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Yom Kippur Yizkor – 5769

A great Sage once asked his students: Tell me what are you watching when the sky turns from orange to rose, then to deep purple and finally to darkness?" That's obvious, said the students. "You are watching the sunset."

It's a striking phenomenon in nature — the way the colors blaze up, at the end of the day. Not only the colors of the sky, which take on vivid hues as the day comes to a close, but also the colors of the leaves, which burst into their most intense shades just as they prepare for death.

If life were fair, it would be the same way with human beings. We would become more beautiful, more loving and kind, the older we got, and our last days would be the loveliest days, leaving our survivors with sweet and vivid memories forever.

Some lives do indeed end this way, Courage, dignity, unselfishness and tenderness are present at the deathbed: emotional wounds are healed: words of love and forgiveness are spoken: the dying person rises to his or her finest hour, and so do the people who gather around to say goodbye. Death comes without pain or fear, as quietly and gently as a sigh - the soul departs, as the Talmud says, "with a kiss from God." The departed go in beauty.

But life is not fair, sometimes, sadly, death comes in a way that's not gentle, and leaves in its wake painful and wrenching emotions. (Rabbi Janet Marder, Yizkor Shemini Atzert 5766, Betham.org) Sometimes death comes suddenly, without warning, without an opportunity to prepare, to say goodbye. Other times the life force lingers and lingers. Long after the goodbyes there is still breath; death, when it finally comes brings relief. And there is relief when death ends great physical pain and suffering. There can also be emotional, psychological trauma at the end of life. When there is unfinished business, hurts and betrayals, regrets and remorse, death leaves behind additional stress and disturbance. Every death is like every life, unique and different.

We learn in *Pirkei Avot* – The Ethics of Our Ancestors: "Two things one never knows in this world – when one is coming and when one is going." (4:2a) How then are we to go in beauty? And remember the beauty of the lives we recall.

A story is told about Mayer Anshel Rothschild. From time to time the Emperor, Franz Joseph, would send visitors to the luxurious Rothschild palace. It was the most lavish and well appointed palace in all of Austria and everyone wanted to see the inside.

During one visit, Rothschild took his guest from room to room and the guest was awed by the display of wealth. He showed him room after room, but when he passed a certain door, he continued walking. "I am sorry." said the banker. "This is the one room in the palace I cannot show you."

The visitor reported back to the Emperor and told him about all he saw, and about the room he could not see. This peaked the Emperor's curiosity. He asked the man why he suspected that room was off limits. "Perhaps that is where Rothschild has his magic money machine."

The Emperor did not know whether to believe the man so he sent a second government official to visit the palace. The second agent came back with the same report, as did the third and the fourth.

Finally, the Emperor decided to visit the palace himself and when they reached the forbidden room, he demanded entry.

Rothschild took out his keys, opened the door, and invited the Emperor to enter. There, in the small room, was a simple pine box, and some plain white cloth on the table. That was all that was there.

"What is this all about?" asked the Emperor.

'We Jews have strict rules about burial," explained Rothschild. When a person dies, he must be buried in a very simple coffin. His body must be clothed in a plain white shroud. This is to maintain the equality of all God's creatures."

"But why is this here in this room?" asked the Emperor, impressed but very confused.

Answered Rothschild "At the end of each day, I come to this room, and view the coffin and the shroud, and I am reminded that even though I have great wealth and power and influence in the highest echelons of Austrian society, I am still one of God's simple creatures, and that this is the end I will come to like all of God's children. (as told by Rabbi Richard Plavin, Yizkor sermon Yom Kippur 5769)

Mayer Anshel Rothschild prepared for his death. Entering that room each day, I am sure helped him to live life more fully. He focused on his humanity. He focused on using his time wisely in meaning and in beauty. Not only was he known as a great financier he was known as an amazing philanthropist. He brought many Eastern European Jews to Palestine and to the West. Everyday he stood outside of his palace and personally distributed alms. When he died and was buried in that casket, he regularly looked at, there was suffering and loss, and there was meaning and beauty.

