

***Toch sh'ar avley tzion virushalayim***  
**Among the Mourners of Zion and Jerusalem**  
**Kol Nidrei Sermon 5779**  
**Tikkun v'Or, Ithaca, New York**  
**Rabbi Brian Walt**

I want to dedicate my sermon tonight to everyone in this sacred space who is grieving the loss of a loved one who died over the past year. In particular, this year two TVO members, Paul Machlin and Benjamin Shay Resnick Gertz died, both within the space of one week this summer.

Paul, the husband of Lisa Machlin and father of Noah, Josh, Julia and Hope, was a beloved longtime member of our congregation and a teacher in our religious school. He also taught in the Ithaca community. Paul was a gifted teacher who had a special way of connecting with the hearts, minds and souls of autistic children. Paul gave a lot to our community and I will always remember his smile and the incredible love that he had for his family.

And Shay was the son of Carole Resnick and Deb Gertz. Shay was an extraordinary young man about to finish his undergraduate degree. He lived fully for his much too short time. He was beloved by his many friends and his community in Syracuse. He was a young person who was equally able to engage with adults and his peers.

To Lisa, Noah, Josh, Julia and Hope and to Carole and Deb we say *Hamakom yenachem etchem* May the Source of Life comfort you.

And, to all who suffered loss this year we say, *Hamakom yenachem etchem toch she'ar avley tzion virushalayim*. May the Source of Comfort and Consolation comfort you among all who mourn. We will share the names of those who died this year at the end of our service tonight and will gather together for Yizkor tomorrow evening when we will remember all our loved ones.

The loss of loved ones is an intensely personal event that shatters our regular lives, often changing them in profound, challenging and sometimes surprising ways. The ending of the traditional greeting mourners is really powerful and poignant; "may you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The tradition points us to the reality that mourning is not just personal it is communal, it is something we share with others in a community of mourners. There is always a community of mourners that shifts over time. If we live long enough we all get to experience being part of the community of mourners several times in our lives. That is a natural part of the human condition.

Rabbi Zalmen Schachter Shalomi once said that when to fill out the cause of death on a death certificate, the the deepest response is birth! Birth is the cause of death. Impermanence is the essential truth of the human condition. We accompany one another through life until we die. That is our sacred task and journey as humans. And Yom Kippur is a day that invites us to focus on this impermanence in many different ways.

*May the memory of all who have died this year be for a blessing. May all mourners be surrounded by the love of friends, family and community.*

As some of you know, this year I am also part of the community of mourners. Three weeks ago my sister, Annette, died and tonight I want to dedicate this sermon to her as well and reflect on some of what I learned from that experience what it means to be in the community of mourners.

My older sister, Annette, a family therapist, an artist, lived with her two dogs that she loved dearly, in Berkeley, California.

On Friday night at the end of May this year I arrived back on Martha's Vineyard from Boston. About five minutes into the drive from the ferry to our home, I get a call on my cellphone and I see it is a call from a hospital in Oakland. I pulled over into the overlook on the side of the road and answered the call.

The doctor at the ICU in the Summit Hospital in Oakland tells me that my sister, Annette, who was admitted to the hospital two days earlier, is fighting for her life. Her liver, kidneys and heart were all failing. The doctor suggests that family members who want to see Annette should come to Oakland as soon as possible. I was in shock and asked some questions but very soon I found myself saying the following with a lot of passion and clarity:

With tears streaming down my face, I said something like this, "If my sister is about to die, she does not want any heroic measures to keep her alive. She has significant cognitive impairment, has suffered immensely over the past two years, and she made her wishes clear several years ago that if faced with a life-threatening situation she did not want heroic medical intervention. Her wish is to be allowed to die as comfortably as possible."

The doctor appropriately made sure that I had the authority to give such a directive. I did because as her cognitive ability deteriorated over the past five or more years, my brother and I had several conversations with her about her wishes. Yet, I felt a little guilty. I had been so strong and passionate in my statement to her. Maybe I was making the wrong decision? How do I know that is what she still wants? Maybe she changed her mind? Even with all those conversations nothing about this is easy. I think I may have said to the doctor that I hope I hadn't offended her by what I just said.

I don't know if I did, but in any case the doctor then said with some emotion, "Mr Walt, I want you to tell you how much I admire you and your brother advocating for your sister. It is so wonderful that you and your brother are standing up for your sister at this moment in her life. Your request and your sister's wishes make total sense."

I was just stunned. I had just made such a difficult decision and the doctor felt like a guardian angel. **She not only agreed to follow our wishes but confirmed my sister's choice and our support for that choice in such a lovely way.** This doctor provided care for my sister for the next six days that she spent in the ICU, and was just the first of many angels around us in the hospital.

We were surrounded by angels over the next six intense days as we watched my sister slowly recover in the intensive care unit and made the decision to take her home and provide her with hospice care. And, I felt this presence of angelic beings for the next 12 weeks as friends, family

and caregivers surrounded my sister with love and accompanied her on her last weeks in life. It was a terribly sad, difficult and beautiful time for all of us.

