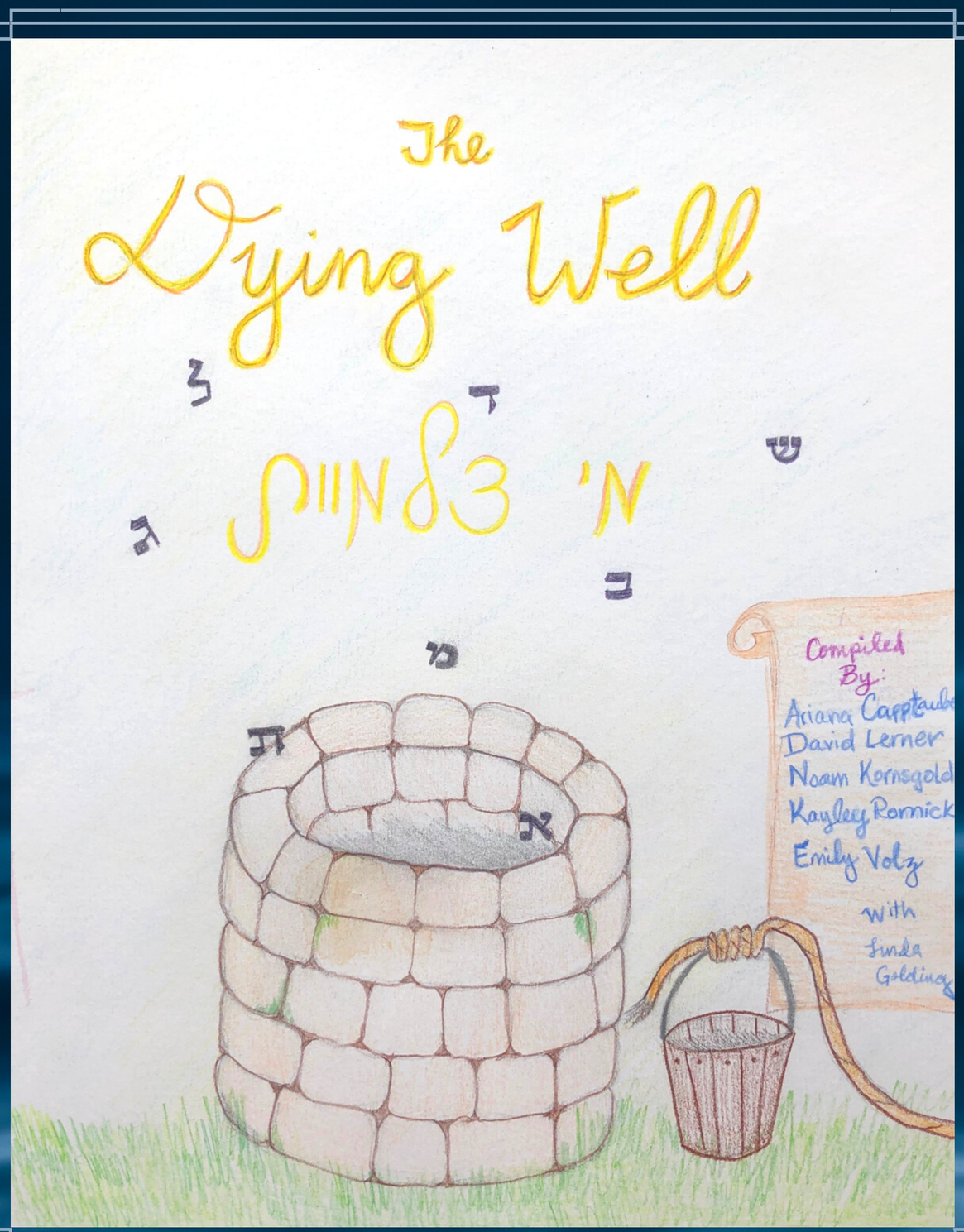
The Dying Well



The Dying Well

Foreword by Ariana Capptauber

Just after the death of Miriam, the Torah tells us that the community was without water. Traditional commentaries explain that this proximity is no coincidence; because of the merit of the righteous prophetess Miriam, a well had followed the Israelites through the desert. When she died, the well disappeared. Death can feel this way: a drying up of the body, a disappearance of the wellspring of love and personality that a living being brought while alive. Yet there are other wells and wellsprings that endure. Namely, our tradition teaches that Torah is like water, a wellspring of that which is life-giving and thirst-quenching:

> *"The words of Torah are likened to water, as it is written: O all who are thirsty, come for water. (Isaiah 55:1) Just as water is a source of life for the world, so is Torah a source of life for the world; Just as water is from the heavens, so too is Torah from the heavens; Just as water makes many sounds, so is the Torah heard in many voices; Just as water restores the soul, so does Torah restore the soul…"*
> Song of Songs Rabbah (Vilna Edition) 1:3

Death may signify the ending of life in a particular way, the drying up of a particular well. Yet the well of Torah is eternal, reminding us that life goes on through and around individual death. In this book we have sought to draw meaning from the well of Torah to answer our central question: **What does it mean to die, and what might it mean to die "well"?** We hope that this little collection of texts from our tradition can serve as one fountain from the wellspring of Jewish knowledge and wonderings that exist around this subject.

A Note on our Formatting Choices

Foreword by Noam Kornsgold

Inside this booklet, you will find primary source materials ranging from the biblical period to the contemporary era surrounded by our personal commentaries. Since the 15th and 16th centuries (with the publications of the Soncino family and Daniel Bomberg) the printed text of the Talmud has taken on a defined shape: the core text in the middle with subsequent commentaries surrounding this main text. We've sought to emulate this shape. It's worth noting that the Talmud is not the only Jewish book printed in this way: many other Jewish works including standard printed editions of the Rambam's Mishneh Torah and Rabbi Joseph Karo's Shulhan Arukh are also printed in this primary text-commentary format. Since this booklet is supposed to function as a Jewish *Ars moriendi*, we felt that it was important to organize the contents of this work in a noticeably Jewish fashion. Additionally, from a historical perspective, this type of format became part of the Jewish printing tradition soon after the publication of the original *Ars moriendi.* As you make your way through this volume, we hope that you will be in dialogue with the multiple voices on each page and that you will surround the primary text with your own commentary.

Contributor Color Key

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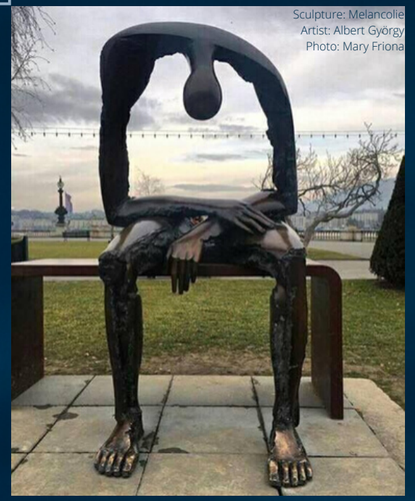
Ars Moriendi

Foreword by Emily Volz

Our project takes inspiration from the set of medieval texts known as the Ars Moriendi. Latin for 'the art of dying,' Ars moriendi describes two texts written in the 15th century that give practical advice for a good death from the Christian perspective. These texts were grounded in the realities of the Black Death, during which death literature may have been more topical than at any other point in history. The authorship of these texts is unknown, but can likely be traced to German clerics. These texts guide clergy, family members, and the dying themselves through the process of death as seen through a Christian textual lens. Central to these texts is a series of blockbook woodcuts, which depict a theological understanding of dying consistent with Christian beliefs. The original Ars moriendi texts inspired a legacy of writings on the concept of a "good death," and we see this project as a continuation of this tradition imagined through a Jewish lens.



Sculpture: Melancolie
Artist: Albert György
Photo: Mary Friona

Image: The Death of Géricault
Artist: Ary Scheffer

Source: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I
Concept Artist: Alexis Liddell

Chapter I:

Miriam's Disappearing Well

Illustration: "Song of Miriam"
Artist: Gretz Kuznitsov

The well was given to the Jewish people in the merit of Miriam… when Miriam died, the well disappeared —- All too often, we take loved ones, or anyone we may encounter in life, for granted while they are alive. This is similarly true with the availability of water in wells - a more modern equivalent being the water that comes out of our taps. We know that it will always be there for us when we are in need, but we usually do not reflect on how crucial it is to our survival and growth. Water is a powerful symbol in Jewish thought. In rabbinic sources, water is compared to the Torah itself (Sifra Ekev 12; M. Tanhuma, Vayakhel 8 and Tavo 3), and in Kabbalah, water is a symbol of *chesed* or lovingkindness. Two of the most impactful things people can transmit to us while they are alive are wisdom and love. When people we care for are close to death, these elements, the water if you will, which they have given to us are more poignant in our minds. We should be in constant appreciation of the water people draw for us in our lives, and express this to them not only once we fear the well may be starting to dry up, but even while it is rich and abundant. "Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with lessons of lovingkindness." (Proverbs 31:26)

Taanit 9a

ר' יוסי בר' יהודה אומר שלשה פרנסים טובים עמדו לישראל אלו הן משה ואהרן ומרים וג' מתנות טובות ניתנו על ידם ואלו הן באר וענן ומן באר בזכות מרים עמוד ענן בזכות אהרן מן בזכות משה מתה מרים נסתלק הבאר שנאמר (במדבר כ, א) ותמת שם מרים וכתיב בתריה ולא היה מים לעדה וחזרה בזכות שניהן

Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says: Three good sustainers rose up for the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt, and they are: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three good gifts were given from Heaven through their agency, and these are they: The well of water, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. He elaborates: The well was given to the Jewish people in the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud was in the merit of Aaron; and the manna in the merit of Moses. When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is stated: "And Miriam died there" (Numbers 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: "And there was no water for the congregation" (Numbers 20:2). But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.

