

Memory and Mortality Yizkor

A memory, one that I will never forget, began with my pre-Shabbat ritual to take a last look at my email on Friday afternoon.

And so it was on January 27, 2012.

When my inbox showed an email from my longtime friend and colleague, Richard Agler, I assumed he had written about his forthcoming visit to Pittsburgh the following week. Rich had recently retired as founding senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Boca Raton, and he was coming to Pittsburgh to scratch his longtime itch of attending Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney and then spend Shabbat with us and as guest speaker at Temple Emanuel. His wife, Mindy, also planned to join us for Shabbat. Then I opened Rich's email and read....

“With inexpressible sorrow and loss, we inform you of the sudden passing of our daughter and sister Tali, on Friday, January 27, in Washington, D.C. Tali was jogging along the National Mall when she was struck by an automobile and fatally injured on Thursday evening. ... Tali sought to better the world and she succeeded in doing so — through her work, through her wit and through her love. Her memory is more of a blessing than we can say.”

That Sunday was memorable for its beauty here at Temple Emanuel. Noah Bendix-Balgley, the 28 year-old first violinist and concert master of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performed here in the Sanctuary, hailed by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette as Pittsburgh's premier musical event of the year.

That Sunday was memorable for Alice and me for its crushing sadness. We were in Washington, D.C., attending a memorial service for Tali Agler at Temple Sinai where she had worked while a student at American University. Afterward, Alice and I joined the Agler's Shiva minyan in a family member's home in Bethesda.

Rabbi Agler did finally speak here at Temple Emanuel on Selichot and that Shabbat in 2017. If you were here, you'll remember his compelling talk of how he and Mindy turned their devastating loss into heartwarming legacies. Organs donated from Tali's otherwise fit and healthy 26 year-old body saved five lives. Moreover, a girl's rescue and rehabilitation shelter in Nairobi, Kenya where Tali interned while a student at A.U. was renamed in her memory. Rich and Mindy also established a fund bearing Tali's name to support the school.

My friend Rich has an adventurer's heart. Among his feats, he captained a sailboat voyage for his family from Key Largo westward along the Florida Keys to the Dry Tortugas and then back, more than 300 miles altogether. Half the voyage crossed the open sea, precisely where Hurricane Ian recently roared to Category 4 before slamming into Florida's west coast. But Tali's death, so senseless and so sudden, was like a relentless Category 5 hurricane day after day after day in Rich and Mindy's lives. Each had to rebuild his or her life from the devastation. Who can say whose task was harder: Mindy's as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor or Rich's as a rabbi, theologian and pastor? In time and with a modicum of healing, both chose to help others and thereby help themselves. Mindy resumed her practice. Rich chose writing.

Rich wrote a book, "The Tragedy Test," subtitled "Making Sense of Life-Changing Loss: A Rabbi's Journey." I reviewed "The Tragedy Test" for the *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle* as the first anniversary of the Tree of Life attack approached. As Pittsburgh is well-acquainted with tragedy, so too is Temple Emanuel, so sadly and so recently in 5782. Let me share a passage from the review.

"Like Jacob's wrestling match at *P'nuel*, 'the Face of God,' 'The Tragedy Test' is Rich's wrestling match with a God worthy of belief in the face of young, talented and beautiful Tali's tragic death. The book is divided into three parts: 'The Challenge,' 'Response' and 'Acceptance.' Where Harold Kushner's 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People' dealt with the quandary of believing that God is either all-powerful or all-loving, ultimately opting for all-loving, part one of 'The Tragedy Test,' 'The Challenge,' delves more deeply not only into the complexities of such quandaries, but also into various pastoral pablums that people are often spoon-fed following tragedy, including my least favorites, 'Everything happens for a reason' and 'God doesn't give us more than we can handle.' One by one, Rich dismisses them as unacceptable. 'The Tragedy Test,' parts two and three, 'Response' and 'Acceptance,' then offer answers that satisfy mind and soul, while acknowledging that no answer will ever fully satisfy the heart. As God passes the Tragedy Test, God helps us surpass ours."

"The Tragedy Test" was Rich's first literary effort to reconcile tragic fate with religious faith. For his second effort, Rich sought the assistance of Rabbi Rifat Soncino, who has authored, co-authored or edited such books as "Finding God," "The Many Faces of God," and "What Happens After I Die?" Together, Rich and Rifat invited twenty-seven rabbis - Reform, Conservative

and Reconstructionist - to write essays for an anthology based on the theme and under the title “A God We Can Believe In.”

According to the old quip, “Two Jews, three opinions,” you can imagine that the opinions of twenty-seven rabbis vary widely. Each rabbi has his or her unique approach to God - the author of children’s books on God, the recovering alcoholic who wrote anonymously, the self-described reverent agnostic, the former chemical engineer, the philosopher, and so on - yet all of the rabbis ultimately describe the God of their beliefs. Of course, ever since Moses asked God’s Name at the Burning Bush and God responded, אהיה אשר אהיה, “I am who I am,” or “I will be what I will be,” God has been perceived uniquely in infinite ways.

