance of our own deaths, time and again there are stories of people who hold on to life by a thread for one reason or another and then once they've seen what they wanted to see, or heard what they wanted to hear, they let go of that thread. It is not always clear what is keeping someone from letting go. Therefore, in order to peacefully usher dying persons into the next stage, rabbis and caregivers should carefully explore these issues with their patients.

Jewish sacred texts and midrashim in particular are filled with life lessons disguised as biblical exegesis. These valuable lessons, when deciphered, have the potential to help guide people through life's challenges, such as when one faces death. While studying these texts is a time consuming activity, it is nevertheless a useful pursuit if a person has time. Studying for the sake of studying can even be therapeutic. The texts presented above offer suggestions on how to approach the end of life. There is no correct way how to do it, as no one ever knows for sure what he or she will feel when death is right around the corner. Thankfully, the rabbis have provided stories and ideas about this sacred transition that can be very useful for anyone in an end-of-life situation.

CHAPTER 3
RITUALS

"Take care with the end as you do with the beginning." –Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching*

Sogyal Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Lama wrote, "There is no greater gift of charity you can give than helping a person to die well."[36] What does "dying well" mean? For some people, it might mean dying peacefully in their sleep. For others, dying well might mean being surrounded by family and saying goodbyes. And still for other people, dying well might have more to do with knowing that one's affairs are in order and that there is a trustworthy person to carry out certain last wishes. According to Philippe Ariès people have come to desire the sudden death, once so greatly feared, in preference to the expected and ritual death.[37] In other words, dying well translates nowadays into having no thoughts of death prior to dying and more importantly, not knowing that death might strike at any moment. The last thing people want is to be in pain and agony while waiting for death to overtake them. What people desire is the *mors repentina et improvisa*, the death that gives no warning. "He went to sleep last night and just didn't wake up." Ariès writes, "To leave without being aware of it, to forget that death exists- this is the best thing that could happen! This is the great advantage that animals have over men...the great affliction of mankind is the knowledge of death, the fear that results from this knowledge, and the sense of the passage of time. Animals have neither this knowledge nor this sense."[38]

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[36] Rinpoche, Sogyal. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. San Francisco: Clear Point Press, 1993
[37] Ariès, 123
[38] ibid, 313

To die well one occasionally needs assistance in order to make this final transition meaningful. Creating rituals that usher in death can help make dying feel like a sacred journey and not like a lost battle. Almost all humans engage in some types of rituals throughout their lives. Secular or religious rituals, when performed properly can be transformative. Though we engage in rituals to give order to our lives, to deepen our feelings towards one another or our heritage and to transport us from one stage in life to the next, the rituals themselves need not be very complex. Some can be simple and yet personally meaningful. Rituals are thus a means of making our experiences tangible.

Not every Jewish person who is in the process of dying is religious or spiritual. Some probably lead very secular lives. But often when a person is dying, they search for answers and even towards God. When one is face to face with death, anything that provides some comfort or meaning is either grabbed on to or in some cases, completely ignored. Rituals have the ability to bring spirituality into the physical aspect of dying and in the suggestions below they connect or re-connect the person to the Jewish tradition.

In this chapter, I explore how rituals can help a dying person make the transition from life to death. Through my own experience working in hospitals and with hospice, as well as from my research for this thesis, I have developed some suggestions of rituals for Jewish clergy and caregivers to consider when working with the dying.

Not every ritual I suggest is suitable for every dying person. Rituals are not meant to heal the body of physical illness or to prolong life. In fact, some rituals might actually help a person die much sooner, by preparing them or easing the way. The most important thing to consider is the person's current level of discomfort and their desire

to undergo a transformative experience. Rituals are most affective when the body is freed from pain and the person understands what she is about to experience.

But first, it is important to review the rituals and guides that the Jewish tradition offers the dying.

Jewish End-of-Life Rituals

Anderson writes, "All too often, traditional religious rituals fail to provide satisfying closure, either because clergy are not always available to assist in these rites or the rites themselves have lost significance for the participants."[39] Judaism knows how to take care of the dead and how to comfort the bereaved very well. There are *sugyot* on the topic of burial (in BT Sanhedrin) as well as various laws on burial and mourning found in the Shulchan Aruch.[40] "From the moment we learn of a death, through the following days, weeks, months, and years, the laws of mourning and ritual are well-defined. We are told what to do, what to say (such as the mourner's *Kaddish*) and when to say it. The system of laws and customs is complex, and it is complete."[41]

Although most Reform Jews do not undergo a *tahara* (ritual washing of the deceased), and not all Reform Jews mourn a loved one in accordance with the *halakhah*

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[39] Anderson, p. xx

[40] Lit. "the prepared table". Jewish law code written by Joseph Caro, similar in form to the *Arba'ah Turim* of Jacob Asher but more concise and without stating any sources. The book is in fact a halakhic synopsis of Caro's previous commentary on the *Turim*, the *Beit Yosef*. It is divided into the same four major sections as the former: *Orah Hayyim*, concerning the daily commandments, Sabbaths, and the festivals; *Yoreh De'ah*, dealing with various subjects, such as dietary laws, interest, purity, and mourning; *Even ha-Ezer*, on marriage, divorce, and related topics; and *Hoshen Mishpat*, dealing with civil and criminal law. In his decisions Caro relied on Isaac Alfasi, Maimonides, and Asher Jehiel, following any two in cases of disagreement. The book was first printed in Venice in 1565 and notwithstanding serious objections to the work, ultimately became accepted as the code of Jewish law par excellence after amendments had been added by Moses Isserles and other commentaries of later halakhic authorities had been written on it. (Encyclopedia Judaica, 2007)

