

Contract, Shatter, Repair
Yizkor 5779
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Mortality forms our humanity.

In their magnificent corporeality our bodies are mere vessels that do not last forever. And as much as life can bring forth great meaning, in this moment of *Yizkor*, we can come to understand that death brings meaning as well.

No matter how old or young someone is, when death takes the ones we love it is too soon. But what happens if we know that our time on earth will end much sooner than we had ever imagined?

Two years ago the writer, Amy Krouse Rosenthal, learned she had metastasized cancer. In an instant—poof! as she noted, her life shrank radically. She stared at her mortality as a pending and near reality. Her youngest of three had just emptied the nest that very day. With a husband she loved dearly, she faced the ultimate existential deadline as a stark truth. How she might make this passage into eternity with a kind of grace and thoughtful effort?

How does anyone prepare? Illness robs us of control. When it also steals the hope of living to a ripe old age, many wish to regulate this spiraling disaster.

But, before that happens, how might we not go gently into that good night, as Dylan Thomas poetically demanded?

One way is to write a Modern Love column for the New York Times, as Amy Rosenthal did as she approached her death last year.

She entitled it, *You May Want to Marry My Husband*.¹

Her words caught the attention of thousands of curious readers and broke many hearts as she shared the journey of her illness. Presenting her husband with sweetness and tenderness, she called their relationship a fairy tale, sprinkled with, as she said, the realities of the regular stuff that comes from playing house for 2 ½ decades.

How much she wanted more time, more of her children, more with the love of her life, more of everything and all those relationships we cling to at life's high and lowest moments. But it did end.

I was so sad when I read the obit in the Times. Even though I didn't know her, I felt that I had and mourned for her family and friends.

She left a hole in their hearts: a place of profound sadness and darkness, a space of melancholy and tearful existence, and that dulled sense of what life would be without her. We know the hollow void of those left behind. Whether our beloved ones left this earth after a long life, a persisting illness, or a sudden diagnosis and demise, or any or all of them, their death is our loss and it is profound.

And then this past June, Modern Love published an essay entitled.

*My Wife Said You May Want to Marry Me.*ⁱⁱ

A year after his wife's death, Jason Rosenthal, wrote a postscript to their story. I thought it might be about how he discovered love again, just like that. After all, his wife, Amy, had proffered an excellent profile any dating app would like to have. I would have wished him happiness in any way he found it. Certainly to love again is a beautiful homage to the love one has experienced before. But this was not the case. Instead, he shared his hellish year of dealing with his wife's passing, and yet he also recognized that she had offered him space to begin again. And though he wanted nothing more than to have his life with her back, he began to appreciate slowly and with a great choking sadness, a different kind of pathway available to him.

Amy's article and Jason's coda to their life brought me to a sacred Jewish concept offered by the 16th century Isaac Luria and crafted into a modern concept by the theologian and philosopher Eugene Borowitz,ⁱⁱⁱ that I, in turn, apply here.

Rabbi Luria wove a mystical understanding to the creation of the world in three parts: Contract, Shatter, and Restore. Before the world was created, God filled every space. It was only because of Divine contraction called *Tzimtzum* that the world to came into being with room enough for humanity.

Amy and Jason Rosenthal filled each other's worlds. We, too, have people in our lives that fill our worlds with sacred joy. Their lives complement our own. We are made whole by their presence. We hold each other's memories, have a sense of what they are thinking and know they can, at times, read our minds. We are pieced together by experience and by life. Their presence in our lives nourishes our ability to grow and to prosper spiritually and psychologically. Their physical presence sustains us. Death leaves a vacuum, an emptiness. The sadness of death overwhelms that emptiness so completely we feel that we can't breathe, move, act, or even have the will to live. We walk in the shadows of darkness without direction.

But there is also something else that can happen. Amy's gift offered a chance to make a fresh start, to find light in the darkness of despair. She even left empty space at the end of her article to drive home that metaphor.

The poet, Maya Angelou, wrote *... after a period peace blooms slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration.*

In the Lurianic mystical story of creation, contraction, *Tzimtzum* does leave a void even though God's Presence did not leave completely. Into that void, rays of sacred light form metaphorical vessels that cannot contain all that light. So they shatter, *shevirah*, sending flashes of that divine light everywhere, as guideposts.

Shevirah, what shatters, is the imperfect presence left by those who have died. Their physical touch, the sound of their laughter, the gut wrenching call of their cries, the drift of their scent, the sight of how they enter a room, the smile directed specifically at us or for some unknown reason. Captured in our mind but imperfectly presented without their presence here, now. What remains is a different kind of rhythm, a pushing and pulling of what we remember and what they provided that cannot be captured exactly but rather offered as a wisp of smoke that can easily evanesce into the universe, present yet unseen. Slowly and surely, we learn to forgive ourselves for an inability to contain them in our mind's eye perfectly. Perfection turns into perception for which we can no longer touch. Our loved ones become like shining moments of awareness in the blink of an eye only to disappear and to show up again in a different way of knowing.

