

For Those Left Behind

A Jewish Anthology of Comfort and Healing

Editors

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**For Those Left Behind ~ A Jewish Anthology of
Comfort and Healing**

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*In loving memory of
Dr. Azriel Eisenberg, scholar and educator
~ My teacher and friend who gave me my start as a writer ~*



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There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

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GLOSSARY

(Many of these Hebrew words and abbreviations are interspersed in the upcoming sections of this book.)

Gan Eden – Garden of Eden.

Gehinom – The Jewish concept of Hell or Purgatory; the spiritual realm in which souls are cleansed.

Goses / Goseset – Dying person.

Halakhah – Jewish Law.

Hevra Kadisha – The synagogue funeral and burial committee.

Heshbon Nefesh – Inner reckoning.

Kaddish Yatom – Mourner's Kaddish; The prayer said by a mourner in a minyan during the mourning period, and on the Yahrzeit.

Kapparah – Atonement for one's sins.

Kittel – A white robe worn by many Jewish men on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur; a reminder of one's mortality on these auspicious days.

Kriah – The ritual of tearing an article of clothing immediately before the funeral.

Levayah – The funeral service.

Ma'ariv (Arvit) – The evening prayer service. (See *Shacharit*.)

Mincha – The afternoon prayer service.

Mitzvot – Good deeds.

Neshama – The soul.

Olam Ha-emet – The world of truth.

Olam Ha-zeh – This world.

Olam Ha-bah – The next world.

Shacharit – The morning prayer service.

Sheloshim – The thirty-day period of mourning after a person's death.

Shiva – The seven-day mourning period after a person's death. (Also Sitting Shiva).

Taharah – The ritual washing of the body and putting on of the burial shrouds in preparation for burial, done by the *Hevra Kadisha*.

Tefilah – Prayer.

Teshuvah – Repentance.

Tikkun – Fixing or Rectifying.

Tzedakah – Charity; also acts of kindness.

Vidui – The Confessional prayer said when death appears to be close.

Yahrzeit – The memorial date.

Yerusha – Inheritance.

Yizkor – Memorial prayers recited on Yom Kippur, Simchat Torah, Pesach, and Shavuot.

ABBREVIATIONS

A.H. – *Alav ha-shalom (aleha ha-shalom)* – May peace be upon him / her. Also *olov ha-sholom*.

H.Y.D. – *Hashem yinkom damo (dama)* – May Hashem avenge his / her blood. (For martyred Jews or Jews killed by anti-Semites.)

Z.L.- *Zichrono livracha (zichronah livracha)* – of blessed memory; also, may his / her memory be a blessing. (For a non-rabbinical person.)

Z.T.L. or Z.Tz.L. – *Zecher tzadik livrakha* – may the memory of the righteous be a blessing. (For a rabbinical / righteous person.)



To everything there is a season,
 And a time for every purpose under heaven.
A time to give birth, and a time to die;
 A time to plant, and a time to uproot;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
 A time to tear down, and a time to build;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
 A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones;
 A time to embrace, and a time to withhold embraces;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
 A time to guard, and a time to cast away;
A time to tear, and a time to sew together;
 A time to be silent, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
 A time for war, and a time for peace.

-Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

INTRODUCTION

When sorrow and grief knock on our door, we are rarely prepared. Yet there is no creature born of woman who can avoid it.

It is the lot of everyone who walks the earth, at one time or another, to meet the dark angel face to face, and suffer the results of such an unwanted encounter.

The ninetieth Psalm in Scripture knew of this ubiquitous reality millennia ago. "You return humans to dust; You stated, 'Return O mortals ... You engulf us in sleep ... We are consumed by Your anger.' "

So much of the beautiful poetry in the Psalter returns to this constant challenge – the brevity of life, the sorrow of those left behind, the fear of everyone who comes closer to death every day that passes.

When the dark shadow falls on our home, or on our community, we grasp for support from many places. From those who share our grief – fellow travelers in the journey through the valley; from the memories in our hearts and in our photo albums, from the mementos sitting proudly on the coffee table or the mantel; from the feeling of satisfaction for what our loved ones have achieved; and from the kind words we shared when we could, whether we were aware that death was near or far.

Visitors to a house of mourning more often than not err on the side of trying too hard. Well-meaning, they often try to "cheer up" those who have suffered a loss, or distract them, thinking that this will alleviate, or postpone, the pain. But the pain is like a bodily attack, and needs to be healed in a slow, delicate way. It will not be brushed away or pushed aside. It will not be wiped clean like a slate, or a rubber eraser on paper. It is a lesion that must cure itself with the God-given modes of healing that we are heir to as humans.