[41] Warshaw, Susan. "The End of Life: What Judaism Teaches Us About How To Die." Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2007. p. 69

of *shiva*, *shloshim* and *yahrtzeit*, most Reform Jews know that there are end-of-life customs in the Jewish tradition. These customs and rituals, however, fail to help a person die. The reason for this is that Judaism does not focus much attention on ushering people into the unknown. It seems that Judaism is much more concerned with the living. After all, to toast amongst Jews is to say, *l'chaim*, to life!

There are, to be fair, short confessional ceremonies (*viddui*) in all of the different rabbis' manuals. These services are centered on liturgy and a specific theology that teaches how God will forgive any person before she dies as long as they admit their transgressions and ask for forgiveness. Unfortunately, staid and problematic liturgy (to some but not all Jews) is one of the only options to give dying people.

Alison Jordan and Rabbi Stuart Kelman write, "those (practices associated with the end of life) which exist today are not widely known or observed in modern American Jewish practice. Although the subject of death is of fundamental theological interest, and despite the inevitable confrontation of every human being with this highly charged emotional, and spiritual passage, there is little Jewish structure to support us during this liminal period."[42]

In her rabbinic thesis, Susan Warshaw initially thought about creating rituals to be used when patients learn of the diagnosis for a life-threatening illness. However, when she mentioned this to her rabbis, teachers, and families of those with a life-threatening illness, "they all reacted with horror and disbelief."[43] To them, this was not a Jewish way to approach illness and death, since Jews tend to hope for the best.

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[42] Jordan, Alison and Stuart Kelman. "The Vidui: Jewish Relational Care for the Final Moments of Life," in *Jewish Relational Care A-Z: We Are Our Other's Keeper*. Ed. Jack Bloom. New York: The Hayworth Press, 2006. p. 375

[43] Warshaw, 69

Recognizing the reality of one's mortality, they suggested, would do more harm than good. Prayers, either personal or fixed, were thought to be most useful and appreciated. The fact that Judaism does not have many end-of-life rituals does not necessarily mean that rituals ushering in death are antithetical to Jewish beliefs. Judaism does not shy away from death. The conclusion to almost every service in the Reform movement includes the recitation of a list of deceased congregants and the mourner's kaddish. Assisting people in preparing for dying, I would argue, is a very Jewish concept.

Maavar Yabbok

In the Medieval period there were manuals created for the sick and dying that prescribed halakhah and customs to guide people through the passage from life to death. Unlike today, there was a Jewish way to die. Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena, Mantua wrote *Maavar Yabbok* (the crossing of the Jabbok), the most famous of these manuals in 1626 and it was used frequently until 1800. He was an Italian kabbalist who had strong ties to the city of Tzfat in northern Israel. Due to its size, a smaller edition, *Kitzur Maavar Yabbok*, was published after the original. This work was meant to facilitate the passage of the dying person's soul from this world to the next. It includes collections of Jewish readings, laws, and customs related to helping the sick and supporting those on their death bed.

The title *Maavar Yabbok* is a literary illusion to Genesis 32:23 where Jacob struggles with a divine being at the *Yabbok* river near *Penuel*. During this wrestling match Jacob's hip is dislocated and he receives a new name, *Yisrael*. This river took on a new significance in Kabbalistic literature. It was taught that after death, the soul would

cross over the river towards the *tsror ha-chayim*, the eternal bond of life.[44] This phrase is also part of *El Malei Rachamim*, the one prayer recited during a funeral that names the deceased.

The larger version of the manual was originally intended for individual Jews and their caregivers prior to and following death. In addition, it was also intended to be used by the members of a *chevra kaddish*, or Jewish burial society.[45] Berechiah covered a wide range of topics, but due to his extensive use of sacred textual sources, only people well versed in these texts would benefit from them. This is mainly the case with the non-liturgical sections. As for the liturgical sections, the common person would be able to utilize them in a life-ending situation. This is most evident from Berechiah's inclusion of vowels in the liturgical sections. He also included detailed directions to accompany each ritual.[46]

Berechiah believed that it was important for a dying person to be surrounded by other people at the time of death. We see this model in the biblical narrative of Jacob as his sons gathered around his bedside. In the rabbinic period as well, students often surrounded their dying rabbis. In Maavar Yabbok, a full minyan (ten people) must be present in the room of a dying person. A minyan is usually associated with praying. For Berechiah, reciting verses from scripture in the presence of a dying person was prayer.

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[44] Goldberg, Silvie Anne. *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Sixteenth through Nineteenth Century Prague.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966. p. 81

[45] ibid, 103

[46] Goldberg, 103

Viddui

As we learned from texts such as the midrashim focused on Moses' death, the decree of death can not be altered. Though no person can escape death, they can repent before they die by reciting a specific prayer of confession called the *viddui.* This is the one deathbed ritual in the Jewish traditional sources. There are two different forms of *viddui.* There is the communal *viddui* that is said on Yom Kippur and there is the bedside *viddui* that is said by a dying individual or someone on her behalf that serves as a final confession before death. Each *viddui* is distinct from one another, yet in *Maavar Yabbok,* Berechiah conflates the two by moving the communal *viddui* text to the realm of the deathbed.