The people in our lives often provide a combination of spiritual and material support, and we often find ourselves in a situation where we only realize the complexity of this support once the person is gone. The people in our lives often provide a combination of spiritual and material support, and we often find ourselves in a situation where we only realize the complexity of this support once the person is no longer around to provide it. Even if we think we have fully appreciated the ways that our loved ones supported us, we may be unable to truly appreciate the degree to which we relied on this support until we are faced with the reality of our grief, as happened to the Israelites after the death of Miriam.

They had the "well" through Miriam's merit — When someone dies, grief can be dredged up in unexpected ways. I've heard that as hard as birthdays, anniversaries and holiday can be, sometimes the weight of loss is most heavy when visiting a place or engaging in an activity that you associated closely with your loved one. Examples may be attending sporting events, cooking a recipe, seeing a commercial for a product, dining at a beloved restaurant. What can be most disconcerting is feeling sudden grief when others around you are oblivious.

They joined against Moses and Aaron — Sometimes grief is expressed in the disguise of anger. During trying times, it is hard to remain patient with someone who is grieving, especially when you are trying to process your own emotions and you might have less emotional bandwidth to extend to others. Unfortunately, reacting to the anger, though very natural, can cause further disruption to life. In this case, Moshe and Aharon fail abysmally in their leadership by striking the fabled rock (for the second time) and face harsh punishment. Evidently, this story also highlights how leaders face heightened challenge during times of personal and communal grief. Leaders are not immune from the impaired judgement grief can cause, and may suffer consequences if they are not mindful or neglect to find appropriate outlets for their emotions.

Numbers 20:1-2

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְבַּר־צִן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקָדֵשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם:בוְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקָּהֲלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן:

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.

רש"י: ולא היה מים לעדה. מִכָּאן שֶׁכָּל אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה הָיָה לָהֶם הַבְּאֵר בִּזְכוּת מִרְיָם

RASHI: AND THERE WAS NO WATER FOR THE CONGREGATION — Since this statement follows immediately after the mention of Miriam's death, we may learn from it that during the entire forty years they had the "well" through Miriam's merit.

On the first New Moon — It seems significant that Miriam's death occurs just around the time of the new moon, or Rosh Chodesh. The new moon is a symbol of rebirth, and the text especially mentions here that it was the "first new moon," a doubly significant moment of beginning or birth, particularly since the first month traditionally is Nissan, which is springtime. Miriam's death is laden with the symbolism of birth, reminding us of the cyclical nature of life, that death is part of this cycle, and that an ending can also be another kind of beginning. It also feels significant to note that Rosh Chodesh has traditionally been a special time of celebration for women, and Miriam led the women in song after the crossing of the sea. Perhaps the prophetess and leader of women dies at this moment to allow women a chance to gather as they always would and celebrate her life alongside the new moon.

Chapter II:

Witnessing Transition

Illustration: "The Lord Takes Elijah Away in a Fiery Chariot"
Artist: Review & Harold Publishing

Sometimes people unrelated to the dying person feel a voyeuristic inclination to involve themselves or a anxious inclination to "offer wisdom." Modern day scenarios could include one-time visitors to hospitals who then gossip about what they saw; people whose fear of death or "this could happen to me" is triggered (especially if they are the same age as the patient) and they suggest clinical trials or cures, having no medical expertise and/or knowledge of the patient's case. Fielding these intruders can feel exhausting and invalidating, especially after months or years of illness. At first, Elisha is tasked with putting them in their place, but Elijah eventually separates himself and his "care team" from those unwelcome. This is a reminder that the patient should have ultimate agency on who is allowed into their inner circle. It seems that Elisha's persistence is unwelcome in the beginning but that his near-distance fosters closeness in the end. While offering spiritual care, we may remain attuned to both verbal and non-verbal cues of patients, respecting boundaries and also offering opportunities for patients to change their minds about our involvement in their care. Lastly, the narrative moves from silence to noise as Elijah is taken in the middle of a conversation with Elisha. This reiterates that a patient should This ending reminds us that while illness can change dynamics and roles between loved ones, there are still moments of "normalcy" even as life is upended.

II Kings 2:1-12

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha had set out from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to Bethel." "As the LORD lives and as you live," said Elisha, "I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. Disciples of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take your master away from you today?" He replied, "I know it, too; be silent." Then Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to Jericho." "As the LORD lives and as you live," said Elisha, "I will not leave you." So they went on to Jericho. The disciples of the prophets who were at Jericho came over to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take your master away from you today?" He replied, "I know it, too; be silent." Elijah said to him, "Stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to the Jordan." "As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you," he said, and the two of them went on. Fifty men of the disciples of the prophets followed and stood by at a distance from them as the two of them stopped at the Jordan. Thereupon Elijah took his mantle and, rolling it up, he struck the water; it divided to the right and left, so that the two of them crossed over on dry land. As they were crossing, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha answered, "Let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me." "You have asked a difficult thing," he said. "If you see me as I am being taken from you, this will be granted to you; if not, it will not." As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw it, and he cried out, "Oh, father, father! Israel's chariots and horsemen!" When he could no longer see him, he grasped his garments and rent them in two.

Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind — This is a quick and remarkable death. It is maintained by rabbinic lore that Elijah never actually died. He merely ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot in an intense whirlwind. What is the reason for Elijah's quick and limited departure from this world? A midrash asserts that his end was determined by how he lived his life... it teaches that eternal life is granted to us when we use our time in this world, as Elijah did, to help the most vulnerable and those who are unable to repay our favors. (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 33:2) If we act in this way, our impact in this world never really dies, but it perpetuates throughout future generations. For some, acceptance of death involves the knowledge that one has left behind something which endures on the plane of the living far beyond their passing. This means that an element of advance planning should include leaving behind not just an ethical will, but performing actions now which help others and impact their lives in a positive, and long-lasting, way. Let us leave behind a legacy of good in this world so we can rise up to heaven through a whirlwind in a fiery chariot — and you shall give to future generations "a double portion of your spirit." (II Kings 2:9)

"Tell me, what can I do for you?" — Who is caring for whom in this narrative? On the face of it, we think of the living as caring for the dying as a *mitzvah* that will allow us to gain a place in the World to Come. Yet, as this narrative illustrates, sometimes it is the dying who care for those who will survive them during the hour of their death. Here, it is Elijah who asks Elisha what he can do for him before he dies, not Elisha asking Elijah what he needs in the moment of death. Illness or proximity to death can sometimes bring profound wisdom, and those caring for the ill or dying may benefit from the imparting of this wisdom. We see in several biblical narratives that the living call out to ancestors or deceased friends for help; most notably king Saul seeks out the advice of the deceased prophet Samuel when he faces imminent military defeat. Alicia Jo Rabins midrashically imagines this relationship between Rebecca and Sarah, when Rebecca enters the tent of her dead mother in law. In the lyrics to her song "Emeralds and Microscopes" Jo writes in the voice of Rebecca to Sarah, "You are welcome to visit me/Any night in any dream/I will leave the door unlocked/Come inside and let me say your name...As above, so below/Is this true, do you know/Now that you have looked in both/Emeralds and microscopes?" In this midrashic imagining, Rebecca looks to Sarah for comfort, for contact through dreams, and for the wisdom she might glean from the other world through her ancestor.

I know it too; be silent — In this moment, Elisha acknowledges what up until this point we had only known from the narrator, Elijah will go up to heaven. The first half of the statement indicates that Elisha accepts Elijah's fate. Yet, if Elisha does express true acceptance, why does he tell the "disciples of the prophets" to be silent? Might it be too painful to hear from others about his master's impending demise? "Be silent," says Elisha, "I must deal with Elijah's death on my own. I don't want to deal with you." Elisha protects himself from the gut-wrenching truth even as he knows it to be true.

Another possibility exists, however. Instead of silencing the disciples of the prophets to protect himself, Elisha may have silenced them in order to protect the honor and person-hood of Elijah. Elisha acknowledges Elijah's impending transition to heaven, but still emphasizes that until that happens, Elijah remains alive. As an alive person, Elijah is deserving of the care due to any alive person: Don't treat him as dead. In fact, immediately in the next verse, Elijah converses with Elisha. Arguably, Elijah may have heard the remarks of the disciples of the prophets. In that moment, Elisha's silencing acts as a protection of Elijah, rather than an inability to express his feelings towards others on the subject of Elijah's demise.

Oh, father, father — Elisha was, of course, not Elijah's biological son. Yet, in Elijah's moment of ascension, Elisha applies a title of extreme honor. On the surface level, we know that students are likened to children (Sifre Deuteronomy 34:4). Therefore, teachers are likened to parents. In this sense, Elisha's cry to his teacher, i.e. his "father," is logical. More generally, we may add that Elisha's cry shares an insight about relationships as death approaches. When a person dies, that person's relationships become crystallized for the survivors. There can be a a moment of true revelation in which a survivor's true feelings and relationship with the dead come to the foreground. In this way, Elisha's cry to Elijah represents a missed opportunity to have shared the ultimate understanding of the two characters' relationships with each other. It's only after Elijah is gone that Elisha fully expresses the deep sense of connection that he had to his teacher. We are reminded that the time before a person's impending death is an opportunity to reaffirm previous relationships and to articulate feelings and words that had previously gone unsaid.