We need to talk about our loved one, air our wound, not hide it under a bandage of false salve. The mourner needs to review the memories, talk about the deceased, laugh, cry, be angry – at them, at God, at himself. The range of human emotions must

be set free to explode as they wish, in their normal course. We can facilitate that process by being good listeners, by asking the right questions: "Tell me about your loved one ... What did he/she love, hate, enjoy; what obsessions did she/he have? Who were her/his favorite actors, authors, musicians, artists; his/her closest friends? How did she/he attempt to suck out some of the marrow of life, and live deliberately, as Thoreau tried to do at Walden Pond?"

Adding to this therapeutic mix are soothing words that bring balm, the alchemy of support and love that is transmuted into a process of healing and calming. The process can take weeks, months, years – there is no set time or pattern. Each of us, created in the image of God, is an individual, and we heal according to our own timepiece, our own calendar.

One of the time-tested methods of mending hearts is through words. The right words can act like a magic potion, speeding the long, slow process of restoration ever so slightly.

We bring in this collection words chiseled out of the crucible of the pain of many hands – some from years past, others more recent, some from cavernous voids, others from lesser degrees of sorrow. All in one way or another part of the unfathomable plan of our Maker.

It is the hope of the editors that some of these soothing words can bring at least a small and temporary rising from the dark valley of the shadow. The two of us are not strangers to the life experience we are talking about. Being part of God's mix of living beings, we have suffered our own pain, overcome our own loss, and have confidence that some of the words collected here can be of help to others in the predicament in which we have found ourselves in days past.

Ultimately, words alone are not a panacea, but a contributing source of healing that will uplift a sorrowing heart, dry a tearing eye, and send a mourner on the necessary path to normal living. This is surely what our deceased loved one would want of us. And by finding some sources of comfort and consolation we hope to honor their memory in one of the only ways we mortals can do.

For Those Left Behind

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Chapter One

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON: FACING MORTALITY

Humanity's days are like the grass;
Like a flower of the field one blooms.
A wind passes by and one is no more;
And one's place no longer knows him.
But the steadfastness of God is forever
Toward those who revere God.

-Psalm 103:15-17

It is coming for every one of us, and for everyone that we love. It may come today, tomorrow, or many years from now. We do not know when it will come, although a final illness may announce its imminent arrival. How then do we prepare to receive Death, and what sort of welcome should we give it? Do we welcome it as a friend, see it as a door to the next room of existence, greet it as a path to adventure? Is Death the ultimate enemy? Do we bar the doors and settle down for a siege, fight it with every weapon at our disposal? Do we fear it, seek to hide from it? Or do we pretend, child-like, that if we can't see it coming, Death will never be able to find us?

Truly, there are as many approaches to death and dying as there are humans on this earth. Each works out his or her approach to dying, whether that dying is one's own, or that of a loved one. We have almost all heard something about the stages we go through in coming to terms with mortality; the denial, anger, bargaining, depression and final acceptance, that come to each of us in different proportions.

Only one thing is sure, and that is that death is every bit as much a part of life as is birth. They are the bookends to earthly existence. Dying is also living, right up to the very end, which is also a beginning. The old advice to live every day as if it were

one's last may be trite, but it is true. If we take it, no matter when Death comes for us, whether we are young or old, we will have lived the fullness of Life.

The Pattern of the Universe

Judaism ... teaches us to understand death as part of the Divine pattern of the universe. Actually, we could not have our sensitivity without fragility. Mortality is the tax that we pay for the privilege of love, thought, creative work – the toll on the bridge of being, from which clods of the earth and snow-peaked mountain summits are exempt ... We are prisoners of the years, yet that very prison is the room of discipline in which we, driven by the urgency of time, create.

Actually, there could be no growth, no progress, if generations did not come and go ... There is a time to run gaily with all the intense excitement of a boy with flushed cheeks racing on a summer's day toward the winding river of sport and adventure; there is also the time when that boy, transformed by the alchemy of the years into an old man, no longer seeks to run but it is quite content to sit and browse even unto the twilight.

-Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman

Fear Not Death

If we can succeed in accepting the inexorable fact of our own death with equanimity, perhaps it will mitigate our sorrow over the death of a loved one. We can even learn to regard death not as an enemy but as a friend, who at the appointed hour leads us like Longfellow's little child at bedtime "half willing half reluctant to be led." Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote* spends a desperate night clinging to a window ledge, afraid of falling. When day breaks, he discovers that all the while his feet had been only an inch from the ground. Our fear of death may be as groundless as Sancho's fear of falling. Death may be but the threshold over which we pass from time to eternity; from the realm of the perishable to the realm of the indestructible. And if we come to terms with death, who would dare to set a limit on what we could extract from life?