The moment on the phone with the doctor brought to mind a similar moment 21 years ago when my mother, who also suffered from Alzheimer's and was living in a nursing home, got something stuck in her throat. The nurses feared she would contract pneumonia and wanted to order an ambulance immediately. Luckily, I was visiting her at that moment and the nurse told me that they were calling an ambulance. I intervened passionately, telling the nurse that before they did anything I wanted to confer with Gene Bishop, a doctor/friend of mine. The nurse was very surprised as she felt that it was an emergency. She couldn't understand why I would even question whether she should immediately call an ambulance.

Dr. Bishop pointed out that if my mother were to go to the hospital the doctors would be required immediately to do anything and everything they could to keep her alive. If you know that is not what she wants, you should not allow her to be taken to the hospital and ask for her to be in hospice care.

In this instance, the nurse was not at all sympathetic. She simply could not understand how I could make such a decision. My mom suffered from Alzheimer's and she had already spent several years in a nursing home. In her own life, she had seen her own mom develop Alzheimer's and die a slow and painful death and she made clear to us that she didn't want to die that way. She had already lived several years in a way she would not have chosen for herself. I saw the event as a God given opportunity to choose life by allowing death to happen with a focus on her comfort. I believe that a loving surrender to allow death is profoundly difficult and can be very complicated but it is often also a wise, loving, a life affirming choice. I learned from both my sister and my mom's deaths that allowing death to take its natural course is to choose life.

In our world with such advanced medical technology, more and more people are facing such difficult choices. Thankfully there are many resources to guide people in taking action to make a choice about how we balance our desire for a long life with our desire for quality of life. There is no one right choice. My family's choice was right because we were honoring my mom and my sister's wishes. If they had chosen to use everything possible to extend her lifespan, we would have honored that request.

That is why it is so important for each of us to make those difficult decisions and communicate our wishes to our loved ones prior to death. 90% of Americans think it is important to talk with loved ones about end of life care but only 30% do it. A few years ago I taught a class on end of life issues at TvO. Maybe it is time for the class again.

What do Jewish sources say about this issue?

There is some disagreement in Jewish sources about what is acceptable in these situations. In general, one is prohibited from hastening death in any way. B'al korchecha ticheye, ub'al korchecha tamut. You do not choose to live (be born) and you do not choose to die. God decides when we are born and when we die. Therefore all Orthodox and traditional rabbis reject the idea of physician assisted suicide (dying) as do most Reform rabbis. There are one or two Reform

rabbis who have supported it. Personally, I also support this option for people who are facing long, debilitating illnesses and it is an option I would want for myself.

In the case of my sister and mother, the Jewish legal position is not so clear. One is allowed to do whatever necessary to provide comfort for a person who is dying. Some of the measures to provide comfort, like morphine, can hasten death. So the issue is complicated for Jews who are bound by halacha, Jewish law. Some would make comfort the overriding value while others may be more cautious because of the prohibition against hastening death. Some may even forbid the use of morphine. This is an interesting and complicated question that deserves more discussion, but I want to return to the angels.

I talked earlier about the angels who accompanied us in the hospital. In addition to her ICU doctor we were blessed with the help of an amazing palliative care doctor, who in a meeting attended by all the doctors taking care of Annette, lovingly and patiently guided us through the decision not to pursue further medical intervention, to take her home and allow her to die in hospice. He was an expert on this issue and was available to us throughout that week, sometimes through some very painful moments.

The wisdom shared with us by the palliative care doctor was familiar to me from the work of Dr. Atul Guwande, a pioneer in the field of palliative care. Dr. Guwande suggests that the important question for people facing terminal illnesses is to ask what is most meaningful and important to them in the last days of their lives. And this means whatever is most important. We knew that what Annette would want most was to die at home, which was her sanctuary, filled with her beautiful art work and we thought she would treasure seeing her dogs which were the love of her life. Getting her to spend her last days in her home with the possibility of seeing her dogs is what she would have wanted and it is what we fortunately were able to give her.

Hospitals are very real and intense places. All the patients and their families have a story. There is a lot of pain, fear, hope and loss and much else. The ICU in hospitals is even more intense. Hospitals are filled with Malachey hashareyt/Angels of service/ serving the highest good; doctors, nurses, counsellors, maintenance workers and so many people dedicated to the care of the sick.

I was so moved by the time we spent in the visitors room. Everyone is kinder to one another, we all know that we are there with loved ones facing adversity, each one with their own story. There is a softness in the relationships between strangers, a deeper compassion and love. The hospital was in Oakland and the Golden State Warriors, the local NBA team for those of you who are not corporate sports enthusiasts, was in the Western Conference finals. It was even touching and a relief to watch the game with other visitors and hospital staff.

And all the visitors are there as advocates for their loved ones. I feel I have learned how to be an effective advocate for my family when in a hospital. I found that I needed to be clear about what we needed and wanted. At our request, the doctors sat down with our family on two separate occasions for meetings of over an hour. They were intense, honest, loving encounters where they shared their wisdom and experience and we shared our questions and wishes. They were two extraordinary encounters.