מלכים ב ב׳:א׳-י״ב

וַיְהִי בְּהַעֲלוֹת ה׳ אֶת־אֵלִיָּהוּ בַּסְּעָרָה הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְאֱלִיָּה֙ וֶאֱלִישָׁ֔ע מִן־הַגִּלְגָּֽל׃ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֵלִיָּהוּ֙ אֶל־אֱלִישָׁ֔ע שֶׁב־נָ֖א פֹּ֑ה כִּ֥י ה׳ שְׁלָחַ֖נִי עַד־בֵּֽית־אֵ֑ל וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֱלִישָׁע֙ חַי־ה׳ וְחֵי־נַפְשְׁךָ֔ אִם־אֶֽעֶזָבֶ֖ךָּ וַיֵּרְד֥וּ בֵֽית־אֵֽל׃ וַיֵּצְא֡וּ בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים֩ אֲשֶׁר־בֵּֽית־אֵ֨ל אֶל־אֱלִישָׁ֜ע וַיֹּ֣אמְרוּ֮ אֵלָיו֒ הֲיָדַ֗עְתָּ כִּ֤י הַיּוֹם֙ ה׳ לֹקֵ֣חַ אֶת־אֲדֹנֶ֔יךָ מֵעַ֖ל רֹאשֶׁ֑ךָ וַיֹּ֥אמֶר גַּם־אֲנִ֖י יָדַ֥עְתִּי הַחֲשׁ֛וּ אַל־תַּדֹּֽמּוּ׃ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר לוֹ֙ אֵלִיָּ֣הוּ אֱלִישָׁ֔ע | שֶׁב־נָ֖א פֹּ֣ה כִּ֣י ה׳ שְׁלָחַ֑נִי כִּ֣י׀ וַיֹּ֣אמֶר חַי־ה׳ וְחֵי־נַפְשְׁךָ֔ אִם־אֶֽעֶזָבֶ֖ךָּ וַיָּבֹ֥אוּ יְרִיחֽוֹ׃ וַיִּגְּשׁ֡וּ בְּנֵי֩־הַנְּבִיאִ֨ים אֲשֶׁר־בִּֽירִיחֹ֜ אֶל־אֱלִישָׁ֗ע וַיֹּ֣אמְרוּ֮ אֵלָיו֒ הֲיָדַ֗עְתָּ כִּ֤י הַיּוֹם֙ ה׳ לֹקֵ֣חַ אֶת־אֲדֹנֶ֔יךָ מֵעַ֖ל רֹאשֶׁ֑ךָ וַיֹּ֥אמֶר גַּם־אֲנִ֖י יָדַ֥עְתִּי הַחֲשׁ֛וּ אַל־תַּדֹּֽמּוּ׃ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר לוֹ֙ אֵלִיָּ֣הוּ שֶׁב־נָ֖א פֹּ֣ה כִּ֣י ה׳ שְׁלָחַ֑נִי כִּ֣י הַיְרֵדֵ֔נָה וַיֹּ֥אמֶר חַי־ה׳ וְחֵי־נַפְשְׁךָ֔ אִם־אֶֽעֶזָבֶ֖ךָּ וַיֵּלְכ֥וּ שְׁנֵיהֶֽם׃ וַחֲמִשִּׁ֥ים אִ֖ישׁ מִבְּנֵ֣י הַנְּבִיאִ֑ים וַיֵּֽלְכ֗וּ וַיַּעַמְד֤וּ מִנֶּ֙גֶד֙ מֵרָחֹ֔ק וּשְׁנֵיהֶ֖ם עָמְד֥וּ עַל־הַיַּרְדֵּֽן׃ וַיִּקַּ֤ח אֵלִיָּהוּ֙ אֶת־אַדַּרְתּ֔וֹ וַיִּגְלֹ֖ם וַיַּכֶּ֣ה אֶת־הַמַּ֑יִם וַיֵּחָצ֥וּ הֵנָּ֖ה וְהֵנָּ֑ה וַיַּעַבְר֥וּ שְׁנֵיהֶ֖ם בֶּחָרָבָֽה׃ וַיְהִ֣י כְעָבְרָ֔ם וְאֵלִיָּ֥הוּ אָמַ֖ר אֶל־אֱלִישָׁ֑ע שְׁאַל֙ מָ֣ה אֶֽעֱשֶׂה־לָּ֔ךְ בְּטֶ֥רֶם אֶלָּקַ֖ח מֵעִמָּ֑ךְ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֱלִישָׁע֙ וְיְהִי־נָ֣א פִֽי־שְׁנַ֔יִם בְּרוּחֲךָ֖ אֵלָֽי׃ וַיֹּ֕אמֶר הִקְשִׁ֥יתָ לִשְׁאֹ֖ול אִם־תִּרְאֶ֣ה אֹתִ֑י לֻקַּ֤ח מֵאִתְּךָ֙ יְהִי־לְךָ֣ כֵּ֔ן וְאִם־אֵ֖ין לֹ֥א יִהְיֶֽה׃ וַיְהִ֣י הֵמָּ֗ה הֹלְכִים֙ הָלוֹךְ֙ וְדַבֵּ֔ר וְהִנֵּ֥ה רֶ֖כֶב אֵ֣שׁ וְסוּסֵ֣י אֵ֑שׁ וַיַּפְרֵ֤דוּ בֵּין֙ שְׁנֵיהֶ֔ם וַיַּ֥עַל אֵלִיָּ֖הוּ בַּסְּעָרָ֥ה הַשָּׁמָֽיִם׃ וֶאֱלִישָׁ֣ע רֹאֶ֔ה וְה֖וּא מְצַעֵ֣ק אָבִ֑י | אָבִ֣י רֶ֤כֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ וּפָרָשָׁ֔יו וְלֹ֥א רָאָ֖הוּ עֹ֑וד וַיַּחֲזֵ֙ק֙ בִּבְגָדָ֔יו וַיִּקְרָעֵ֖ם לִשְׁנַ֥יִם קְרָעִֽים׃

Chapter III:

The Death of David: A Lesson in Control

Illustration: "The Death of Socrates"
Artist: Jacques-Louis David

It is a decree before me — Life is unpredictable. We do not know when we will die, but we know we will eventually die. These two complimentary facts could yield a deep sense of melancholy. Not knowing what the next day will bring, but acknowledging that it could bring death could put a person into submission. R. Eliezer was acutely aware of this conundrum when he stated, "Repent one day before your death" (Avot 2:10). There's a recognition that we do not know when death will envelop us, so we are prodded to ensure that our actions are in order each and every day. More than this, R. Eliezer provides an actionable response that a person can take in answer to the unknown. Instead of sitting in catatonic fear, we can at least constantly reflect on our actions to bide our time. Death need not be an overpowering force in our day-to-day, but it would be foolish to ignore the specter altogether. A relationship with death doesn't simply happen in the moment of death. A true and healthy relationship with death recurs throughout a person's life. One doesn't know when one's soul will be removed from the body so preparing for that will perhaps give the actual moment of death closure.

You will die on Shabbat — How did King David feel at the conclusion of each of every Shabbat that he survived? Shabbat, a day of rest and peace, must have been at least somewhat stressful for David. Indeed, Rabbi Avraham Yithak Sperling in Ta'amei HaMingahim (Shabbat 425) states that at the conclusion of each Shabbat, David would host a meal for all of his household in celebration of his survival. Perhaps it would have been better for God to not reveal any information about David's death. Not knowing when death will happen is in many ways much more empowering than knowing some detail of how death will occur. Think of the countless movies, television and book plots that revolve around a character attempting to thwart some sort of vision that the character experienced about death. Death is important, but it cannot come at the price of living. **[David] would sit and learn all day** — Torah is the elixir of life (Eruvin 54a). By engaging with Torah, we have the power to overcome death, both in this world and, certainly, in the World to Come. Yet, just like all worldly elixirs and medicines, Torah's power to stave off death in this world is finite. Modern medicine is powerful, but it is not all powerful. At some point, something, even the slightest hiccup, can cause instant death. A procedure could be going extraordinarily well, but external factors, like tripping on step, could subvert the entire life sustaining apparatus. How ironic for David that the trees shaking prevented the Tree of Life from continuing its life sustaining powers! Medicine and medical procedures are important, but a dying person and that person's loved ones must not relinquish their decision-making capabilities to them.

Shabbat 30a-b

For Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav, "What is the meaning of that which is written, 'God let me know my end and the measure of my days. What it is. Let me know how short-lived I am' (Psalms 39:4). David said before the Holy One Blessed be He, 'Master of the Universe, let me know my end.' [God] said to him, 'It is a decree before Me that we do not inform the end of flesh and blood.' 'And the measure of my days.' 'It is a decree before me that we do not inform the measure of a person's days.' 'Let me know how short-lived I am.' [God] said to him, 'You will die on Shabbat.' 'Let me die on Sunday.' [God] said to him, 'The reign of your son Solomon has already arrived, and the reign of one does not touch his fellow's even a hairbreadth.' 'Let me die on Friday.' [God] said to him, "'For a day in your courts is better than one-thousand" (Psalms 94:11). 'One day of you sitting and engaging with Torah is better for me than one-thousand burnt offerings that Solomon your son will offer to me in the future on the altar.' Every Shabbat, [David] would sit and learn all day. On that day when his soul was to rest, the Angel of Death stood before him, but was unable [to kill] him, because [David's] mouth didn't cease from learning. [The Angel of Death] said, 'What shall I do with him?' [David] had a garden behind his house. The Angel of Death came, went up, and shook the trees. [David] went out to see. He went up the stairs; the stairs broke out from under him. He was silent and his soul rested.

The theme of this selection is control. When someone is dying, especially in the context of the medical system or nursing home, their personal agency is severely limited. Factors that limit agency also include mobility, the relative complexity or simplicity of medical treatment, and ability or inability to eat, bathe, change clothing, and use the bathroom independently. It can be surprising which areas of life are more limited than others. That is why it is so important that when caring for someone who is dying, whether as a professional or a loved one, that we create opportunities for choice. This can be a choice of medical practitioner, food, clothing, drink, visitation time, and more. As always, we adhere to available advance directives and listen to verbal and non-verbal boundaries, respecting them as best we can. One painful situation may be that a dying person does not want to see a visitor. That visitor may feel rejected, insulted or inconvenienced.

Acknowledging their emotion and explaining issues of control may help for family and friends; as chaplains on a care team, we can understand that the patient's decision to send us away fulfills a spiritual need for agency.

Would I want to know the date of my death if I could? How would human life be different if we went through our lives knowing exactly when they will end? This has never been a possibility for humanity, and thus we must live with the knowledge that we will never know in advance when the exact time of our death will come.

