

When I was 12 years old the מלאך המות *malach ha-mavet*, the angel of death, found me. Well, not me, but when my dad died 10 months before I became Bar Mitzvah, feeling a bit ill one day and dead the next, it was close enough. That summer, in an instant, my idyllic world of childhood ended. I discovered what we all come to realize ... that no one is immune and, early or late, death finds a way to touch us all.

Before Yizkor I have seen, over the years, how those who have not lost a parent or grandparent leave services (or take out their children out), feeling the memorial prayers for the dead are not for them. Is it gratitude for not having to remember a loved one? Is it fear that somehow – *ptu, ptu, ptu* – speaking of death will attract the gaze of the evil eye? Could it be a worry that talking about death will somehow traumatize a child? Or is it a concern that seeing our tears our children confuse our sadness with weakness?

I hear this fear about exposing children to death every year in the weeks prior to taking our 4th grade students and their parents to the cemetery. As many, although not all, of you know, this cemetery trip is an integral part of our curriculum for our 9-year old students. After learning about other life cycle events, the year's studies end with discussions about what happens when we die, and the Jewish rituals meant to give us support and comfort in confronting the death of those we love.

The morning with the 4th graders begins with me asking them to say what immediately comes to mind when they think about cemeteries, particularly in movies. You can imagine the scene they conjure up. It's nighttime, It's foggy – mysterious, ominous. And what they associate with the cemetery is terrifying – ghosts, goblins, zombies ... a veritable Halloween horror house. But they are on to something deeply imbedded in our culture that a cemetery is related to something fearful, dark and dangerous.

In contrast, in Jewish tradition is euphemistically called a בית חיים *Beit Chaim* – a "House of Life." In this is something important for kids to know – that instead of running from death, in contrast to avoiding it, we Jews embrace it. On those mornings we talk

about how the stones and markers in a cemetery help point us to the relationships and values of those who are buried there. More than that, we hope our 4th graders will see the cemetery as a place of beauty. Yes, sadness. But not a place to be afraid of. That's why we ask them to come with a parent or grandparent on a beautiful Spring morning instead of the first time having to be there seeing those they love most in grief.

At the cemetery we look at the stones and try to learn something from them. Long before Twitter's 160-character limit, monument vendors forced people to – as succinctly as possible – sum up a person's life. If you walk in enough cemeteries the truth about what matters most doesn't take long to become clear. It almost always comes down to a few words. Loving mother. Caring father. Loyal friend. Beloved child. Perhaps a line about their laughter, how they inspired others, their generous spirit or compassion. At times a pithy statement of wisdom or moral values. What's not there? Never a statement of their net worth, how many countries they visited or the experiences they checked off their "bucket list". The stones in a cemetery remind us that, in the end, what matters most and lasts longest is pretty simple. It's our relationships – with family, community, our faith, with God. And that is something good for kids to see when they are starting to think about what success looks like or to consider the things they want to accomplish in their lives.

Running between the graves, discovering on a few of the gravestones allusions to the interests of those buried there – playing chess, baking pies, flying planes – our 4th graders realize that something of those who have died still lives on. I hope it dawns on them why we call a cemetery a *Beit Chaim* בית חיים, because in that place we do not just honor the lives of those interred there, but find inspiration for ours. It is in embracing death that our children see the words of the sages of old are true, "the righteous are called living even when dead."

Some try to shield children (or grandchildren) from death, but young people know that death crouches at the door. Indeed, some of the most popular children's movies over the years have shown that death is a natural part of a child's spiritual vocabulary. Many of the highest-grossing animated Disney films, from *Bambi* to *The*

Lion King, *Frozen* to *Moana*, have a story-line that revolves around the death of a parent or grandparent. Pixar Films also focus on death. *Up* begins with a romantic, yet heartbreaking, overview of romantic love, aging, and the inevitable end to the happiest marriage: death. In 2014's *Big Hero Six*, the main character Hiro loses his college-age brother Tadashi in an explosion.

These movies tap into something that kids – even if they can't fully express or understand it – know. Death finds us.

The question before us at *Yizkor* is what we do with having had the מלאך המות *malach ha-mavet* touch us? Do we hide our children from it? Or can we embrace it, realizing that there is so much over which death has no dominion. When we cry for those we loved and who died, our children *should* see us. First, to know that it is OK for them to express emotions. Second, to know that we suffer, too, and they can comfort us – sometimes better than anyone else. And finally, to see how we can be sad, but keep on living – and living well.

A few years ago, a woman named Jennifer Horst, learned that she had leukemia. With the encouragement of hospice workers her husband David spoke to their 5 and 6-year-old that their mom was dying. David said he cried “all the time.” On the day when his 37-year old wife died, David sat at the at his wife's grave with his son on his lap. his son said: “You know, Dad, Mom will never suffer anymore, right? The cancer is gone.” That's when Mr. Horst said he understood that his son had absorbed what he had been trying to communicate to him.

“I lost it,” he said. “They got all the suffering she was going through, or at least he did, and that now it's over. That's amazing.”

At *Yizkor*, we are reminded not only how to grieve, but how to prepare those who follow us – our children and grandchildren for death. How?

- First, to expose them at a non-emotional time to what our traditions teach about death that affirms hope, life and continuity.
- Second, to allow them – when death comes – to feel what they feel. Some cry and some are stoic. Some need to be with around others when they grieve; some just want to be alone. There is no right way to mourn.

- Third, that they, too, can be mourners. How old should a child be to come to a funeral or *shiva*? Alan Wolfelt, a grief counselor and author of dozens of books about loss, suggests, “Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve.”
- Fourth, prepare them for what they will see at a funeral and the emotions they will see expressed. It’s OK if they are sad. You are sad, too, and it’s better that they see it than are kept away, being left only to imagine how horrible it must be if they are not allowed to be there.
- Fifth, remind them that having them there gives us grownups a great gift – a sense of life’s continuity. The innate joy, curiosity and excitement about life that children bring may, in fact, be what is most needed when others are feeling despair.
- Finally, embracing death is not the same thing as dwelling on it. “There is, as Ecclesiastes says, “A time to mourn and a time to refrain from tears.” We should be honest about death and mourning with kids, yet also let children take the lead. Let their questions guide the conversation. And if you don’t know, be honest about it. Kids ask me all the time, “what happens after we die?” – and I tell them the same thing, “I have no idea. But we’ll all find out. Until then, what I do know is how Torah and our traditions tell us how to live.” And so I conclude, “live well.”

As the gates begin to close and the shadows lengthen, *Yizkor* reminds us that our days are not endless. It gives us the perspective to not be afraid even when we may be sad. It shows us that we can find life even in death. It says that we are not alone – that as a community of mourners – we find strength in one another. It encourages us to know that even as the gates are closing on Yom Kippur and eventually, when the book closes on our life, we can live in ways that give us a “good seal” or “good finish” – the ultimate and final **גמר טוב** *g'mar tov*.

I close with a quote from my dear friend, Rabbi Aaron Panken, President of our Reform movement’s seminary, who died tragically in a plane crash this past May:

We who are given the gift of life, no matter how short or long it happens to be, do best by imbuing its every moment with meaningful actions that are

complete, whole, and innocent. If we can have the strength to do so (and it is far from easy), then we, too, can one day face death with deeds that speak to our life's goodness and the way we lived it well.

And we will say to the מלאך המות *malach ha-mavet* ... "I'm ready."