

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768
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On Rosh Hashanah, we are asked to come into an awareness of the fragility of our lives, the perpetual gift that we are given each moment, to be alive. The truth of this moment is that we don't know what the next moment let alone the year ahead will bring – we don't know, we can't know, what is written for us this year.

In the liturgy we read: *Adam Yesodo Me-Afar-*

All of humanity is founded on dust—
Of dust we are made, and to dust we shall return;
As long as we live, we strive for our bread;
Like vessels of clay, we break;
Like grass we wither, like flowers we fade.

Our year 5767 is fading. We are on the threshold of the New Year. This in between moment now is all there is.

Rosh Hashanah also connects us to something eternal, something that does not fade, does not break, that never leaves us. On this day, we return to our inner goodness, to our most loving and compassionate selves. We renew our commitment to live as authentically as we can, trusting that we will have the courage and the strength to face whatever **lies ahead**.

Since the age of twelve, when my father died, I have been dreading what **lay ahead**, that is, the day my mom would die and leave me, too. My mother, despite her **less than stellar** genes, lived in relative good health. But, for as long as I can remember, I have been actively anticipating her mortality and so many of my decisions were based on this fear. In recent years I denied the signs of her diminishment as best I could. I didn't want to hear about the doctor's visits, the diagnoses, the prescriptions. I couldn't handle it. In fact, I thought she made a lot of it up just to keep me close. You know the joke...the Jewish mother calls her son to tell him she's dying.... Hangs up the phone and with a wink, says to her husband, "well, Melvin is coming home for Chanukah!"

I never planned a visit to see my mom solely because I missed her; my visits were as much propelled by a sense of imminent loss. I could never even stay angry with my mom for too long out of fear that she might die and I'd feel responsible and radically unresolved. And yet, I had many legitimate reasons to be angry, like so many children, adults or otherwise.

Throughout my teenage years and well into my adulthood, I sought to please my mom because I had some grandiose idea that I could prolong her life. Deep in my psyche, I felt that her happiness, her sense of purpose, and at times her decision to live were in my hands and impacted by my life choices.

Is this sounding familiar to anyone? (Wait for laughter)

Naturally, I resented my mother for this.

I wasn't the only one afraid of her dying.

Often couched with humor, my mother talked relentlessly, in her later years about her health, her death, her funeral, ... because, I believe my MOTHER, herself was afraid of dying.

Who among us doesn't fear death? Unavoidable. Inescapable. Death is a fact of life. True, we live longer than our grandparents; we are better fed; we lose fewer babies. Vaccines protect us from once-feared epidemics, hi-tech hospitals save tiny preemies, and patients receive new kidneys or hearts.

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But we are still mortal. And even if we have been successful in warding off plagues that decimated earlier generations, we have no lack of our own - AIDS, Cancer, teen suicide, addiction, racism, poverty, violence, and war.

Believing that my mother was afraid of dying, I felt that the one gift I could give her when, she was actually on her deathbed was to be there for her, holding her hand when she died.

But, I missed it.

The moment of my mother's passing...

I missed it.

I was actually on the doorstep of my friend Benay's house with Lilah and Karen about to plant tulip bulbs when I got the call from my sister, "Camillie, she died."

I so wanted to be there when my mom took her last breath.

I had been vigilant for days, wanting to console and comfort her in her vulnerability; afraid to leave, afraid to lose a moment of this precious time together. Her beauty, her flesh, I felt such tenderness toward my mother. I was afraid to let her out of my sight, knowing that she would soon be out of my sight forever.

When I did leave to take a shower or get a meal, I felt so ambivalent. Our tradition tells us to choose life, and the people around me kept reminding me of that. After 8 long days, family, friends and hospice caregivers persuaded me to go out in the world, to have quality time with my daughter.

"She's not dying today," they assured me, even as I knew no such assurance was possible.

So, I went into the outside world, startled at first by the noise, the colors, the people going through their normal routines. Just as I was starting to acclimate, the call came.

And while we were away....she took her last breath. Alone.