Time and time again, I have learned there is beauty within the pain and suffering of death if one has lived life fully with meaning and purpose. Two very public deaths this past year reiterated this lesson. Like you I experienced two deaths from afar, I don't know directly the feelings of the mourners, but I felt in the tributes and honors bestowed on these departed that, despite the wrenching pain and loss their early demise caused, they were going in beauty. I am referring to the deaths of journalist Tim Russert, who died this past June and Professor Randy Pausch who passed away in July.

Tim Russert's death at age 58 brought a sense of grief to many. Intrigued by the sense of loss I felt, and many expressed to me, I wondered, what was it about his passing that touched us? Certainly, all sudden, unexpected deaths by people in our age bracket or younger are reminders of our mortality. Television and the nature of the connection it creates also played a role in the national sense of loss. But I think we were most deeply touched because of how we perceived Tim Russert was living his life. In his wonderful book "Big Russ & Me" he wrote "that he felt that he stood on the shoulders of his father." He encouraged us "To say to our dads 'thanks for all the sacrifices that you made so that we can have a better life.' And if our dads are no longer with us, we remember them for that." He also wrote: "I think if we all take time out and think about how important we are to each other, we'll be a lot better off as a country." Tim Russert was, by all accounts, real. What you saw was what you got. From the tributes to him we learned: he was a genuinely devoted father, and husband, a loving son, a religious Catholic for whom faith was an anchor, a loyal friend and wonderful boss, and a celebrity who never forgot his humble roots in Buffalo. (Rabbi Gerald Skolnick) His passing was shocking. He will be deeply missed by family and

country. In the outpouring of respect, love and appreciation upon his death and in the mourning; we saw and experienced; meaning and beauty.

Another tragic death this past year was the death of Professor Randy Pausch. Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University was invited to give a lecture in a series called: "The Last Lecture." Professors delivering this lecture are "asked to consider their demise and remark on what matters to them most." Just before delivering this lecture Randy was diagnosed with terminal cancer. His talk suddenly became much more than theoretical. He titled his lecture "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." He opened talking about his cancer saying, "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand." He was a realist. He spoke about the dreams he managed to fulfill in his lifetime, about overcoming obstacles, taking hold of the moment, enabling yourself and others to realize their dreams. He spoke about living, about living to the fullest, about giving, about treasuring each day as a gift. Randy Pausch taught about time. Here are a few of his simple rules: Time must be explicitly managed. You can always change your plan, but only if you have one. Are you spending time on the right things? Develop a good filing system. Rethink the telephone. Delegate and take a time out. "Time is all that you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think." (as quoted by Rabbi Randy Mark) Millions of people heard or read Randy Pausch's last lecture on the web or in the book that describes the last year of his life. Millions were touched by his life. His death, at 47 years of age, was tragic, a huge loss to his wife and his three young children, to his community and to society – because of how he lived his life. I believe, in his death there was and is; beauty.

As a rabbi I have been blessed to honor, to pay tribute to many who have lived life with such purpose and meaning. People who are open and real. People who live life with wisdom. People who make everyday count. People who let go of the little stuff and focus on the big picture. People who forgive and are forgiving. People who live life to its fullest. These people have taught me to aspire to live my life with beauty, with meaning, with purpose – then I will be prepared for my death (may it come at 120, like Moses) and my family will find comfort.

In a few minutes at Yizkor, let us remember the beauty in the lives of those we recall. Let us grasp hold of their wisdom; of the lessons of their lives. Let us find comfort and strength, meaning and purpose as we remember.

A great Sage once asked his students: Tell me what are you watching when you see the sky turn from orange to rose, then to deep purple and finally to darkness?" That's obvious, said the students. "You are watching the sunset." "No," said the sage. "You are wrong. You are not watching the sun set. You are watching the world turn."

The world has turned: time has taken from us the ones we love. They have breathed their last and been gathered to their people in a story that is painful and beautiful and as old as the world. Let us hold them close in memory now; let us keep them in our hearts. (Story adapted from Jeremy Kagan, *The Jewish Self: Recovering Spirituality in the Modern World*, as told by Rabbi Janet Marder)