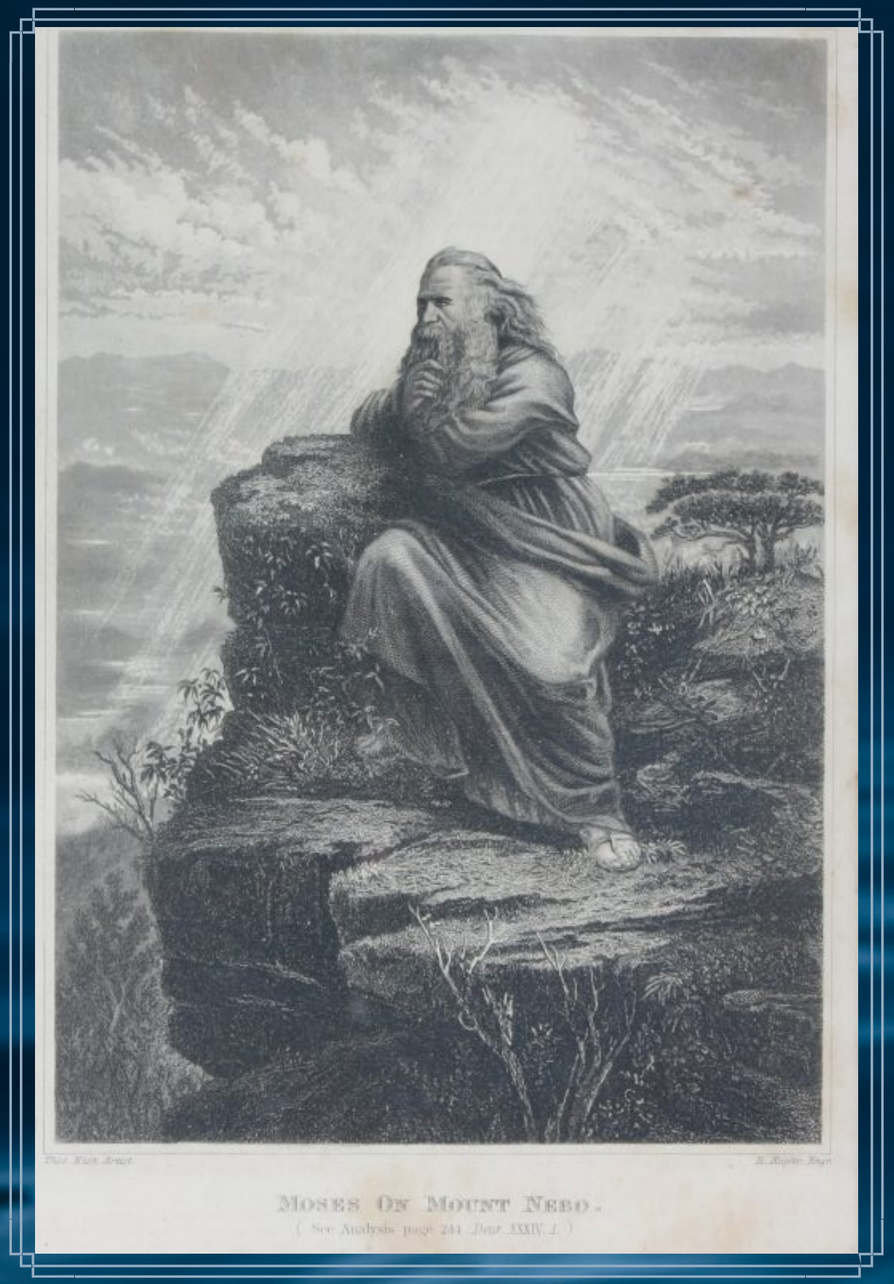
Instead of living with the feeling of being in the midst of a countdown, we live as if there will never come an end to our lives. We have to find some way to live with a sense of our deaths in order to appreciate the limited time we are allotted to live.

The Angel of Death came — We are each given a set amount of time in this world. There can always be instances when rational arguments can be made for trying to extend a person's life as well as, in some cases, for cutting it short. But ultimately, whose decision is it? Is personal autonomy the bottom line? Are we really in control of "the measure of our days?" This passage in the Talmud teaches that our lives are part of a deeper narrative that far surpasses our own limited understanding. Indeed, in this text, Torah learning is revealed to have life-sustaining force, and in this way the Torah can be compared to life itself. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) writes in the introduction to his famous work Haamek Davar that the entire Torah can be looked at as poetry, "whose stories are not fully explained. Rather, one has to make insights and explanations based on the intricacies of the language." Our lives may be, at first glance, a series of stories which are not fully complete or explained. However, this is a limited understanding of the essential contribution of our lives in the broader plot of the world. Each person's life has its own intricate language, whose ultimate value is not measured by the extent of its days, rather, its mere presence adds a unique melody to the harmony of existence. As hard as it is to relinquish control and accept our fate, we must know that regardless of the outcome, our lives were measured and counted - we all matter to this world, and are actually fundamental to the totality of human existence. As my Great-Aunt Sarilla lay in the hospital approaching the end of her days she was presented the option of trying to extend her time in this world. She was always a pious woman and she responded to this question with deep wisdom and understanding. She acknowledged that her time was not hers to control, and she said: "either my brother will take me home tonight or Hashem will." While the struggle for control seems to be an essential part of human nature, how do we build the strength and the faith to reach the point of acceptance and ultimate peace?

[David] would sit and learn all day — There are many ways we try to trick and outsmart death. We doggedly pursue medicines to prolong life and enhance our quality of living. We dress and embalm our bodies to emulate youth, as though to ward off the image of our decaying bodies. Sometimes we turn to distraction: fierce drive to work and accomplish, clinging to positions of power, procreating and building large and strong families, all attempts to outlive ourselves, all ways to try to somehow outrun or outsmart death. One traditional belief holds that to change one's name is to change one's fate and potentially escape death. In The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit Lucette Lagnado repeats a folkloric story about a rabbi who glimpsed the angel of death hovering near him one day, and called upon doctors to find out what was wrong with him. They could find no way to help him, so, laying in bed, he decided to change his name. This changed his fate and he lived many long years.As they do here, the rabbis frequently imagine that study of Torah can help one avoid death. Indeed, in the forward, I wrote how Torah is considered an eternal well and lives on through and around death. Yet the message here, as in other stories about Rabbis studying constantly to evade death, is that Torah may go on forever but individual students and teachers of Torah do not. In none of these stories does anyone manage to outsmart death; ultimately, the Angel of Death finds a way to bring them away from their studies for a moment and fulfill his mission. Is this a good death? Does running from death allow us to "die well?" I do not think this is the message of these stories, rather, they encourage us to embrace our not-knowing and our ultimate faith so we may die with mindfulness and peace.

תלמוד בבלי שבת דף ל

דְּאָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב, מַאי דִּכְתִיב: ״הוֹדִיעֵנִי ה׳ קִצִּי וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה הִיא אֵדְעָה מֶה חָדֵל אָנִי״ — אָמַר דָּוִד לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, הוֹדִיעֵנִי ה׳ קִצִּי. אָמַר לוֹ: גְּזֵרָה הִיא מִלְּפָנַי שֶׁאֵין מוֹדִיעִין קִצּוֹ שֶׁל בָּשָׂר וָדָם. ״וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה הִיא״ — גְּזֵרָה הִיא מִלְּפָנַי שֶׁאֵין מוֹדִיעִין מִדַּת יָמָיו שֶׁל אָדָם. ״וְאֵדְעָה מֶה חָדֵל אָנִי״ — אָמַר לוֹ: בְּשַׁבָּת תָּמוּת. אָמוּת בְּאֶחָד בְּשַׁבָּת? אָמַר לוֹ: כְּבָר הִגִּיעָה מַלְכוּת שְׁלֹמֹה בִּנְךָ, וְאֵין מַלְכוּת נוֹגַעַת בַּחֲבֶרְתָּהּ אֲפִילּוּ כְּמִלְאָ נִימָא. אָמוּת בְּעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת? אָמַר לוֹ: ״כִּי טוֹב יוֹם בַּחֲצֵרֶיךָ מֵאָלָף״ — טוֹב לִי יוֹם אֶחָד שֶׁאַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה מֵאֶלֶף עוֹלוֹת שֶׁעָתִיד שְׁלֹמֹה בִּנְךָ לְהַקְרִיב לְפָנַי עַל גַּבֵּי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. כָּל יוֹמָא דְּשַׁבְּתָא הֲוָה יָתֵיב וְגָרִיס כּוּלֵּי יוֹמָא. הַהוּא יוֹמָא דְּבָעֵי לְמֵינַח נַפְשֵׁיהּ, קָם מַלְאַךְ הַמָּוֶת קַמֵּיהּ וְלָא יְכִיל לֵיהּ, דְּלָא הֲוָה פָּסֵק פּוּמֵיהּ מִגִּירְסָא. אֲמַר: מַאי אַעֲבֵיד לֵיהּ? הֲוָה לֵיהּ בּוּסְתָּנָא אֲחוֹרֵי בֵּיתֵיהּ, אֲתָא מַלְאַךְ הַמָּוֶת סָלֵיק וּבָחֵישׁ בְּאִילָנֵי. נְפַק לְמִיחֲזֵי. הֲוָה סָלֵיק בְּדַרְגָּא, אֵיפְחֵית דַּרְגָּא מִתּוֹתֵיהּ, אִישְׁתֵּיק וְנָח נַפְשֵׁיהּ



Chapter IV:

Moses and the Five Stages of Grief

Illustration: "Moses on Mount Nebo"
Artist: Thomas Nast

I will not move from here — Moses' initial denial phase is full of self-righteousness. He is ensconced in thoughts of his own goodness, claiming to have been righteous since birth. Yet the reader knows that Moses has been no such way: he killed an Egyptian, frequently let his anger get the better of him, and often protested bitterly against God. Denial can be this way: we are immersed in self-pity and self-righteousness, able to see only the truth of our own narrow opinion, leaving no space for the truth that may be coming to meet us.