The Yom Kippur *viddui* has its origins in Leviticus 16:21 where Aaron places his hands on the head of a live goat and confesses all of the Israelites' sins. The goat is then sent off into the wilderness of Azazel. The goat serves as a metaphor for the people's transgressions. Just as the goat is sent away, so too are the many transgressions sent out of the community. The goat serves another function as well – it actually becomes the bearer of everyone's transgressions. The goat physically carries the sins away. Nowadays, this *viddui* is incorporated into the Amidah on Yom Kippur. It is one of the most recognizable parts of High Holyday liturgy.

The deathbed *viddui* is quite different. It is recited in the first person singular as opposed to the first person plural. This confession is intended to be a private moment between the person dying and God. The origins of this form of the *viddui* are in the Mishnah (M. Sanhedrin 6:2). The rabbis wrote about people convicted of committing capital crimes for which the death penalty was the punishment. Before a man was put

to death, he was commanded to confess his sins, even if he believed he was not guilty. The rabbis explain that all who confess their sins, regardless of whether they actually committed the crime, will have a share in the world to come. The Mishnah does not give a specific confessional formula, but it does state that if a person does not know how to confess, he should at least say, "May my death be atonement for my sins."

This personalized confessional *viddui* evolved into a fixed prayer over a span of one thousand years. Rabbi Moses b. Nahman[47] wrote a version of this prayer in his 13th century work, *Torat ha-Adam*. This version is still used to this day. *Torat ha-Adam* is a homiletic-exegetical writing that deals with the laws surrounding mourning rites and burial customs. Joseph Caro, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, wrote a version as well (in Yoreh Deah 338:1). Since the time of death is virtually impossible to predict, and death may come at any time, the Shulchan Aruch teaches a readiness that anyone who is close to death should regularly recite the *viddui*. The text reminds us (and tries to comfort us as well) that many times people say the *viddui* and do not die just as many people die without ever saying the *viddui* (Yoreh Deah 338:1). This strategy for confessing one's transgressions before dying is also illustrated in the Talmud. In tractate Shabbat 153a, the rabbis write,

> We learned elsewhere, R. Eliezer said: 'Repent one day before your death.' His disciples asked him, 'How does one know on what day he will die?' 'Then all the more reason that he repent today,' he replied, 'lest he die tomorrow.'..R. Johanan b. Zakkai said: 'This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace. The fools went about their work, saying, 'can there be a banquet without preparations?' Suddenly the king desired the presence of his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. 'Those who adorned

[47] a/k/a Nahmanides, RaMBaN (1194-1270). He was a Spanish rabbi, Talmudic scholar, kabbalist, poet, physician, biblical exegete, and philosopher.

> themselves for the banquet, let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.'

A contemporary version of the *viddui* is found in the Conservative Rabbi's manual. It is similar to the version found at the end of the section on death in *Torah ha-Adam*. It reads:

> My God and God of my ancestors, accept my prayer. Do not turn away. Forgive me for all the times I may have disappointed You. I am aware of the wrongs I have committed. May my pain and suffering serve as atonement. Forgive my shortcomings, for against You have I sinned. May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of my ancestors, that I live now with a clear conscience and in accordance with Your will. Send a *refuah sheleima*, a complete healing, to me and to all who suffer. My life and death are in Your hands, Adonai my God. May it be Your will to heal me.[48]

Since the *viddui* has been the central deathbed ritual for almost two thousand years, it naturally carries a lot of weight. There is both a positive and negative aspect to this for the dying patient and for the clergy. On the one hand, having only one known ritual makes life easier for the rabbi who needs to provide the patient with the text. The patient, on the other hand can know ahead of time what they will one day say, which might be comforting. On the other hand, having only one ritual is very limiting to both parties. Not every rabbi and/or dying person accepts the theology of the *viddui*. Saying it in that case can be very uncomfortable.

The *viddui* portrays God as the ultimate judge. This is another quality held in common between the deathbed *viddui* and the Yom Kippur *viddui*. Warshaw suggests that one's destiny is decided, therefore, upon the deathbed.[49] Sincere confession thus alters God's judgment and invokes God's mercy. While part of the *viddui* is about

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[48] Rank, Perry R., and Gordon M. Freeman, eds. *[Moreh derekh] the Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi's Manual.* New York, N.Y: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1998. Pp. D23-24

[49] Warshaw, 83

confession, the last part, which includes the recitation of the *Shema*, is about affirming the oneness and complete faith in God. This dual feature of the *viddui* can make the recitation very powerful for some Jews. For others, however, there might not be any truth in the *viddui*. Some Jews do not believe in God yet still consider themselves Jewish. Others do not believe in Divine Providence, that God has any role in the lives of humans. Many dying patients as well as their families have difficulty accepting the words of the *viddui*.

In my chaplaincy work, I have given a copy of the *viddui* for a dying patient to read and have read it on their behalf as well. Before introducing the *viddui*, I make sure that the patient and family do not object to its usage. Though I recognize that the *viddui* is not for everyone and that there ought to be plenty more end-of-life rituals, the *viddui* is nonetheless an important and sacred text. It is also mandated by halakhah to be recited by a *goses* (one who is very near death).