Cold comfort though it was, the hospice nurse told us this intriguing statistic: 6 out of 10 parents die when their children are out of the room; the percentage is higher among Jews; and higher still between mothers and daughters. Fascinating as it was, this fact did nothing to assuage my lifelong need to be exceptional.¹

But, this isn't a talk about guilt or even disappointment. If anything, it is about unburdening ourselves from these heavy weights and creating space for compassion and love.

You see, there was another moment during those final days that I didn't miss. I'd like to think that it was as much for my mom as it was for me the more important gift. It was our *Vidui* moment; a shared moment of forgiveness.

One of the most helpful conversations I had was with the hospice social worker, Elizabeth, whose charge to me was to be gentle, loving and non-judgmental with myself. She also said, "We don't fix relationships when people are dying." Harumph! I didn't believe her. My hope has always sprung eternal. As long as there is breath, there is life. The last sensory function to shut down is the hearing. I almost always urge people to speak their peace/piece. This is what our tradition insists.

A *Vidui*, is a final confessional to be recited by the dying person when the end is imminent. It is a coming to terms with the reality of death, and an attempt to complete the unfinished business of relationships that still need healing. There is also the expressed wish that one's closest relations

¹ The Talmud actually suggests a reason for why some souls wait until they are alone to depart – so that they may spare their loved ones further distress.

who are being left behind will be safe and cared for. With this sense of completion and consolation, the dying person is ready to recite the *Shema* and to be joined in spirit with the Eternal One, *B'yado Afkid Ruchi*. In the event that a person can no longer recite the prayer on his or her own, it can be done for them. As a rabbi, I often provide people with a contemporary translation and encourage them to draw on this healing ritual.

Listen as I read you an excerpt from the text:

Modah Ani L'fanecha, I acknowledge, Eternal One, my God and God of my ancestors, that both my healing and my death are in Your hands. If I have offended or hurt anyone, I beg their forgiveness. May my death be an atonement for all the hurts I have caused, intentionally or unintentionally. You, who are the Parent of orphans, protect my dear ones with whose souls my own soul is bound up. Into Your hand I entrust my spirit; redeem me, Eternal One, God of Truth. Amen.

It is not a magical formula that cancels out all the hurt, but the *vidui* can move us along a path of healing.

The social worker's notion that a deathbed is no place to bring up old grievances, nor is it the place to press for reconciliation – confused me. How would I balance her insights with the need to let my mother know that despite the ways she failed me, and I failed her, that we failed each other, I loved her unequivocally; that I knew in my heart she did the best she could; and that I forgave her and hoped she could forgive herself and me for our shortcomings with each other and rest with peace.

Three days before she died, I went to my mom's bed, and lay my hands on her hands. Her eyes were closed; She hadn't responded all day... and we were wondering, "Is she still conscious?"

I say, "Mom... mom, I am so MAD at you! I need you to know....." Her eyes open wide. I am so mad at you for not letting me love you; for not letting me in more. I am so mad that you couldn't be more present to my feelings; that you could never *really* listen. I'm so mad that you self-medicated instead of finding other ways to address your pain. I'm so mad at you for ditching me, over and over again! I've spent my life holding in my anger for fear it could kill you – and I can't hold it in any longer. I need you to know.... How impossible it's been to live up to your expectations; and penetrate your defensive walls."

I went on for some time like that.... And all the while her eyes stayed open. I had a strong sense she was with me.

"Mother, despite all of my disappointment, and all of the ways I think you messed me up, I forgive you and I want you to forgive yourself and forgive me. I'm actually really happy in my life and I'm grateful to you for my life and I love you so much. My heart is breaking to have to let you go. But I am going to be ok."

So, what do you do after you forgive your dying mother? What do you take away from that experience after she is gone? And what comes next?

Jill Neimark, author of *Why Good things Happen To Good People*, writes, "Forgiveness replaces pain with peace. However, forgiveness is not a simple act or a onetime gesture. It is an approach to life, a work in progress. It is perfectly human for anger and pain to catch us off guard even after we have done our best to forgive someone."

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The *Vidui* moment created a doorway for me to pass through, wherein, I am now working on a new sort of relationship with my mom and with myself. It involves letting go of unreasonable expectations, having compassion, and loving more freely.