Let me become in this world like the bird — Moses tries every which way to escape death, but there is no escape route. Not even for the bird that seems to fly free in every direction.

Fear not, I myself will attend to you — When a person is in the depths of depression, there is little a caregiver can say. Often the only way to help is to be present with the person, and to commit to continued presence, no matter what.

With a kiss of the mouth — Not all death is this pleasant (see Berakhot 8a), but there are pleasant ways to die. Throughout this compilation, we've endeavored to give advice, or at least a broad roadmap, on Jewish perspectives on dying and death and on "a good way to die." Yet, these approaches and comments are not exhaustive. Each person dies in a unique way. Look at Moses in the way he is presented in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11. He goes through his own path of denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Our goal is not to make a judgement call on the way in which Moses or anybody else died or will die. We simply provide suggestions and thoughts about how we, based on study, experience, and conversation, relate to the notion of "good death."

Excerpts from Devarim Rabbah 11:10
as the Five Stages of Grief

Denial: Israel have many times committed great sins, and whenever I prayed for them, God immediately answered my prayer, as it is said, Let Me alone, that I may destroy them (Deut. 9:14); yet what is written there? And the Lord repented of the evil (Ex. 32:14)...Seeing then that I have not sinned from my youth, does it not stand to reason that when I pray on my own behalf God should answer my prayer?

Anger: He took a resolve to fast, and drew a small circle and stood therein, and exclaimed: "I will not move from here until You annul that decree."

Bargaining: What else did Moses do then? He wrapped himself with sackcloth and rolled himself in the dust and stood in prayer and supplications before God, until the heavens and the order of nature were shaken. "Master of the Universe," said Moses, "if You will not bring me into the Land of Israel, leave me in this world so that I may live and not die." [God's refusal was swift. Again Moses pleaded:] "Master of the Universe, if You will not bring me into the Land of Israel, let me become like the beasts of the field that eat grass and drink water and live and enjoy the world; likewise let my soul be as one of them." [God was unrelenting, but so was Moses:] "Master of the Universe, if not, let me become in this world like the bird that flies about in every direction, and gathers its food daily, and returns to its nest towards evening; let my soul likewise become like one of them."

Depression: Moses begs, "Do not hand me over into the hand of the Angel of Death." In response to his fear, Bat Kol, a divine emissary, comforts Moses: "Fear not, I myself will attend to you and your burial."

Acceptance: The final moments are full of blessing. Moses experiences the most peaceful death possible, the kiss of God: At that hour, Moses arose and sanctified himself like the Seraphim, and God came down from the highest heavens to take away the soul of Moses, and with Him were three ministering angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Zagzagel. Michael laid out his bier, Gabriel spread out a fine linen cloth at his bolster, Zagzagel one at his feet; Michael stood at one side and Gabriel at the other side. God said: "Moses, fold your eyelids over your eyes," and he did so. He then said: "Place your hands upon your breast," and he did so. He then said: "Put your feet next to one another," and he did so. Forthwith the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned the soul from the midst of the body, saying to her: "My daughter, I have fixed the period of your stay in the body of Moses at a hundred and twenty years; now your end has come, depart, delay not... Thereupon God kissed Moses and took away his soul with a kiss of the mouth.

He took a resolve to fast — This allegory shows the breadth of human reaction to facing imminent mortality. It may be comforting to see that even a prophet and leader as great as Moshe may not have "been himself" as he faced his own mortality. When he exclaims, "I will not move from here," it seems that Moshe has regressed to a childlike state. It is important to witness a dying person's emotional state without judgement, preserving their agency and dignity as so much else is taken away.

God's refusal was swift — Though God seems unrelenting, our tradition provides us with a myth of power in the face of death: the power of this one human to move the Divine, as the Ruler of the Universe to witnessing and performing Chesed shel Emet, the Ultimate Act of Lovingkindness. Perhaps we are not just what the liturgy states, "A flower that fades, a cloud that dissipates, a dream that flies away." Perhaps, we capture the attention of the Omnipotent.

My daughter — In this gorgeous passage, the soul is personified as separate from Moshe, the leased offspring of Light. As our selichot liturgy says, "The soul is Yours, and the body is animated by You." However, the midrash seems to imagine that the soul acts somewhat independently, with the ability to tarry, with timing of its own volition. Perhaps the soul is afforded an element of freewill, like the connected disconnection at a synapse.

Look at it well — What a gift it would be to be able to see the fruits of all of our labor in this world. Yet, often we are destined to merely plant the seeds for future generations. There is a story in the Talmud about the sage Choni HaM'agel: "One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children." (b. Ta'anit 23b) It is so important for people at the end of their lives to feel as though they leave behind something for future generations. In providing end-of-life care, it is incumbent on pastors, family members, and friends, to practice active listening and to reflect back what we perceive as the seeds that people are leaving behind. What can we ascertain about the values and actions that this person cherished most and is passing down to bear fruit? While they may never see the culmination of their work, the Promised Land so to speak, what can they look back on to feel proud about as they prepare for their next stage of existence?

Deuteronomy 3:23-28 (Va'etchanan)

וָאֶתְחַנַּן אֶל־יְהוָה בָּעֵת הַהִוא לֵאמֹר: אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה אַתָּה הַחִלּוֹתָ לְהַרְאוֹת אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ אֶת־גָּדְלְךָ וְאֶת־יָדְךָ הַחֲזָקָה אֲשֶׁר מִי־אֵל בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה כְמַעֲשֶׂיךָ וְכִגְבוּרֹתֶךָ: אֶעְבְּרָה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הָהָר הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה וְהַלְּבָנוֹן: וַיִּתְעַבֵּר יְהוָה בִּי לְמַעַנְכֶם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלָי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי רַב־לָךְ אַל־תּוֹסֶף דַּבֵּר אֵלַי עוֹד בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה: עֲלֵה | רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְשָׂא עֵינֶיךָ יָמָּה וְצָפֹנָה וְתֵימָנָה וּמִזְרָחָה וּרְאֵה בְעֵינֶיךָ כִּי־לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה: וְצַו אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְחַזְּקֵהוּ וְאַמְּצֵהוּ כִּי־הוּא יַעֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהוּא יַנְחִיל אוֹתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה:

I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, "O Lord GOD, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." But the LORD was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The LORD said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see."

This also reminds me of the story of Honi Hame'agel. Many people have a lifelong dream that they would like to see to fruition, but sometimes it is not for the individual to see the dream through. Rather, we each plant seeds that will grow beyond our lifetimes. This is a beautiful message but it can be painful to live through, as we see it is in Moses' case. He has dedicated many good years of his life to bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt to the land of Israel, but he will not get to see his mission through to the land itself. Instead, he must content himself with merely looking out at the land that is the destiny of his people. It has often been noted that this is the poignant end not only of Moses' life, but of the Torah itself. This leaves us with a note of longing, of unfinished business. It is disappointing, yet this is so often the trajectory of life's stories: not clear, neat endings wrapped up with triumph but hard work accomplished to a point, with always more left to do. As Rabbi Tarfon used to say (Pirkei Avot 2:16) לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה, It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.

I pleaded with the LORD at that time — We learn from Sefer Hasidim (612:1) that sometimes, no matter how much we plead and beg, our prayers will not always be answered. Sometimes, as in the case of Moses, we must reconcile ourselves with the fact that our deepest desires may not be fulfilled. There is a tremendous amount of anecdotes of dying individuals waiting for something: a goodbye from a child, the death of a loved one, etc. - to occur before they die. Even when death seems imminent for those people, some hold on until the very right moment. However, there is also a tremendous amount of anecdotes of dying people dying before a desired event could occur - a child's plane ran late, vaporizing the chance at an in-person goodbye, for example. Moses' plea and dissatisfaction is a reminder of this latter category. We can always hope that we will see a loved one again before we die, but we must also manage expectations that this might not be possible.

In this important charge, God asks Moshe to finalize his legacy in this world. His legacy is twofold, physical and spiritual. Physical in the land promised to Israel, and spiritual in the radical ordinances with which to conquer and govern it. But this charge is also painful: despite all of the years of striving and building, one cannot partake of their own legacy. This midrash acts as an allegory for all mortals. As a person contemplates death, they have the opportunity to engage in life review. They think about what they accomplished—or didn't—and what it meant. This can be a bittersweet process, as there is no way to know one's true impact, or the full gravity of one's misdeeds. Connection with others plays an important role in life review, especially spiritual life review, in the imparting of values and resources to the next generation, as well as making amends. One may compose an ethical will, give objects as gifts or allocate portions of their monetary will to meaningful causes. Witnessing and encouraging spiritual life review with a dying person can help them achieve clarity on how they would like to build their legacy in a way that is significant to them. Regrets or tales of long-standing conflict may arise during review, and the dying person may be interested in reconciliation or making amends. It is important to follow their lead in this, and not try to "fix" what they are not interested in addressing. Speaking about the issue may be enough for them. You can read more about how to encourage spiritual life review in Addendum A.

Chapter V:

Experiencing Death

Illustration Source: The Wall Street Journal

Shadows of El&him

By Kayley Romick

when the soul
has not departed
can you still
sense the spark
Divinity alights within
this loved one turned
stranger in the tightening
or loosing of your chest
does their hand still
provide warm or cool
comfort like it used to

does it help us know
if we've done enough

Every possible type of death has already been crafted by God and experienced by millions of people. Even though the exact circumstances of our dying process will be unique, there is no death that does not bear resemblance to another death. We can take comfort in the fact that we are never truly alone, that no matter how isolating our experience of death may feel, it is one that is shared with a multitude of people who have lived—and died—before us.