The *viddui* has the potential to be spiritual for many Jews, even those Jews who do not consider themselves religious. Confessing is a part of *teshuva*, a meaningful reflection of one's past deeds and the seeking of forgiveness for any wrongdoings. Looking inward and making peace with oneself can be a holy process and the seeking of forgiveness before dying and being at peace with oneself naturally makes the dying process easier. The final stage of Kübler-Ross' five-stage theory is acceptance. While not all dying people are able to reach this stage, it is nevertheless a goal one should try to achieve.

Today, there are many versions of the *viddui*. It should be up to the clergy to figure out which version ought to be used. In addition, the rabbi should know whether

to use the Hebrew or a translated text. Since the *viddui* is the primary end-of-life text, dismissing its usage from the start would be a mistake. Making *teshuva* and coming to grips with one's own mortality are important steps in ensuring a peaceful transition from life to death. Each time I have used the *viddui*, it has had a profound impact on everyone in the room. As we learned from the midrashim and biblical account of Jacob's death narrative, a life review and recitation of the shema were essential components to his passage. Even if one takes issues with the theology of the *viddui*, simply knowing that it is an ancient and sacred text, might still allow its recitation to bring someone meaning and a feeling of wholeness.

Psalms

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub[50] writes, "The Book of Psalms is a rich treasury of prayer and reflection for many occasions and situations. Over the centuries, Jews and people of all faiths have derived comfort, guidance, reassurance, and catharsis from its 150 chapters, which reflect a wide range of experience and expression- despair and delight, horror and hope, fatigue and faith, rejection and renewal."[51] There are many Reform Jews, however, who do not think about reading Psalms in times of crisis. Everyone knows Psalms are important, so why do people resist? Perhaps they have not learned how the recitation of specific Psalms can be a source of comfort in trying times. I recall one of my hospital patients who was given less than a month to live after being

[50] Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, LCSW serves as Rabbinic Director of the *Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS)*, where his major responsibilities are with the *New York Jewish Healing Center* and the *National Center for Jewish Healing (NCJH)*. He offers Jewish spiritual counseling and leads Jewish spiritual support groups for Jews confronting illness, trauma, and loss, as well as training seminars for rabbis and health care professionals, and has written and lectured widely on the use of traditional texts and practices for Jewish spiritual healing.

[51] Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y., ed. *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength & Solace in Psalms.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1994. p. 17

denied a liver transplant. I asked her how she was coping with this realization, that death may come any day. She pointed over to the chair in the corner of the room. On it sat a book containing all of the Hebrew Psalms in translation. She said, "I read the Psalms everyday. I read them to my father when he was dying and now I read them to myself."

Weintraub's book focuses on ten psalms[52] identified by the Hasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov[53] to be especially helpful as healing psalms. In this book, each chapter is dedicated to one of the ten psalms with commentary from rabbis within the various Jewish denominations. Rabbi Weintraub comments on how to get the most use out of reciting Psalms, "Rabbi Nachman taught that the Psalms can have minimal value in mere recitation - one must identify with their contents in a deep and meaningful way, and seek to apply the words to oneself, to find oneself in every psalm."[54] The ten psalms are designated as a unit, called *Tikkun HaKlali*, the Complete Remedy. As a rabbi or caregiver, sharing these psalms with a dying patient may prove to be healing for him or her. Though one may not resonate with each of the ten psalms the first time around, repeating them several times might connect the patient to the healing value of the words. The patient may only connect to one of the psalms and that is perfectly fine. The key is to help the person make the psalm his or her own. Weintraub suggests that should none of the *Tikkun HaKlali* psalms provide any comfort, then perhaps one should look at some other psalms, particularly, Psalms 3, 6, 16, 23 27, 30, 31, 40, 69, 86, 90, 91, 116, 121, 130 and 139.

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[52] Psalms 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 106, 137, and 150

[53] Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810). He was the great-grandson of the founder of Hasidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov.

[54] Weintraub, 19

Preparing for any Ritual

All rituals take preparation. A ten-year-old boy, for example, does not walk up to the bima on a Saturday morning and chant torah before giving a speech thanking his rabbi for all his help in becoming a bar mitzvah. Rather, the boy must wait until he is thirteen and in most communities he is not ready to become a bar mitzvah until after a year of studying and training. The same goes for rituals that usher a person from life into the unknown, even when the rituals are brand new and not thousands of years old.

Here are a few steps of preparation to keep in mind before performing any ritual. These are based on Megory Anderson's steps towards creating a space conducive for rituals.

Firstly, create a space that contains the sacredness any ritual ought to have. The room should feel private, special, holy and most of all it should feel comfortable. My teacher Rabbi Richard Levy once told me that holiness is often felt more powerfully in a hospital room than in a synagogue.[55] The reason behind this is that patients are sometimes more open to prayer than someone who frequents a congregation.

The room should feel inviting. Whether the ritual takes place in a home or a hospital room, all clutter and distracting possessions should be removed. Assuming the patient is bedbound, fresh sheets can make a huge difference in the comfort of the person. A room can also be made inviting by lighting candles, or even opening the window shades to let some sunlight in. The space around someone dying is crucial. It can either feel comforting or it can feel chaotic or even closter-phobic. What might feel sacred and comfortable to one person might not feel the same way by another.