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It's not so easy this. Like some of you, I am incredibly hard on myself. Some reasons for this are because I'm a lesbian, and as a marginalized person, I've had to work extra hard to prove myself; because I was a rabbi's kid, and I felt scrutinized by the community; because of my mother, who had such lofty goals for me, who always wanted me to be what **SHE** wanted me to be. I've set impossible goals for myself hoping to please and WOW everyone, at every moment.

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But love doesn't mean that people admire your perfection...on the contrary: Love means accepting someone in full awareness of all their imperfections, weaknesses, and human frailties. Love isn't blind -- to love means to see a person embody all their faults and still accept them. If you love, you forgive. If you are loved, you feel forgiven.

That's what my *Vidui* moment with my mother was truly all about.

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Ten days from tonight we will listen to our tradition: *Kol Nidre, v'es-arey, v'haramei...*the promises we made to ourselves and to others, the vows, the goals, the expectations that we fell short of this year -- the plans that miscarried, the objectives unreached...they're dissolved. We can let go. *Kol Nidre* beckons us not only for the past year but for the year ahead. For the wrong we have done and the good we will fail to do. *V'yomer Adonai Salachti K'dvarecha*, we are forgiven. The doorway to the New Year is wide open. Compassion and Love are here to escort us through. God is welcoming us home with open arms and forgiveness.

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One of the most comforting lessons in studying Torah comes from the encounter with our people's imperfections -- big imperfections -- and to see that God still loves them, and the covenant is still transmitted through them. Here is Abraham, who comes close to murdering his kids. Here is Isaac, blind to the rivalry he sets up between his two sons. Here is Jacob who loves one child over the others and sends them into murderous rage. Here is David who commits adultery with his next door neighbor's wife, and then sends the poor *shlemiel* of a husband into battle to die and cover his mistake. Here are people who fail. Moses fails, Elijah fails, Jeremiah fails. Our tradition gives us flawed characters.

Can we understand these people? Can we accept them as imperfect, broken, frightened people? And can we still honor them and love them and forgive them?

How many people do we know who are constantly driven, no matter how hard they work, no matter what they accomplish, no matter what success they achieve in professions, in family life, in the community...driven to fulfill some parental expectation deeply ingrained over the years.

Do you suppose that these High Holydays, we might be able to recognize that our parents -- like us -- are fragile and less than perfect?

Could we recognize that their expectations reflected their own failures and frustrations? Their criticism, the guilt they heaped on, the approval they withheld -- their sins as parents reflected their own limitations. Maybe your father needed you to be a success to cover his own sense of failure? Maybe your mother was afraid of your independence because she was lonely? Can we forgive them this Yontiff for letting their fears drown out their love?

At this time, last year, I could not. I did not know that within days of Yom Kippur, I would be orphaned. Within the last two years, 35 of our members have suffered the death of a parent. And others of us have witnessed our loved ones diminish in strength of mind and body. We don't have to wait any longer, whether they are alive or dead, to begin the process of *teshuva*. Forgiveness is a

long process. Thinking of it as a one-time achievement, is yet another unfair expectation. It comes in moments, over time, and knows no bounds.

When we have glimpses of forgiveness, we sense the peace of At-One-Ment. We come as close as any human being can to the essentially divine act of creation. For we create a new beginning out of a past of pain. By forgiving, we restore our own faith in the essential goodness of life.

Let the message of these holy days blast through us like the shofar and crumble the stones that keep our heart encaged: Stones of anger and stones of pain, stones of frustration, and stones of disappointment, stones of unfulfilled yearning for love and approval, stones of guilt and stones of shame.

Now is a moment for us to let them go.

Now is the time.

Listen to the words of Kohelet:

“To everything there is a season, and time for every purpose under heaven;
A time to gather stones and a time to cast stones away.”

Now is the time, to cast out, *tashlich*, our stones.

We can unburden ourselves of unfair expectations, the demands and the resentments. We can let go and make room for new life.

May the Holy One, who creates the world anew each and every moment, help us to return to our inner goodness. May the all-Compassionate One encourage us to forgive ourselves and make peace with those we hold most dear. May we grow in wholeness more this year than ever before. May the new Year and its blessings begin.