Berakhot 8a

תַּנְיָא נָמֵי הָכִי: תְּשַׁע מֵאוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה מִינֵי מִיתָה נִבְרְאוּ בָּעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״לַמָּוֶת תּוֹצָאוֹת״, ״תּוֹצָאוֹת״ בְּגִימַטְרִיָּא הָכִי הָוו: קָשָׁה שֶׁבְּכֻלָּן — אַסְכָּרָא, נֵיחָא שֶׁבְּכֻלָּן — נְשִׁיקָה. אַסְכָּרָא דְּמָיְא כְּחִיזְרָא בִּגְבָבָא דְּעַמְרָא דִּלְאַחוֹרֵי נַשָּׁרָא, וְאִיכָּא דְּאָמְרִי כְּפִיטְווֹרֵי בְּפֵי וֶשֶׁט, נְשִׁיקָה דְּמָיְא כִּמְשִׁחֵל בִּנִיתָא מֵחֲלָבָא

It was also taught in a baraita: Nine hundred and three types of death were created in the world, as it is stated: "Issues [totzaot] of death," and that, 903, is the numerical value [gimatriya] of totzaot. The Gemara explains that the most difficult of all these types of death is croup [askara], while the easiest is the kiss of death. Croup is like a thorn entangled in a wool fleece, which, when pulled out backwards, tears the wool. Some say that croup is like ropes at the entrance to the esophagus, which would be nearly impossible to insert and excruciating to remove. The kiss of death is like drawing a hair from milk. One should pray that he does not die a painful death.

person. We wonder each year, who will die in their sleep and who will die violently? The talmud here seems to almost place value judgement on who merits a kiss (Moses, as well as Aaron and Miriam were said to have died this way) and who is condemned to croup. Yet elsewhere, we have stories of righteous people dying in horrific, violent ways, and this is also justified. Perhaps the definition of "good death" is not limited to physical experience of dying but rather a range of factors surrounding the circumstances of death, and the experience of life.

Totzaot — from the root יצא, which is also the basis for words related to "taking out." The play on words connotes that God is taking the soul out from the body, or perhaps it extracts itself.

Impossible to insert and excruciating to remove — This reminds me of what I've heard about the pain of removing a trach tube. It is ironic that in saving a life, medical science can cause pain that is comparable to death.

Drawing hair from milk — This poetic phrase offers hope and comfort. I believe this would be analogous to "she just went to sleep." What triggers the imagination is the 901 other experiences of death that are unnamed, or perhaps choosing such a high number seeks to indicate that the are innumerable and unknowable experiences of death.

Nine hundred and three types of death — This number is overwhelming, too numerous to truly count. Imagine trying to come up with 903 distinct ways in which death can occur! This giant number indicates that death is all around us, but not necessarily in a morbid sense. Death exists in numerous forms in the same way that life exists in numerous forms.

The most difficult is croup, while the easiest is the kiss — This comment gets right at the heart of our question, "is there a way to die well?" Here we have a description of ways to die that are more difficult, and ways that are easier. This gets at the .physical experience of death, which certainly differs drastically from

Chapter VI:

The Many Faces of Death: Abraham's Encounter

Illustration: "Medusa" (adaptation)
Artist: Glen Vause

Nay, but you are the comeliness of the world — What an unexpected response to death! In our culture, we depict death as ugly, evil, and malignant. Death cannot possibly take the form of a beautiful creature. Such an image would engender a disconnect between death's ugly role and magnificent appearance. Abraham, in this moment, is the avatar for our normal relationship with death. Yet, Death's representation in this tale is perhaps the way we should relate to death. Yes, individual deaths can certainly have ugly elements, but we should not write off death as a pariah. Later, when Death explains his appearance, we learn that Death doesn't always look this beautiful. There are plenty of instances in which Death does indeed look ugly. The key here is variation and difference of experience.

And in beauty and great peace and gentleness I approach the righteous, but to sinners I come in great corruption — Depending on our life experiences, we relate to our deaths and the end of our lives differently. Against the text, there doesn't need to be a moral valence to these differences of experience.
Thought Question: "The Testament of Abraham" presents themes and ideas (deception and death and the different types of death, to name just a couple) that are encountered through the other texts presented in this resource. How does this source amplify or diminish the thrust of these shared ideas as expressed in the other sources? Given that the "The Testament of Abraham" is not a book of the Tanakh or normative rabbinic literature, should we relate to the ideologies and ideas expressed in "The Testament" differently from how we relate to normative canonical texts?

Death, tell me if you come thus to all in such fairness and glory and beauty — All throughout Rabbinic literature, the character of Abraham is described as the paragon of faith. However, when Abraham interacts with Death near the end of his days, his faith is challenged. He first sees Death as beautiful, in a "robe of great brightness," but as he learns how vicious Death can be, the initial image becomes tarnished and ugliness is revealed — Abraham is shaken. Furthermore, when Death in all its ugliness kills Abraham's servants on a whim, its indiscriminate nature is also revealed and Abraham is all the more distraught. As those who witness death in our lives whether as pastors, caregivers, family members, or friends, we may encounter death in its many forms. We may often see death in its beauty, but we might also see some of its more ugly forms. The narrative of Abraham's interaction with Death symbolizes how death can impact our faith and what that can do to our spirit. Seeing the ugliness and indiscriminate nature of death has the powerful capability of leading us down a dark road of fear and despair. Indeed, even Abraham, the paragon of faith, admits after witnessing this aspect of death that, "my spirit is distressed exceedingly." It is therefore crucial for those who may be confronted with this manner of death to recognize the potential impact on our spirit and our faith and do what we can to strengthen our resolve and avoid all-consuming despair. At many points in our lives we are tested like Abraham - death, in particular, can significantly impact our faith. In its wake, how can we live up to the psalmist's ideal: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff - they comfort me?" (Psalms 23:4)

Bitter and fierce name of the world — The notion that death is the bitter and fierce name of the world is so profound. Here, I might have thought the name of the world was life, but in fact it is death. What does that mean about existence? What does it mean if God named God's greatest project, creation, "Death?" Or perhaps this is just one name of the world, the "bitter and fierce" name? I think I prefer that reading, that death is just one name among many names God gave to the world.

Hide your fierceness…and put on your beauty and all your glory — It seems that Death has different guises. Sometimes it can dress in a way that frightens with its fierceness, or enrages us with its corruption, or saddens us with its bitterness. But sometimes Death can dress in such a way as to dazzle us with beauty and glory. (Sometimes when death strikes us as beautiful in a way, it is difficult to believe that this is in fact death we are looking at, as it was for Abraham; like when a person dies in a peaceful way, a way that befits their life, and surrounded by love.) This is true to my experience of encountering death in the world: it can make me feel all these emotions, depending on the circumstances surrounding it, the guise in which it is presented. Perhaps a "good death" is one in which one can encounter death's beautiful and glorious face, rather than its fierce, bitter, or corrupt one.

The Testament of Abraham (1st/2nd century CE Pseudepigrapha)

Excerpts from chapters 16-20 (long recension)

"The invisible God said to Death, Come hither, you bitter and fierce name of the world, hide your fierceness, cover your corruption, and cast away your bitterness from you, and put on your beauty and all your glory, and go down to Abraham my friend, and take him and bring him to me. But now also I tell you not to terrify him, but bring him with fair speech, for he is my own friend. Having heard this, Death went out from the presence of the Most High, and put on a robe of great brightness, and made his appearance like the sun, and became fair and beautiful above the sons of men, assuming the form of an archangel, having his cheeks flaming with fire, and he departed to Abraham. Now the righteous Abraham went out of his chamber, and sat under the trees of Mamre, holding his chin in his hand, and awaiting the coming of the archangel Michael. And behold, a smell of sweet odor came to him, and a flashing of light, and Abraham turned and saw Death coming towards him in great glory and beauty. And Abraham arose and went to meet him, thinking that it was the chief-captain of God, and Death beholding him saluted him, saying, Rejoice, precious Abraham, righteous soul, true friend of the Most High God, and companion of the holy angels. Abraham said to Death, Hail you of appearance and form like the sun, most glorious helper, bringer of light, wondrous man, from whence does your glory come to us, and who are you, and whence do you come? Then Death said, Most righteous Abraham, behold I tell you the truth. I am the bitter lot of death. Abraham said to him, Nay, but you are the comeliness of the world, you are the glory and beauty of angels and men, you are fairer in form than every other, and do you say, I am the bitter lot of death, and not rather, I am fairer than every good thing. Death said, I tell you the truth. What the Lord has named me, that also I tell you. Abraham said, For what are you come hither? Death said, For your holy soul am I come. Then Abraham said, I know what you mean, but I will not go with you; and Death was silent and answered him not a word.Then Abraham arose, and went into his house, and Death also accompanied him there. And Abraham went up into his chamber, and Death went up with him. And Abraham lay down upon his couch, and Death came and sat by his feet. Then Abraham said, Depart, depart from me, for I desire to rest upon my couch. Death said, I will not depart until I take your spirit from you. Abraham said to him, By the immortal God I charge you to tell me the truth. Are you death? Death said to him, I am Death. I am the destroyer of the world. Abraham said, I beseech you, since you are Death, tell me if you come thus to all in such fairness and glory and beauty? Death said, Nay, my Lord Abraham, for your righteousnesses, and the boundless sea of your hospitality, and the greatness of your love towards God has become a crown upon my head, and in beauty and great peace and gentleness I approach the righteous, but to sinners I come in great corruption and fierceness and the greatest bitterness and with fierce and pitiless look. Abraham said, I beseech you, hearken to me, and show me your fierceness and all your corruption and bitterness. And Death said, You can not behold my fierceness, most righteous Abraham. Abraham said, Yes, I shall be able to behold all your fierceness by means of the name of the living God, for the might of my God that is in heaven is with me. Then Death put off all his comeliness and beauty, and all his glory and the form like the sun with which he was clothed, and put upon himself a tyrant's robe, and made his appearance gloomy and fiercer than all kind of wild beasts, and more unclean than all uncleanness. And he showed to Abraham seven fiery heads of serpents and fourteen faces, (one) of flaming fire and of great fierceness, and a face of darkness, and a most gloomy face of a viper, and a face of a most terrible precipice, and a face fiercer than an asp, and a face of a terrible lion, and a face of a cerastes and basilisk. He showed him also a face of a fiery scimitar, and a sword-bearing face, and a face of lightning, lightning terribly, and a noise of dreadful thunder. He showed him also another face of a fierce stormy sea, and a fierce rushing river, and a terrible three-headed serpent, and a cup mingled with poisons, and in short he showed to him great fierceness and unendurable bitterness, and every mortal disease as of the odor of Death. And from the great bitterness and fierceness there died servants and maid-servants in number about seven thousand, and the righteous Abraham came into indifference of death so that his spirit failed him.And the all-holy Abraham, seeing these things thus, said to Death, I beseech you, all-destroying Death, hide your fierceness, and put on your beauty and the shape which you had before.