[55] From a class discussion in May 2008.

Therefore, it is important to explain to the person dying the reasons for the steps being taken to transform her room. This may reduce some resistance to change. On the other hand, some people feel more comfortable with their television sets turned on, their drapes closed, and their cell phones on and within reach.

Anderson calls special attention to the fact that "Dying persons usually have very little say in what is going on around them. They become mostly objects to be dealt with."[56] This is certainly the case in hospitals where doctors come in and out of the room, often with teams of residents in tow; and nurses (while many are gentle) still poke and prod all day long. Clergy and caregivers should always be aware of the patient's diminished role in the hospital and try hard to make sure the patient's autonomy is not completely destroyed. In many cases this is all they have left. If a person is unconscious, for example, one should speak as if he were able to hear and understand. It is crucial to ask the patient's permission before performing any ritual or reciting any prayer.

Secondly, begin with a few moments of silence. Ask the participants to ready themselves emotionally and spiritually for what they are about to do. Asking God to watch over the participants helps bring a sense of *kedusha*, or holiness into the room. As the people close their eyes and meditate, have them focus on their breathing. This may help them relax and ease any anxiety they might have. I propose that a Shabbat-like feel be created. In other words, participants would do well to leave the outside world outside so they can completely focus on the present.

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[56] Anderson, 18

Thirdly, just as one informs the person dying of all the steps being taken to transform her room into a sanctuary-like space, beginning the ritual with a statement of intent or prayer or even a song helps set the mood and reminds people what they are about to experience and why.

After the ritual is performed, acknowledgment of its completion and thanks are in order. The end does not mean that the outside world should make its way back inside. The end might be a good time for a period of silence and reflection before separating from the sacred space to the common space.

Rituals for Dying

What kinds of rituals are appropriate for a person dying to participate in? To answer this question, the ritual leader must find out a few things. For instance, how open is the patient to talking about dying? How comfortable does the patient feel with Jewish prayers and texts? Does the patient want to be alone or accompanied by loved ones? Is the person afraid to die? Is he hesitant to try something so foreign? Are there unresolved issues that are blocking death from taking over the patient?

According to Anderson, there are three different types of rituals, including: Letting-go rituals, rituals for unresolved issues such as anger, remorse or sadness, and purification rituals.[57] To this catalogue, I would add learning rituals. These would include reading poems and other texts with patients and discussing their impact with them. As seen from the previous two chapters, one can learn a lot about dying and how to die from poetry and some of Judaism's sacred literature.

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[57] ibid, 36

Megory Anderson writes, "Just as it is possible to create your own ceremonies at the time of marriage and birth, it is equally possible to create rituals at the time of death."[58] Dying is as sacred a transition as any other life cycle moment; and it may be the most sacred transition of all. Before my son was born, my wife and I created a "birth plan" to give to our doctor and team of nurses. It entailed how we wanted to experience the birth process from pain management to intervention to music preferences. The same can be done for a death. Though a "death plan" has a disturbing ring to it, the idea, when taken seriously, can help make the dying experience a sacred journey.

Washing Ritual (*Taharat ha-Hayyim*)

While Jews used to die at home surrounded by loved ones, most people today die in hospitals. Caring for the dying has been handed over to the healthcare industry professionals. There is a lot of fear surrounding death as if it is contagious. In Judaism, for instance, dead bodies are considered ritually "impure." Touching a dying body might be the last thing people want to do, but is often the most needed sensation. Just as a newborn is washed when he enters this world, so should we leave this world cleansed and pure through the religious act of washing, akin to a *tahara*. According to Anderson, "when a person enters the liminal space of the dying, there is a desire to be pure and clean, physically, emotionally, and spiritually."[59] To care for our loved ones and treat them with reverence and to see their bodies as holy is being true to Jewish values. Jewish tradition has a tremendous amount of wisdom about dealing with death and

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[58] ibid, 203

[59] Warshaw, 36-37

mourning, and it would be a shame not to borrow some of that wisdom and apply it to the actively dying.

After death, for instance, many Jews undergo a ritual cleansing and purification process called a *tahara*. A *tahara* is likened to a 3-act play: cleansing, purification and dressing. In the cleansing stage, one removes anything extraneous from the body such as bandages. The body is then washed twice. First the practical washing, in warm water: the fragile skin is cleansed with washcloths, the ears swabbed with Q-tips, the hair combed, the toenails and fingernails cleaned. At this point the body is treated almost as if it were still alive, as if it could feel warm water, only the part being washed is uncovered to view. Then the sheet is removed for the ritual washing. Naked, the body is rinsed with floods of cold water. In the purification stage, a cascade of 24 quarts of water is poured in a continuous flow. It's like washing away the suffering, or the last stage of their life.

Once the body is washed according to strict rules, it is dressed according to ritual law, in white linen shrouds called *tachrichim*. A *chevra kadisha*, or holy society (a volunteer group of trained Jewish men and women) performs this mitzvah. Such "societies" exist in almost all communities where Jews have a presence. In fact, on many occasions when Jewish communities sprung up in a specific location, the first organization to be formed was the *chevra kadisha*, even before a synagogue or *beit midrash*, a house of study.