-Rabbi Sidney Greenberg

A Saying by Black Elk

A book of Native American wisdom: a saying by Black Elk (1770-1853), the chief of the Omaha Native Americans. Black Elk lived at a time of hardship and transition for his tribe. Foreigners threatened to take his land, and the Sioux were a warring tribe against his. But the biggest danger he faced was small pox, which had come to America via Europeans and was a rampant cause of death among Native Americans. Black Elk needed to give his people a sense of hope and perspective on managing a difficult past and having strength to face the future. Here is what he told his tribe:

“Do not grieve. Misfortunes will happen to the wisest and best of men. Death will come, always out of season. It is the command of the Great Spirit, and all the nations and people must obey. What is past and what cannot be prevented should not be grieved for ... Misfortunes do not flourish particularly in our lives – they grow everywhere.”

Not Just Today, But Every Day

Rabbi Eliezer said: “Repent one day before your death.”

His disciples asked: “Does anyone know on what day he will die?”

“All the more reason to repent today,” answered the Rabbi, “in case you die tomorrow. Thus a person’s whole life should be spent in repentance.”

-Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat, 153A

A Modern Version of *Viddui* – the Confessional Before Dying

“I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have made ready”

-Exodus 23:20

The *viddui* (confessional) is traditionally recited when a person is at the point of death. It is important to stress that the *viddui* in no way requires or encourages the loss of hope or the

will to live (Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 338:1). It is intended to comfort the dying person (*goses/goseset*) and lovingly address and ease any fears, guilt, or anxiety. The *viddui* offers an opportunity to say goodbye, and according to traditional Rabbinic understanding, to make one's death a holy moment and a *kapparah* (atonement for one's sins).

My Source, God of those who came before me:
I know that my cure and my death are in Your hands. May You heal me completely, move me to wholeness. But if death is nearing, I am ready to receive it from your hand.

May all the wrongdoings I have done in my life - those things I have done unwittingly, those things I have done knowingly; acts I have done to myself, to others, to You - may they all be forgiven.

Allow the hidden goodness stored for *tzaddikim* (the righteous) to flow over me. Help me to understand the path of life. Gift me continuing life in the hidden world yet to come.

As I come close to You now, Your face bathes me with light. Being at Your right hand fills me deeply.

One who watches over the vulnerable and needy, take care of my close ones, those precious ones with whom my soul is intertwined.

Shema Yisra'el Adonai Elo'heinu Adonai Ehad
Listen, Israel, our God, our Source, is one.

-Rabbi Vicky Hollander

Get A Life

I am madly addicted to reading Personal Ads. They tell you a lot about what people are looking for in their lives. But this past summer, I found an ad in the *Berkshire Advocate*. The woman was not looking for a relationship. Or maybe she was. Maybe she was looking for a relationship ... that goes beyond relationships.

"I am a 58 year old woman with, doctors tell me, one year to live. I would like to spend that year doing something meaningful, interesting, and fun. I like C-span, Bill Moyers, Times crosswords, Nina Totenberg, Anna Quindlan, Mario Cuomo, Nevada. I don't like George Will, R.J. Reynolds, computer talk fundamentalists, California. I have limited stamina and resources. Have you any ideas how I can spend this year making a difference?"

I do not know if the woman is Jewish or not. But she managed to condense the entire Yom Kippur liturgy into eight lines in the back of a free weekly newspaper. "For what is our life, and what our vaunted strength? What can we say in Your presence?" She has re-written the *Unetaneh Tokef*, asking in the pages of the *Advocate* what in our world might temper the Decree over which we have no control. This is the great, unspoken theme of Yom Kippur. It is why we fast. It is why we wear white. It is why tomorrow we will read of Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the whale. On Yom Kippur, we confront our own mortality. There is only one difference between the woman in the *Berkshire Advocate* and us. She gave voice to what we already, deep down in our hearts, know to be true.

-Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin

Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die? Who in the Fullness of Years, and Who Not?

It was the first pulpit Rabbi Cynthia Culpeper ever had – Montgomery, Alabama's Agudath Israel Synagogue, where she began her rabbinic service in the summer of 1995. She had been a Registered Nurse at San Francisco General Hospital, and

decided to return to rabbinical school. Her excitement knew no bounds when she was ordained and then called to serve as spiritual leader in her own congregation in Alabama.