It is interesting that death is characterized in extreme form here either exquisite and inviting or doom and destruction. This source reminds me somewhat of the selection from Berakhot 8a in that it ignores the middle ground, the mundane side of death. It would be a travesty to experience a grueling death, but perhaps it would be as tragic to imagine our death as commonplace, ordinary, “just death.” Part of our ego wants to have the most memorable end to life, so that we can be emblazoned on the memory of our loved ones. One element that is particularly awful about pandemics, genocides and wars is that the individual story is lost to the collective, the death becomes a number. Resources are so limited that care cannot be given properly in caring for the dying or in burial. Last wishes come secondary to the greater good, the ritual fabric of life is unraveled. Another death some people find horrifying is dying alone in a nursing home, where people unceremoniously pass away each day, with caregivers who confront death as “part of the job.” While I do not place judgment on this type of death, and know that the experience can be elevated by dedicated nursing home and hospice professionals, the fear speaks to the human need to be important to someone, to be missed because you offered something special. By accompanying dying people during their final stage of life, no matter the setting, no matter how painful, we can offer solace that their death isn’t “just death.”

"Isaac Blessing Jacob" Govert Teunisz Flinck

And straightway Death hid his fierceness, and put on his beauty which he had before. And Abraham said to Death, Why have you done this, that you have slain all my servants and maidservants? Has God sent you hither for this end this day? Death said, Nay, my Lord Abraham, it is not as you say, but on your account was I sent hither. Abraham said to Death, How then have these died? Has the Lord not spoken it? Death said, Believe, most righteous Abraham, that this also is wonderful, that you also were not taken away with them. Nevertheless I tell you the truth, for if the right hand of God had not been with you at that time, you also would have had to depart from this life... And going up into his chamber he lay down, and Death came and stood before him. And Abraham said to him, Depart from me, for I desire to rest, because my spirit is in indifference. Death said, I will not depart from you until I take your soul. And Abraham with an austere countenance and angry look said to Death, Who has ordered you to say this? You say these words of yourself boastfully, and I will not go with you until the chief-captain Michael come to me, and I shall go with him. But this also I tell you, if you desire that I shall accompany you, explain to me all your changes, the seven fiery heads of serpents and what the face of the precipice is, and what the sharp sword, and what the loud-roaring river, and what the tempestuous sea that rages so fiercely. Teach me also the unendurable thunder, and the terrible lightning, and the evil-smelling cup mingled with poisons. Teach me concerning all these. And Death answered, Listen, righteous Abraham. For seven ages I destroy the world and lead all down to Hades, kings and rulers, rich and poor, slaves and free men, I convoy to the bottom of Hades, and for this I showed you the seven heads of serpents. The face of fire I showed you because many die consumed by fire, and behold death through a face of fire. The face of the precipice I showed you, because many men die descending from the tops of trees or terrible precipices and losing their life, and see death in the shape of a terrible precipice. The face of the sword I showed you because many are slain in wars by the sword, and see death as a sword. The face of the great rushing river I showed you because many are drowned and perish snatched away by the crossing of many waters and carried off by great rivers, and see death before their time. The face of the angry raging sea I showed you because many in the sea falling into great surges and becoming shipwrecked are swallowed up and behold death as the sea. The unendurable thunder and the terrible lightning I showed you because many men in the moment of anger meet with unendurable thunder and terrible lightning coming to seize upon men, and see death thus. I showed you also the poisonous wild beasts, asps and basilisks, leopards and lions and lions' cubs, bears and vipers, and in short the face of every wild beast I showed you, most righteous one, because many men are destroyed by wild beasts, and others by poisonous snakes, serpents and asps and cerastes and basilisks and vipers, breathe out their life and die. I showed you also the destroying cups mingled with poison, because many men being given poison to drink by other men straightway depart unexpectedly.Abraham said, I beseech you, is there also an unexpected death? Tell me. Death said, Verily, verily, I tell you in the truth of God that there are seventy-two deaths. One is the just death, buying its fixed time, and many men in one hour enter into death being given over to the grave. Behold, I have told you all that you have asked, now I tell you, most righteous Abraham, to dismiss all counsel, and cease from asking anything once for all, and come, go with me, as the God and judge of all has commanded me. Abraham said to Death, Depart from me yet a little, that I may rest on my couch, for I am very faint at heart, for since I have seen you with my eyes my strength has failed me, all the limbs of my flesh seem to me a weight as of lead, and my spirit is distressed exceedingly. Depart for a little; for I have said I cannot bear to see your shape. Then Isaac his son came and fell upon his breast weeping, and his wife Sarah came and embraced his feet, lamenting bitterly. There came also his men slaves and women slaves and surrounded his couch, lamenting greatly. And Abraham came into indifference of death, and Death said to Abraham, Come, take my right hand, and may cheerfulness and life and strength come to you. For Death deceived Abraham, and he took his right hand, and straightway his soul adhered to the hand of Death.”

Chapter VII:

Mortality Makes Life Matter

Illustration: "The Thinker"
Artist: Auguste Rodin

Otherwise there would be nothing to lose in the first place — I want to contrast this assessment of the winning culture in the "religion of baseball" with the later sentence "life is a series of crushing disappointments," followed by Kurt Vonnegut's pronouncement that "Maturity is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists." The reason that life is disappointing is precisely because there is so much to live for. Life is riddled with disappointments because between the potholes is a road paved with beauty and possible success. We are disappointed when we hit a pothole because we were so close to experiencing something that was, or that we at least believed to be, beautiful. The key to living with balance and obtaining wisdom is to appreciate those beautiful things which we have experienced, and to acknowledge in our disappointment that the possibility of beauty existed. This is not a culture of winning, per se, but a culture in which winning and losing are always intertwined, whichever we are experiencing currently.

At Luz — At the moment of death, Jacob invokes Luz. True, from a narrative perspective, as recounted in Genesis 35, Jacob did in fact travel to Luz. However, Jacob's mentioning of Luz at the time of his death compels us to think of another significance of the word "Luz." In Jewish tradition, "luz" is also used to identify the special indestructible bone in the human skull that bridges life and death. It is from this bone that a human will be resurrected during the Messianic period. Interpreted in this light, Jacob, in a kind dying fashion, hints to his son that imminent death is merciful and welcome. Yes, we all have regrets when we die and we shouldn't be afraid to articulate those regrets at the moment of death (and ideally, as Rabbi Lew urges, many times before death). However, Jacob's example also reminds us of another feature of dying well: Give comfort to the living.

I squandered it — This sentiment is tragically conveyed in Thorton Wilder's play Our Town. In the final act, formerly alive characters have the ability to reflect on their lives by watching past moments from those lives. Those that have been dead a long time don't reflect anymore. The newly dead, however, want to relive the precious moments of their lives. However, even the newly dead soon learn that such an endeavor can only bring pain. They have the ability to relive their lives, but choose not to because the pain of reliving and recognizing all of the missed opportunities is just too great. Part of dying well is the lifelong work trying to live without regrets and acknowledging those disappointments throughout life when they do manifest.

"This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared" by Rabbi Alan Lew