Tahara, tachrichim, and *chevra kadisha*, have not typically been part of Reform practice. But just as in recent decades the Reform Movement has readopted and

reinterpreted other traditional Jewish rituals, an increasing number of Reform congregations are turning their attention to the rites surrounding death and burial. It is my hope that a washing ritual similar to a *tahara* will be used for Jews who are near death. A *tahara* is an expression of reverence for the dead. It is my belief that reverence for the dying should also be ritualized. Not only does washing the body feel refreshing for the patient, but adding a sense of *kedusha* to the act can make it transforming too. If the body is prepared, both physically and spiritually, the person will be more likely to let go in a peaceful way. Being clean on the outside is important for feeling clean on the inside.[60] This "*tahara*" for the dying is not meant to supplant the traditional *tahara*, but rather to complement it by creating bookends around the dying experience.

A *tahara* for the dying (or living) will undoubtedly be seen by many Jews across the denominations as a radical transformation of an ancient ritual and perhaps, "un-Jewish." In spite of this, Judaism is an ever-changing tradition that has been adapting to the needs of its adherents for thousands of years. One could certainly argue that change is not beneficial and in fact, the newer something is, the less inherent holiness it has. However, just because a tradition is thousands of years old does not mean that it is "tapped out" of rituals. There is a need to honor dying people and bring sanctity into their lives. There is no reason why Jews should revere the dead more than the dying. This new ritual based on the structure and liturgy of a traditional *tahara* attempts to fill a void within Judaism.

Modesty must be a top concern for anyone involved in performing this cleansing ritual for the dying. For patients who are alert, the ritual should be explained to them

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[60] Anderson, 134

and their permission should be sought. If a patient is comatose, the same explanation and permission should be sought from the patient's family. While ideally, members of a *chevra kadisha* would perform this new ritual, it would benefit clergy to perform it with the help of the patient's family and caregiver. While many of us do not mind exposing our bodies to our doctors and nurses, we might be hesitant to do so in front of our rabbis and family. Therefore, should a patient want a ritual washing to help usher her into the next world, but is uncomfortable with her brother and son performing the cleaning, other anonymous Jews in the community who have experience in this ritual should be gathered together. Similar to the traditional *tahara*, men should clean men and women should clean women.

The following ritual, *taharat ha-hayyim*, the purification of the living, is based on the procedures for a traditional *tahara*.

Before commencing, attention should be directed to the "Preparing for any Ritual" section a few paragraphs above.

The ritual leaders say:

> O God, God of our ancestors, be with us now as we perform a *taharat ha-hayyim* on _____. We ask that you guide our hands as we aim to comfort _____'s soul and take care of his/her body. This time in _____'s life is one of fragility, and mystery. We seek your presence and your *sukkat shalom*, shelter of peace.

Begin by washing the head and working downward, ending with the feet. Continuously pour warm water over the scalp, massaging it lightly. Recite Song of Songs 5:11,

> רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז קְוֻצּוֹתָיו תַּלְתַּלִּים שְׁחֹרוֹת כָּעוֹרֵב

> *His/her head is finest gold, his/her locks are curled and black as a raven.* (Or Song of Songs 6:5b), *Your hair is like a flock of goats, streaming down from Gilead.*

Gently wash the face with a soft washcloth, beginning with the forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, ears, mouth, chin and neck. Recite Song of Songs 5:12-13, 16,

עֵינָיו כְּיוֹנִים עַל־אֲפִיקֵי מָיִם רְחֲצוֹת בֶּחָלָב יֹשְׁבוֹת עַל־מִלֵּאת
לְחָיָו כַּעֲרוּגַת הַבֹּשֶׂם מִגְדְּלוֹת מֶרְקָחִים שִׂפְתוֹתָיו שׁוֹשַׁנִּים נֹטְפוֹת מוֹר עֹבֵר
חִכּוֹ מַמְתַקִּים וְכֻלּוֹ מַחֲמַדִּים

His/her eyes are like doves by watercourses, bathed in milk, set by a brimming pool. His/her cheeks are like beds of spices, banks of perfume. His/her lips are like lilies; they drip flowing myrrh. His/her mouth is delicious and all of him/her is delightful.

(Or Song of Songs 4:3-4)

כְּחוּט הַשָּׁנִי שִׂפְתוֹתַיִךְ וּמִדְבָּרֵיךְ נָאוֶה כְּפֶלַח הָרִמּוֹן רַקָּתֵךְ מִבַּעַד לְצַמָּתֵךְ: כְּמִגְדַּל דָּוִיד
צַוָּארֵךְ בָּנוּי לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת אֶלֶף הַמָּגֵן תָּלוּי עָלָיו כֹּל שִׁלְטֵי הַגִּבּוֹרִים

Your lips are like a crimson thread, your mouth is lovely. Your brow behind your veil gleams like a pomegranate split open. Your neck is like the Tower of David, built to hold weapons hung with a thousand shields- all the quivers of warriors.

Wash the arms and hands. Clean underneath the arms and also the fingernails. Recite Song of Songs 5:14a,

יָדָיו גְּלִילֵי זָהָב מְמֻלָּאִים בַּתַּרְשִׁישׁ

His/her hands are rods of gold, studded with beryl.