Some of the rabbis cite issues confronting religion in general: society's decline of trust in all former bedrock institutions, the diminution in religious belief from generation to generation, and recently, the existential challenges of the pandemic. Some rabbis cite aspects of Jewish tradition that ring hollow, not hallowed, in Jewish prayer and Jewish particularism. Anti-Semitism and its apotheosis, the Holocaust, pose huge hurdles to others. I do not recall any rabbi who raised these latter issues then facing up to them by ascribing blame where it belongs: on humanity’s capacity for inhumanity.

One of the final essays in “A God We Can Believe In” raises the biggest question: What about death?

“What About Death?” in fact is the title of the essay written by Rabbi Simeon Maslin, past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the longtime senior rabbi of Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia’s flagship Reform congregation. Adding poignance to his essay and as noted in “A God We Can Believe In” published last April, Rabbi Maslin died last February at the age of ninety.

Maslin’s essay bursts bubbles of hope in immortality from the pagan world that found their way into Judaism, and from Judaism into Christianity and then Islam. However, Rabbi Maslin found immortality in science. He wrote, “Through the genes we inherited *we* were slaves in Egypt; *we* stood at Sinai; *we* sat in the academies of Hillel and Akiba. All of this is in our DNA; we are immortal.” He then concluded, “When the mind of God created our world and the organisms that would evolve into *homo sapiens* billions of years ago, that infinite mind created genetic codes that would evolve along with their carriers and that would survive through all the generations from the primordial ooze to you and me today. That evolutionary spiral was designed by God, the God who is the source of life, the God who is infinitely beyond

human understanding, the God whose love makes it possible for us to continue the search of Moses, Spinoza and Einstein. That is our immortality.”

By turning to science, Rabbi Maslin touched upon stunning truths long espoused by Judaism, truths that science eventually acknowledged as fact. To begin at the beginning, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle proposed that the universe itself is eternal. Modern astrophysics now confirm what the Torah has always taught. The universe was created. Moreover Torah teaches that to understand creation is to understand the Creator. Similarly, science today says that all matter that exists today, all matter that we are, was created at the moment of creation, 13.7 billion years ago. Thus, science now affirms the blessing after the reading of the Torah that we have recited for millennia - והיה עולם נטע בתוכינו - that God has implanted within us eternal life, and 13.7 billion years is just the beginning of eternity.

With all due respect, Rabbi Maslin seemed to overlook the existential reality of mortality. Regardless of the times we look in the mirror as we age and see the face of our father or mother as they aged, regardless of how much we see our children’s faces in the photographs of our own childhood, and despite the indescribable *naches* and blessing grandparents know to see such traits living in our grandchildren, they are not us and we are not them. We enter this universe as unique individuals, and so too do we depart from it.

But God bless Rabbi Maslin for crediting everything precious and sacred to God’s love. The greatest gift God’s gift of life bestows is the gift of love. For in God’s love, created in God’s image, we have the capacity to love and to be loved in return.

I asked my good friend Rich how many of the rabbi-authors used the word, that all important word, the nonpareil and exquisite sine-qua-non, “love.” A simple “Find” on his computer, and Rich found “love” in twenty-three of the twenty-seven rabbis’ essays. O how I love rabbis. Although I did not ask, Rich also told me that one rabbi used the word “love” more than any other rabbi: yours truly.

I claim no expertise on love. If I wrote of love more than the other rabbis, it was only my effort to describe the God we can believe in and love, even if our love is only a fraction of the love God has given us with this gift of life. But I will claim this. As we now approach the end of the annual reading cycle of the Torah, Moses approaches the end of his life. Martin Buber offered this insight regarding Moses facing his mortality. “He wanted more time.”

Don't we all?

Moses lived to one-hundred-twenty, and he wanted more time!

How much the more so for us, and for all of our loved ones!

Despite our prayers affirming eternal life, despite the promises from our prophets of resurrection, the visions of our mystics of reincarnation, and the glimpses we ourselves may have that life is far more than what meets the eye, something beyond our mind's comprehension but somehow vibrant within our heart and soul, this we know for certain: the time comes for all of us when we have no more time. And the death of every loved one is a life changing loss.

Yet there remains something wondrous and reassuring, sacred and loving that we can also claim for certain: We are all in this together, including God.

I am grateful to my friend Rich for inviting me to contribute to "A God We Can Believe In." That so many of the essays are exceptional adds to my gratitude. Because of the book's many insights and inspirations, I purchased copies for Rabbis Aaron and Emily Meyer, and Temple president Michelle Markowitz, as well as a copy to borrow from the library which I dedicated to you, the members of Temple Emanuel who have inspired me over the many years. If you would like to purchase a copy, send me an email after Yom Kippur and I will tell you how to purchase a copy so that the proceeds go to the Tali Agler Girls' Shelter in Nairobi.

The title of my essay is "Hebrew Lessons." The subtitle states my essay's intent: "To Discover the Divine, To Reveal the Truly Human." At one point, I discuss *Yizkor Nishamot*, this memorial service intertwining memory and mortality. *Yizkor Nishamot* assures us that as we remember our loved one's souls, God remembers them as well. Such is God's eternal love for them and God's eternal love for us.

Rabbi Mark Joel Mahler
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