One of the ironies of Jewish-American life is that Yom Kippur often takes place against the backdrop of either the baseball playoffs or the World Series itself. In 1986 I had a congregation full of Mets fans, in the suburbs of New York. The Mets were locked in a tense playoff with the Houston Astros, and a critical game fell on the night of Kol Nidre. We had half our usual attendance for Kol Nidre that night. It was then that I realized that baseball and Yom Kippur were competing religions.Baseball is a religion of winning. We identify with a team, and when they win we feel a lift—we feel as if we have won. When they lose, we just don't pay very close attention. Even fans of perennial losers (a religion in itself) or those rare and true fans who appreciate loss for the depth of feeling it provokes, and for the wellsprings of compassion and affection it opens, begin with a yearning to win. Otherwise there would be nothing to lose in the first place.Yom Kippur, on the other hand, is all about losing. Losing nobly perhaps, but losing nevertheless. As our friends the Buddhists cheerfully remind us, suffering is inevitable in life. It is, in fact, life's first noble truth. Suffering is endemic to the experience of being alive, and Yom Kippur is the day when we Jews also acknowledge the truth of this. We acknowledge that we have fallen short, and we acknowledge that life has fallen short of our expectations as well.Life is a series of crushing disappointments. As Kurt Vonnegut once said, "Maturity is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists." And the fact is that as life progresses, most of us find ourselves living among the mounting debris of shattered hope. There is a certain point in our lives when it becomes clear that we are not going to attain what we dreamed of attaining in our lives, or far worse, we do attain it and it isn't what we thought it would be. We suffer broken relationships with our parents or our children. A close friendship goes bad or simply withers from distance and neglect We suffer the death of those who are close to us and the diminishment of our own capacities through illness or through the simple advancement of time and of age. Winning? Come on. How can we talk about winning when the overwhelming first-person biological reality of our experience as human beings is that from our twenties forward, we are unmistakably, definitively losing? Except, of course, for one small detail. There is in fact one human capacity that actually increases, that grows stronger and deeper as we grow older, and that is wisdom. And the reason wisdom increases as we age is that the source of all wisdom is precisely our death. As we approach death, we approach wisdom.We see this in the Torah with Moses, at the moment before his death. We often read this passage just before Yom Kippur. With his death upon him, Moses is no longer afraid of it, and he has a vision beyond his own life. At the moment of death, the Torah suggests, we finally stop denying death, and when this happens, we also stop denying life. We finally see our lives for what they really are. Jacob is an even better example. His son Joseph comes to visit him as he lies dying, and he summons up his last jot of strength and tells Joseph two things. "God almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me," he says, and a little later he continues, "And as for me, Rachel died on me, along the way, in the land of Canaan." Standing at the last moment of his life, Jacob is able to see it clearly, and to express its meaning with great precision. The most significant moment for Jacob spiritually was the first time God appeared to him at Luz, which he then renamed Beth El (the House of God) in honor of the experience. This was the event, it was now clear to him, that had shaped his life, that had given him his mission. Personally, emotionally ("as for me"), the most significant event in his life, he could now see, was the death of his beloved wife Rachel, whom he had to bury along the side of the road near Efrat. In my years as a hospice chaplain, I often witnessed this kind of vision. As death approached, even the most ordinary people often acquire the ability to sum up the truth of their lives, often in a single heartbreaking sentence. "I married the wrong man, and I lived without love all my life," one woman told me during the last hours of her life. "I never wrote that book I always meant to write," a dying man told me. "This life was a precious opportunity and I squandered it. And at the moment of our own death, we also become capable of blessing, of seeing deeply into those we love, and giving to them from the core of our being. The deathbed blessing is a commonplace in the Torah. Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau. Moses and Jacob bless all their sons. They are able to do so because the proximity of death opens their eyes. Suddenly they can see all the way to the core of their own essential nature and pass on the full force of their spiritual burden from there. I began to admire Mayor Giuliani of New York City about a year and a half before the events of 9/11 cast him in such a heroic light. I had never liked him much, but I began to change my mind about him during the period when he was trying to decide whether or not to run for the United States Senate. In the end, he decided not to run. Things had not been going well for him. First there were the reports of his marital infidelity. Then came the news that he had prostate cancer and was in need of immediate treatment. Finally he held a press conference to announce that he was withdrawing from the race. This is what he said: "I have a hard time deciding whether to run or not and deciding what kind of treatment to choose. This has never happened to me before. Until now, I have always been able to make difficult decisions when I had to. But this time I have found in thinking about it, in suffering over it, that something that is very painful and very difficult, but also very beautiful happens to you. It makes you figure out what you're really all about and what's really important to you. It makes you figure out what should be important to you, and where the core of you really exists. I guess, because I've been in politics so long, I used to think the core of me was politics, but perhaps it isn't."

Turn one day before your death… and we never know when that day might be, so we have to turn every day — As death approaches, one has the tendency toward introspection and reflection. Yom Kippur reminds us that this exercise should not be reserved for us only near our end, but we should be constantly inclined toward turning, or teshuvah. Indeed, in another place in the Talmud we are taught: "One should always incite their good inclination over their evil inclination… if one subdues it, excellent; if not, one should remind oneself of the day of death." (b. Berachot 5a) Seeing death up close, whether it be a loved one or a patient of ours, can be a constant reminder that we should seize the opportunity to better ourselves well before the time of our death. As Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi reminds us, "we never know when that day might be, so we have to turn every day."

The proximity of death — Crisis can shake us out of our routines and force us to take a closer look at ourselves, our attitudes, our routines. Though pointing out silver linings can very much invalidate another person's experience, making meaning of our own suffering can lead to exponential growth. Often, our insights help us reorient ourselves and adjust our personal trajectories towards a more hopeful, meaningful and connected existence. We feel more empowered and inspired, and less like a victim of fate or random chance.

Any loss that carries us closer to the core of life is no loss at all — This is a very difficult message to internalize in the midst of a loss that feels crushing and black and irredeemable. But tragedy plus time equals comedy, or perhaps in some cases, wisdom. I have found that with time many of the tragedies I believed could never yield any good were able to help me understand something, and to bring wisdom to my living.

Giuliani had always struck me as a tough, hard-charging sort of figure before this. Perhaps that was why I didn't like him very much. But here he was in his mid-fifties, hesitating magnificently. All of a sudden the possibility of death loomed before him and forced him to take a long, hard look at himself, to ask himself the most fundamental kind of questions. Who am I? What is my life really about? We Jews aren't supposed to wait for the end before we ask ourselves these questions. We are supposed to ask them all the time, and especially on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur urges us to ask them over and over again. The tradition urges us to ask them. Turn one day before your death, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi tells us in the Talmud, and we never know when that day might be, so we have to turn every day. And Rabbi Jack Riemer reminds us we are not supposed to wait for a hanging, or for the doctors to pronounce that awesome word of judgment "malignant," because by then it might be too late. We are supposed to ask these questions all the time, and at least once a year, at least on this solemn day. What is my life really about? What is the truth of my life? This is why Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our death, the day we wear a shroud and abstain from all life-affirming activities. The day we into the funereal liturgy "Who will live and who will die?" The rabbis wanted to bring us to the point of existential crisis. They wanted to bring us to the point of asking the crucial question, What is my life all about? And they knew, as Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and Mayor Giuliani knew, that few of us ask this question until it's too late; few of us ask this question until the last moments of our life. So they have us stage a dramatic re-creation of our death on this day. For my entire lifetime, the economic climate has been such that it has been fairly easy for most of us to feel as if we've been winning. But the truth is, no one wins this game. No one gets out of this one alive. The best we can do is lose nobly, and to lose nobly means to be able to say at the end of our days that we know what our life is about. We know what's at its core. To lose nobly means to answer that question in time to move toward that core while we are still alive. The irony is, it is precisely losing, it is precisely failure and loss and death, that seem to push us to the point of finally asking this question. I know a married couple who went through a major crisis. She had an affair. He was crushed and angry, of course, and the marriage seemed doomed. But as we spoke in my office, it developed that the affair was not the problem; it was merely the symptom of the problem. The problem was that the couple had fallen into a crushing deadness in their marriage. They had become careless about spending time together and rarely did, except to collapse in a stupor every evening after both of them got home from their very demanding jobs, comatose and half dead, before the TV. The affair was a failure, a horrible, unconscious act of anger, as adultery usually is. I don't recommend it. But the truth is, it also brought them back to life. The affair might have been the beginning of the end of their marriage, or it might have been the beginning of the renewal of their marriage, but the point is, it woke them up. It brought them back to the core of their being, that pulsing center of their lives from which they were estranged. The proximity of death, the ultimate failure, also seems to open us up this way. In his novel The Idiot, Fyodor Dostoyebsky wrote a thinly veiled account of the time the czar played a terrible joke on Dostoyevsky and his circle of revolutionary intellectual friends. The czar had them all arrested. And then one morning they were awakened at dawn and told they were to be executed. As Dostoyevsky rode to the execution with his friends in an open wagon, a strange sensation began to overcome him. He felt a spacious, oceanic sense of time. He felt as if the limits of time had opened wide. In a few minutes he would die, but he felt as if he had all the time in the world to do what he needed to do. What he needed to do, he now realized, was to say good-bye to his comrades for the final time. He did this in a full and leisurely way, the great love he bore his comrades welling up to the bursting point. Then he decided to spend his last moments on earth looking around at the world for the last time. As he did so, he found himself gazing at the tin roof of a nearby barn. A brilliant morning sun was shining, and a great burst of sunlight shone off the tin roof. Suddenly Dostoyevsky knew for a certainty that was what he would become. In a few minutes he would die, and he would become this blazing, brilliant light. This knowledge filled him with an ecstasy so intense he thought that if it went on for even another minute, he wouldn't be able to bear it. It was then that the czar's captain told them it was all a joke. The czar had only wanted to frighten them. They wouldn't die after all. Dostoyevsky was changed forever by this experience. It showed him who he was. It took him to the core of his being, and he was a different man for the rest of his life. This is what Yom Kippur asks us today. What is the core of our life? Are we living by it? Are we moving toward it? We shouldn't wait until the moment of our death to seek the answers. At the moment of death, there may be nothing we can do about it but feel regret. But if we seek the answers now, we can act in the coming year to bring ourselves closer to our core/ This is the only life we have, and we will all lose it. No one gets out alive, but to lose nobly is a beautiful thing. To know the core of our being is to move beyond winning and losing. It is to enter that moment where life is deep and rich and God is present for us. We all lose, some of us nobly, and all of us with a certain amount of tragedy. But as Rabbi Zimmerman (a.k.a. Bob Dylan) reminds us, "there's no success like failure," and any loss that carries us closer to the core of life is no loss at all.

Questions to encourage spiritual life review:

- Were you ever religious?
- How did that play a role in your life?
- Do you feel a connection to God?
- Was that connection stronger or weaker at other times in your life?
- How do you feel when you think about God?
- Are you proud of what you accomplished in your life?
- What values are most important to you?
- Have you ever had to compromise your values for something you accomplished?
- What stands out as the most meaningful experience you shared with others? What about alone?
- What role has [insert value] played in your life? Who in your life did you show [insert value] most to? Are there times when you weren't able to show [insert value?] How did you feel about that?
- What is your relationship like with your kids? Has that relationship changed over time? Are you proud of the job you did as a parent? Do you have any parenting regrets?

Tips:

- For verbal patients/loved ones
  - Validate what is shared, don't try to fix or make them feel better
  - Respect unvoiced boundaries, don't push a topic the dying person seems to be avoiding
  - Let the person talk, don't interrupt with your own story or perspective
- For non-verbal patients/loved ones
  - Start by acknowledging they will not be able to respond
  - You can say you believe God hears them, if appropriate Allow A LOT of wait time in between questions (20-30 seconds) Offer affirmative presence during wait time

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Life Preserve

By Kayley Romick

don't stand
idly by rather
stand by as life
ebbs and fritters
preserve life like
jam, stir it
up with sugar
over low heat
become

a jar
to hold it
give it shape

a cloth to cover it
and wait for the lid
to twist into place