That allows for *Tikkun*, restoration, healing, and fashioning life anew. In this mystical model, *tikkun*, means discovering that light of repair.

Tikkun then is a new independence in the presence of the interdependence with the one who no longer occupies our life and space in the exact same way. It is the gift they have bestowed upon us to take hold of life again in a new way.

Amy Rosenthal offered the ultimate gift of *tzimtzum*, *shevirah*, and *tikkun*. To fill a space but also to contract from it so that her light could shine. Then, inspiration and guidance led her husband to recognize his own capacity to live his life with the fresh realization that she remains a part of his life while he enters the future. Jason offered this insight: *One thing I have come to understand, though, is what a gift Amy gave me by emphasizing that I had a long life to fill with joy, happiness and love. Her edict to fill my own empty space with a new story has given me permission to make the most out of my remaining time on this planet.*

Those whom we have lost shine their light to illuminate a path that leads to new vistas of experience. Still, the hardest part is to enter the future without them in the way we experienced them while they graced this earth.

What is established is one whole organism of the universe, seen and unseen, present and hidden, physical and spiritual all interwoven into the greater whole. Nothing is lost, only reshaped and re-created to form a new sense of existence giving room for our imagination and life to blossom anew.

The great gift someone can leave us is that life will not end with his or her passing. Instead, it will open to what could never have been imagined before.

Like Jacob who was never the same after wrestling with the angel in the sacred nocturnal encounter, wrenching his hip as the eternal reminder, we, too, carry, those we loved with us as we go forward even limping from our losses, but the space opens before us. It is the ultimate permission slip to persevere, to go on, and even to enjoy.

Mysticism, just as it sounds reflects the mysteries of the universe. What might seem distant touches our very souls. We are active participants of our worlds, even with the many losses we endure. Our Jewish mystical tradition and profound stories like what the Rosenthals experienced summon us on this day and these moments of *Yizkor* to fill the emptiness of loss with the fresh wonder, sparks of light, and possibilities life affords us. It also teaches us that we can give permission to our loved ones in our own passing so they can go forward.

Soon the gates of *N'ilah* will close and the new year will open up before us. What will we be able to do as we begin anew? How can we bring new meaning to our lives gifted by those we have loved and lost? A big and beautiful space lies before us.

ⁱ NYTimes 3/3/17

ⁱⁱ NYTimes 6/15/18

ⁱⁱⁱ Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership by Eugene Borowitz

Poems that influenced me for this sermon:

Maya Angelou, *When Great Trees Fall*

Katherine Chapin, *Bright Mariner*

Joshua Loth Liebman, *Death is Not the Enemy*

Dylan Thomas, *Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night*

Maya Angelou

When Great Trees Fall

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.
When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.
When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.
Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of
dark, cold
caves.
And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

Katherine Garrison Chapin

Bright Mariner

Had I known that you were going
I could have given you,
At least, good speed;
But you slipped away so suddenly
That I was left standing on the shore
Watching into space,
Not knowing that you would never come back
Till I felt the waters of the incoming tide
Cold about my heart.
I do not ask for you again.
I know the sea you sail does not touch these shores.
I only look for a distant "all hail," like the white crest of a wave against the horizon,
Or a signal light flashing once, sharp against the sky.
Sail on, my bright sturdy mariner!
Let out a full sheet to your new winds,
Taste the clear spray of your new waters.
You were made for flight and swiftness
And eternal freedom.
Nothing shall weigh you down
Or call you back to the sweet earth,
Or the shape we knew,
Or the place that held you immeasurably dear.
I have cut the anchor chain that bound you to me,
And the great strength of my love,
And the heavy ache of my loneliness,
Which might bear upon you and hold you back,
I have fashioned into a shining silken fabric,
To be the highest and strongest of your new sails.

Joshua Loth Liebman

Death Is Not The Enemy

I often feel that death is not the enemy of life, but its friend; for it is the knowledge that our years are limited which makes them so precious. It is the truth that time is but lent to us which makes us, at our best, look upon our years as a trust handed into our temporary keeping. We are like children privileged to spend a day in a great park, a park filled with many gardens and playgrounds, and azure-tinted lakes and boats sailing upon tranquil waves. True, the day allotted to each of us is not the

same in length, in light, in beauty. Some children of earth are privileged to spend a long and sunlit day in the garden of the earth. For others, the day is shorter, cloudier, and dusk descends more quickly as in a winter's tale. But whether our life is a long summery day or a shorter wintry afternoon, we know that inevitably there are storms and squalls which overcast even the bluest heaven and there are sunlit rays which pierce the darkest autumn sky. The day we are privileged to spend in the great park of life is not the same for all human beings; but there is enough beauty and joy and gaiety in the hours, if we but treasure them. Then for each of us the moment comes when the great nurse, death, takes us by the hand and quietly says, "It is time to go home. Night is coming. It is your bedtime, child of earth. Come, you're tired. Lie down at last in the quiet nursery of nature and sleep. Sleep well. The day is gone. Stars shine in the canopy of eternity."

Dylan Thomas

Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

ⁱ NYTimes 3/3/17

ⁱⁱ NYTimes 6/15/18