Cover the arms and wash the torso. Recite Song of Songs 5:14b,

מֵעָיו עֶשֶׁת שֵׁן מְעֻלָּפֶת סַפִּירִים

His/her belly a tablet of ivory, adorned with sapphires.

Cover the torso and wash the legs and feet. Remind the person that the feet represent our journey. They take us where we need to go. Recite Song of Songs 5:15,

שׁוֹקָיו עַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מְיֻסָּדִים עַל־אַדְנֵי־פָז מַרְאֵהוּ כַּלְּבָנוֹן בָּחוּר כָּאֲרָזִים

His/her legs are like marble pillars set in sockets of fine gold. He/she is majestic as Lebanon, stately as the cedars.

As each body part is gently dried with a soft towel, recite Song of Songs 4:7,

כֻּלָּךְ יָפָה רַעְיָתִי וּמוּם אֵין בָּךְ

Every part of you is fair...there is no blemish in you.

The person(s) washing may recite the quotes from Song of Songs, or another member of the *taharat ha-hayyim* team who is in the background may recite the verses while observing the ritual. The verses may be said in the original Hebrew or in the vernacular of the person dying. These Hebrew verses are not written in gender-neutral language. It might be necessary to alter the Hebrew depending on whom it is being said for.

When the ritual washing is completed, the leaders say in unison, "*tahor hu/tahora hee*" (he/she is pure) three times.

The person is then dressed in fresh clean attire of his/her choice. Before completion, the team gathers around the person and asks forgiveness for any errors of omission and tells the person that they have done everything in their power to perform the mitzvah to the best of their abilities. They might say, "We ask forgiveness from you if we did not treat you respectfully, but we did as is our custom. May you feel refreshed, pure and in the presence of God.

<u>The Liturgy</u>

As this is a brand new ritual performed for a person at the end of his of her life, each word spoken should be deliberate and meaningful. As with a traditional *tahara*, conversation pertaining to other matters amongst the leaders should not take place. The only exception would be if a leader must ask another leader a question about the

process, or if the patient initiates conversation with any of the leaders. But, it should be explained from the onset that the ritual of *taharat ha-hayyim* is no different than tefillah or any other ritualized life-cycle experience. Just as the rabbi and cantor do not converse with one another on the bima during Kol Nidre about the recent Lakers game, so too should the *taharat ha-hayyim* leaders abstain from such everyday discourse.

Today, as more Reform communities are forming *chevrei kadisha*, they are also modifying the traditional liturgy used while performing *tahara*. For instance, some groups might prefer a more egalitarian liturgy. The verses I chose to be used all come from Song of Songs. Some of these verses are used in a *tahara* as well, but it just depends on the *chevre kadisha*. I find that there is a tenderness in the selected lines. I also think that poetry is especially nice to use since it does not always spell everything out. It often leaves something up to interpretation or experience.

The selected verses are unique in the sense that they describe the various body parts through metaphors connected to the Land of Israel. This is another way that the ritual serves as a bookend with the traditional *tahara*. Just before closing the pine box, the *chevrei kadisha* place dirt from Israel over the body's eyes and heart and sometimes even some extra in the casket.

Letting-go Ritual (*Tashlich*)

One of the most tangible Jewish rituals is *tashlich*, or casting away. It involves symbolically casting off the sins of the previous year by tossing pieces of bread into a body of flowing water. Just as the water carries away the bits of bread, so too are sins symbolically carried away. In this way the participant hopes to start the New Year with a clean slate. Traditionally, while people observe this ritual they recite Micah 7:18-20.

מִי־אֵל כָּמוֹךָ נֹשֵׂא עָוֹן וְעֹבֵר עַל־פֶּשַׁע לִשְׁאֵרִית נַחֲלָתוֹ לֹא־הֶחֱזִיק לָעַד אַפּוֹ כִּי־חָפֵץ חֶסֶד
הוּא: יָשׁוּב יְרַחֲמֵנוּ יִכְבֹּשׁ עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ וְתַשְׁלִיךְ בִּמְצֻלוֹת יָם כָּל־חַטֹּאתָם: תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב
חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ מִימֵי קֶדֶם

Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because He loves graciousness! He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

Megory Anderson writes, "Anger is a physical emotion and rituals releasing anger are for the most part physical rituals...Sometimes it involves destroying objects."[61] My hospice chaplain supervisor, Cantor Susan Caro, says occasionally, "People die the way they lived." In other words, if a man is rude his whole life, then he is most likely not going to be a sweetheart when he dies. If someone is angry, then, going by this reasoning, he will also be angry as he dies. I think this tends to be true. However, there are people who want to change their habits and die peacefully. Some people bottle many things up inside them during their lifetimes that by the time they are close to death, releasing those issues seems almost impossible.

For people who have a lot of anger stored up inside them, like Jacob who suffered his whole life, one approach is to ask them, "Do you want to die with that anger still inside you?" If they want to rid themselves of it, then there ought to be a ritual helping them let go. Since a *goses* is not likely to take a walk to the nearby pond or ocean, a *tashlich*-like ritual can be brought to his or her bedside.