Shortly before Rosh Hashanah she went to have a sore throat checked. The day after Rosh Hashanah she was told that she was HIV-positive, and two weeks after that she was diagnosed with AIDS. She immediately informed her congregation. In January 1994 she received an “occupational exposure” at the hospital where she served, and was tested twice within the year following, both times negative. Now, shortly after the High Holy Days, she was given a death sentence. In her letter to her congregation she wrote: “You can well imagine how intense Yom Kippur was for me this year, my first as a rabbi at that. Its unending primary liturgical message of how our lives are in the balance took on a whole new meaning for me.”

In so many ways the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer still resonates for each of us as we stare fate in the eye and wonder what the future will bring for us. There is no clear answer in the prayer, but only the hope that through *Teshuvah*, *Tefilah* and *Tzedakah* – through Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Kindness – we can make our lives meaningful, whether we have one year or eight years left on this earth.

-D.PE.

Soaring to Greater Heights

(Ari L. Goldman, former religion writer for The New York Times, wrote a touching memoir on his father's death, called Living A Year Of Kaddish, in which he reminisces about the year after his father's passing, and the death of other members of his family. Here are his words:)

Soon after I returned to New York, I got word that my forty-six-year-old cousin Elise Goldman was terminally ill with cancer. Elise, who grew up in Hartford, lived in Florida with her husband, Murray, and their ten-year-old daughter, Shanna. Elise died in late March and the family assembled to bid her farewell a few days later in a cemetery in Woodbridge, New Jersey. I saw a lot of Elise when we were children, but had lost contact with her over the years. I had never met Shanna, but knew who she was right away when I saw her at the funeral.

With big hopeful eyes, a ready smile, and a head of curly black hair, she looked just like her mother.

The family on my father's side is a large one; I am one of fourteen grandchildren of Sam and Nettie Goldman. My cousins and I had gathered before at other family funerals and memorial services, but this one was different. This funeral was for one of our own. Elise was the first of our generation to die.

But as we gathered in sorrow and in pain, we were surprised to find that it was Elise who was concerned about us. Before she died, she penned these words, which were read by our cousin Donna at the funeral: "I feel badly about the pain I have caused through my passing, and yet I could not have waited any longer. I know what awaits me and it is wonderful. In the twilight of death between this world and the next, I could get brief glimpses."

She wrote that she did not fear death and implored us not to grieve. "Remember me with joy and health, and rejoice with me that I am whole again and need not suffer anymore." As we heard her words, it was almost as if she were standing beside us at her open grave. "When you bury me," Donna read, "do not imagine me below the earth, but above it, soaring to greater heights on the wings of those who have gone before and return to help me make my journey from the darkness to the light.

"May your pain be healed in God's light as he has healed mine. I love you all, now and forever."

-Ari L. Goldman

A Holy Place

I still remember one of my first experiences with death, which occurred very early in my work as a chaplain. I was on call at the hospital when I was asked to be with a family whose loved one was dying in the intensive care unit (ICU). Life support had been disconnected; there was nothing to do but wait for death. Family members gathered around the death bed, the eerie sounds of the ICU in the background, as they held a vigil for the woman who was wife, mother and grandmother. The

vigil, as it turned out, went on for some hours. I spent time with the family and then went to visit with other hospital patients, checking back from time to time. I remember little about what was said during that time. What I remember most is the silence, the hush, the sensation of our watching the monitors together. Finally, the line on the heart monitor went flat. There were tears and prayers, and a bit of relief. Most of all, I remember the sense of awe, the awareness that we had all stood in a holy place.

-Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Is It Really The End?

Is it really the end? The path is still clear.
The mists of life still beckon from afar
The sky is still blue, the grass green;
Autumn is coming.

I shall accept the judgment.
My heart harbors no complaint.
How red were my sunsets,
How clear my dawns!
And flowers smiled along my path
As I passed.

-Rachel (trans. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg)

Fifteen-Year-Old Teaches Lessons About Living and Dying

The obituary page of the New York Times on April 30, 1994 told of the death of a fifteen-year-old boy named Joseph Lopez, Jr. It read as follows:

*"Joseph Luis Lopez, Jr., a co-author of *I Will Sing Life: Voice From the Hole in the Wall*, an award-winning book by and about children with life-threatening medical problems, died on Thursday at his family home in Jersey City, NJ. He was 15."*

The obituary goes on to explain that Joseph died of AIDS, after being in a coma for 2 weeks. He liked to call himself Joe Louis Lopez, after the famous boxer, Joe Louis. Joseph had been HIV positive since birth. The medical director of a camp