When Annette was discharged I sat in the back of the ambulance with her taking her back home for the last time. It was a profound moment in our relationship. The angels accompanied us not only in the hospital but also in the last weeks of her life. We hired Ana Moa, an amazing Thongan woman, who with some help from her other family members, took care of Annette for the last 12 weeks of her life that she spent at home. Ana took care of everything in a beautiful, loving and spiritual way. Friends came to visit Annette, family came from far and near. **Dalya and Mick who were very close to her both visited her and called her frequently singing her favorite songs with her.** New and deeper bonds were created between cousins, between my brother, sister and me, between her friends, with her neighbors. There were definitely hard moments but for the most part she was comfortable and surrounded by love.

Losing a sister was very different from losing my parents. Losing a sibling is a different existential experience. It raises the specter of one's own mortality in a more direct way. You are losing someone who knows you from the first. Just today I received a beautiful note from a friend in which she wrote, "Our siblings are the repositories of so many singular shared memories that the loss is particularly hard. No one else will ever know us in that way. And while we're somehow steeled to the fact that we will not always have our parents, It seems like we're not wired to feel that way about our siblings. They're supposed to be there, sharing the journey."

My experience with my sister also reminded me that all deaths can bring up how complicated some family relationships are.

Judaism has a wonderful set of rituals for burial and the mourning period. Right after the burial the family leaves passing through two lines of those gathered who say the traditional greeting, *Hamakom yenachem etchem toch sh'ar avley tzion virushalayim*/May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. Right after we finished filling the grave with dirt, we passed through the lines and became mourners. After that period we all felt loved by so many people who reached out to share food, condolences, support and love. We sat shiva for four days in Berkeley and then two days back home. On Shabbat we had a family Shabbat dinner in Annette's home without Annette! It was sad and joyous.

Three and a half weeks ago, the day before I was to travel to be with my sister I was preparing High Holiday services and came across two poems that spoke to me deeply, both of which have been included in our services.

Not knowing that my sister would die that day, I wrote on the morning of her death to my family and her friends,

Hi Friends and family,

Today Yda arrives in Berkeley. I am sure Annette will be deeply comforted by her presence even if she is asleep most or all of the time. Tomorrow I am traveling there.

Yesterday I was struck by two poems that speak to this moment for me/us. Here they are:

## **Bedside Manners**

*Christopher Wiseman*

How little the dying seem to need—  
A drink perhaps, a little food,  
A smile, a hand to hold, medication,  
A change of clothes, an unspoken  
Understanding about what's happening.  
You think it would be more, much more,  
Something more difficult for us  
To help with in this great disruption,  
But perhaps it's because as the huge shape  
Rears up higher and darker each hour  
They are anxious that we should see it too  
And try to show us with a hand-squeeze.

We panic to do more for them,  
And especially when it's your father,  
And his eyes are far away, and your tears  
Are all down your face and clothes,  
And he doesn't see them now, but smiles  
Perhaps, just perhaps because you're there.  
How little he needs. Just love. More Love.

Indeed, Just love. More love.

And then, some challenging wisdom for every morning.

## **This Morning**

*David Budbill*

Oh, this life,  
the now,  
this morning.

which I  
can turn  
into forever

by simply  
loving  
what is here,

is gone  
by noon.

I hope Annette has a comfortable day surrounded by love. And that we can simply love whatever "is here" for us in our day.

Good Morning and much love,

Brian

I did not know when I wrote that email that later that day Yda would arrive from South Africa just two hours before Annette died and accompany her in her last two hours of life. What a beautiful gift, the younger sister helping her older sister to die. Heartbreaking and beautiful. Two days later we buried her in Gan Shalom/The Garden of Peace in Brionnes, California.

What my sister needed most during the last few years of her life was love. It is what we all need all our lives and especially at the end. Today as we think about our lives and our relationships with our loved ones all we need is love.

And the challenge every day and every moment in our lives is to love whatever is "here for us."

May we all know that in the end the most important thing we can give one another is love.

And the most important thing we can do in life is to be fully present to whatever is "here" for us.

I am reminded of a moving passage in Stephen Levine's extraordinary book about conversations with people who are dying. He writes about one such conversation with person who is terminally ill:

*"We shared for some time the reality that to be born is to sign a contract. Each is going to witness the other's exit from the body. And how for many people it is the most intense growth they go through together. Painful as hell, incredibly painful. But it is the pain that tears open the heart to life; allowing life to unfold, not in fear, but in a new kindness, a deeper sense of being that does not pull back from impermanence but opens to it as a way of tasting each moment in its precious essence"*

And we are all a community of mourners. May we comfort one another as we accompany one another on the miraculous, mysterious, joyful and challenging journey of life. May we all be comforted in the community of those who have suffered loss of loved ones.

May we be more loving, more compassionate and more forgiving to ourselves and to one another. May we all open to *new kindness, a deeper sense of being that does not pull back from impermanence but opens to it as a way of tasting each moment in its precious essence.*

May we all be blessed with a year of love and presence

May we all be blessed with a year of life, blessing and peace.

May the Source of all Life, comfort us all!

G'mar Chatima Tova! May we all be sealed in the Book of Life!