In her book, *Sacred Dying*, Megory Anderson describes a situation where she performed a letting-go ritual. Instead of breadcrumbs, she uses a thin blanket. Anderson

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[61] Anderson, 107

tells one elderly man, "This blanket is containing sixty years worth of anger and pain." Then she lays the blanket over the person and asks how it feels. He does not like it. He feels suffocated. Next, she says, "you have lived your whole life under the blanket and now its time to tear it up. Try to give a name to each tear. It can be done silently too." The man begins tearing the blanket into shreds, each tear representing a pain from his life. Afterwards he is relieved from years of carrying around anger he had for various reasons, some he couldn't even remember. This tearing can help a person let go of things they held so closely for many years.

To make this ritual feel "Jewish," there ought to be a connection made to tashlich. The ritual leader can explain what tashlich is about (the casting away of a year's worth of transgressions), and then say that this bedside ritual will help cast away years of pent up feelings which will result in a peaceful passing. The Micah text does not fit well with this new ritual; so another text should be used to add more of a sense of *kedusha*, holiness to the ritual. Perhaps before tearing a blanket or even pieces of paper, the dying person can recite Leviticus 19:18,

לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטֹּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countryman. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Or Psalms 37:8,

הֶרֶף מֵאַף וַעֲזֹב חֵמָה אַל־תִּתְחַר אַךְ־לְהָרַע

Give up anger, abandon fury, do not be vexed; it can only do harm.

Or Psalms 145:8,

חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם יְהוָה אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וּגְדָל־חָסֶד

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

This *tashlich* ritual can be a meaningful ceremony for some people to help heal the pain of letting go, while also offering reconciliation and peace; ideal prerequisites for a peaceful and sacred death. The accomplished Jewish poet, Linda Pastan, wrote *Go Gentle,* a beautiful poem that may also be used in this letting-go ritual.

> Remember when you taught me how to swim?
> Let go, you said,
> The lake will hold you up.
> I long to say, Father let go
> And death will hold you up.

Other Ritual Activities

There are countless rituals one can perform to help peacefully transition from life to death. As long as there is intent, structure, cooperation and some type of text or liturgy, a dying person and his or her loved ones will be transformed in one way or another.

The Hebrew Bible and the various *siddurim* (prayer books) are filled with uplifting and contemplative verses and passages that could serve to help a dying person. Stated above, simply reading the Psalms, in no particular order has and will continue to bring comfort to many people. I have selected a few more passages from both the bible and siddur that might serve the same purpose. These passages may either be read quietly by the patient or out loud to the patient. Some of the passages that are short may also be more effective if they are made into a chant, or mantra. Saying any word produces a physical vibration. And over time, if the word or words are

repeated, then they may come to have meanings associated with the effect of saying that vibration. Repeating phrases may also allow someone to uncover a hidden meaning that is not so obvious from the start.

Below are three examples from sacred texts and liturgy that I have shared with some of my own patients.

> *Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*
> *I have called you by name and you are mine.*
> *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*
> *And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*
> *When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*
> *And the flames shall not consume you.*
> *Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored,*
> *And I love you.* (Isaiah 43:1b-2, 4)

To be used as a mantra:

כִּי־אֵשֵׁב בַּחֹשֶׁךְ יְהוָה אוֹר לִי

> *Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light.* (Micah 7:8)

To be used as a mantra:

> *Into Your hands I place my soul, both when I sleep and when I wake. And with my soul, my body also. God is with me. I shall not fear.* (Concluding verse of Adon Olam)

CONCLUSION

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that "The Hebrew Bible calls for concern for the problem of living rather than the problem of dying...Its central concern is not, as in the Gilgamesh epic, how to escape death, but rather how to sanctify life."[62] Heschel is commenting on two different points. The first is that the Hebrew Bible and most of Jewish sacred literature focus primarily on life and not death – there is no "Jewish Book of the Dead." To be fair, sections of the Talmud, *Torat ha-Adam* and *Maavar Yabbok* do discuss various issues on this larger topic, but these texts are not readily accessible to most Reform Jews. Heschel also mentions that the central concern of the Bible is figuring out how to sanctify life. Throughout the generations, Jews have been successful in making this a priority. However, Judaism has missed the mark, in my opinion, towards sanctifying the life of the dying. We take great care of the recently deceased and the bereaved, but we fail to guide people through the mysterious transition from life to death. Perhaps this is because we feel uncomfortable with death. This is what I have gathered as a Jewish hospice chaplain for two years. Most people I encounter are terrified of thinking about themselves dying. We also tend to think about our own mortality when confronting a loved one who is dying or has died. Death is a chilling subject to ponder. If death does not cause fear, however, then it causes uncertainty. Luckily, there are texts in the Jewish corpus of sacred literature that teach us how to die, though they are not labeled as such. In addition, there are wonderful poems in the Israeli national canon that do this as well.

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[62] Reimer, 62

In writing this thesis, I have learned how the rabbis from generations ago envisioned a good death. I have also learned through poetry (as well as in my four chaplaincy internships) what dying people think, feel, and yearn for. These two drastically different genres of literature (midrash and poetry) are invaluable sources for: people facing a looming death, their loved ones, clergy and caregivers. There is much to be learned about this sacred passage from these texts. I have also learned through my research and clinical experience that people are open to rituals. Judaism is a religion abundant with rituals and adding a few more where there is a current void is what I initially set out to do. I hope that Reform Jews will consider undergoing and performing a *taharat ha-hayyim* as well as my version of *tashlich* for the dying. I pray that every Jew finds meaning, comfort and holiness when they face the unknown.

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