

Legacy for Life:

The Wisdom and Example of Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein



Edited by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

A found sermon reminds us:

לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנָבֵא לְבַב חֻכְמָה

Teach us to number and treasure our days.

Then we will attain a heart of wisdom.

Psalms 90:12

All proceeds from this booklet will benefit
the Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein Memorial Fund.

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זכרנו

להיים



מלד חפץ

בהיים



REMEMBER



US FOR

LIFE

Acknowledgments

My main acknowledgement as the editor of this booklet is to my mother, Sylvia Orenstein, who was a partner to my father in life and remains his champion in death. She sponsors an annual lecture in his memory. Every day, she continues the legacy of caring, leadership, and Yiddishkeit that the two of them created together. Her “retirement,” like all her passages before, proves the assertion in my father’s Yizkor sermon that every age and stage of life can be filled with meaning and beauty.

I also wish to acknowledge my siblings, Aviva and Rafy, who sustain my father’s legacy through what they say and do – and who they are.

Thank you to my cousin and Rav Jehiel’s dear friend and regular visitor, Nila M. (Nikki) Pusin, for the beautiful artwork she made for him to enjoy, which is shared in this booklet. The front piece includes calligraphy of a blessing from the High Holiday liturgy: “Remember us for life, Divine King who loves life, and write us in the Book of Life.” The back page includes the words from Psalms 16:8: “I have set God before me, always.” Nikki and her sister and mitzvah partner, Rusty Feldman, continued their regular lunchtime visits to my father even after he could no longer eat or speak. They saw the divinity and humanity in him, always – as he did, in them.

Like Nikki and Rusty, many other relatives and friends, too numerous to mention by name, gave my father the gift of their time and loving presence during his illness. Thank you.

Thank you to Congregation Beth El of the Oranges and Maplewood, NJ and to Congregation B’nai Israel of Emerson, NJ. My father’s name is both literally and figuratively “written on your doorposts and on your gates.”

I am grateful to my loving and adventurous husband, Craig Weisz, a lifelong Californian, for moving east with me. There is nothing “in-law” (or outlaw) about the way you relate to my side of the family. And thank you to my children, Emmett and Hannah Mathilda, who brought so much joy to their Saba with open-hearted visits and untamed shenanigans.

Lastly, thanks (and drats!) to my remarkable father for making the rabbinate look so easy. I cannot easily distinguish between his legacy as a father and his legacy as a rabbi, because he was the ultimate in both. זכר צדיק לברכה

Debra Orenstein
May 16, 2016/ 8 Iyar 5776

Introductions: A Yizkor Sermon Found

An Introduction by Debra Orenstein:

On Shabbat Pesach, 22 Nissan 5776, corresponding to April 30, 2016, my mother and I both read aloud at our home congregations a Yizkor (Memorial Prayer) sermon originally written and delivered in 1999 by my father, Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein, for Congregation Beth El of the Oranges and Maplewood in South Orange, NJ.

Years before he became ill with ALS and not long after he retired, my dad was cleaning out his famously cluttered office to make room for the rabbi who would succeed him. At that time, he came across just a few typewritten sermons, which he handed in an envelope to Arnie Nierenberg, a friend and past President of the congregation. Arnie recalls that it was done without fanfare, after a weekday morning minyan. “I was cleaning out my office, and I thought you might find these interesting,” my father commented casually, as he gave Arnie the envelope. It was typical of my father’s modesty that he did not save or distribute any other copies. It is typical of Arnie to treasure the gift and to return it to my family, years later.

The sermon appears to be a transcript, which my father may have dictated either before or after the sermon was delivered. It is both longer and more formal than his normal drashot (sermons); the version he presented orally no doubt departed from the written text printed here. Yet, you can certainly “hear his voice” in this sermon, including his trademark humor.

I have a fantasy that some frustrated congregant snuck in a tape recorder to services, subverting the restrictions on recording devices during Jewish holidays. This is unlikely, I concede, but not inconceivable. People looked forward to my dad’s sermons. They often talked about them with their friends and family. In many cases, they quoted from his sermons for years, even decades. He had a way of speaking personal Torah into people’s lives – based on the wisdom of our inherited texts, whatever else he happened to be reading that week, and his amazing gifts for synthesizing information and weaving stories. He spoke both simply and profoundly.

Rabbis speak often. My father gave original talks about each holiday and Torah portion hundreds of times over the course of his rabbinate. He crafted Yizkor sermons four times a year for close to fifty years. If he remembered this particular sermon after he was diagnosed with ALS, he never mentioned it to anyone. However, he did embody it. He was a man of his word.

The following is what my mother said during the Yizkor service, before she shared her late husband’s words:

An Introduction by Sylvia Orenstein:

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Same'ah.

I want to start by thanking two special people for making what I'm about to do possible: my dear friend, Arnie Nierenberg, for finding a copy of this sermon among his papers and giving it to me; and our wonderful spiritual leader, Rabbi Jesse Olitzsky, who has graciously relinquished the bimah (pulpit) to me on this important day and at this solemn hour.

This sermon is remarkable in many ways. First, anyone who knew Jehiel would be astonished to see that it is typed up in complete sentences. I do not know of another instance like it. Most of Jehiel's sermons consisted of notes on the back of an envelope.

Even more remarkable is that this sermon was written in 1999 – 10 years before Jehiel was diagnosed with ALS, a disease that relatively few people had heard of at the time.

And most remarkable of all is that Jehiel lived this sermon.

Anyone who visited him during the days of his illness can testify that even when he was completely paralyzed, he never ceased to live a meaningful life. He taught students and played chess and laughed with his grandchildren and continued to counsel the many people who sought his advice. He relished seeing his family and his extended Beth El family. People who came, sometimes apprehensive of how they might find him, quickly forgot that he was so ill. Despite everything, he remained who he was.

Perhaps this sermon can explain why.

Tuesdays with Morrie, Yontif With God

by Jehiel Orenstein

There are two reasons why we come here to recite Yizkor: one is to remember our loved ones who have died; the other is to think about our own death. There is a moment sometime during every Yizkor service, when our thoughts wander from remembering those we have come here to memorialize to wondering whether anyone will come here to remember *us*. And to wondering, what is it that they will remember about us? Will it be the good we did or the bad? Will it be the way we lived, or will it be the way we died?

I believe that these thoughts, or thoughts like them, are on our minds and on our hearts at this moment. So permit me to speak to you today about the meaning of our deaths. I want to do so by studying with you two deaths that have occurred. Recently two people died from the very same disease, but in two very different ways. Both attracted nationwide attention. One death took place on television; the other became the subject of a book that has been on the bestseller list for more than two years. I want to look at the similarities between these two deaths and I want to look at the differences between them, for I believe that they have much to teach us about our own lives – and about our own deaths.

I was drawn to the similarities and the differences between these two deaths by an article about them that appeared in *Commentary* by Dr. Paul McHugh, who is a professor at Johns Hopkins. I don't agree with much of what he says in this essay, but he was the one who made me aware of the connection between these two deaths and what they can teach us about the way we live and the way we die today.¹

The first death was that of Thomas Youk of Michigan. You may not remember his name, but you probably remember the circumstances of his death. He was killed – forgive me I can think of no nicer word – by Dr. Kevorkian in 1998. And his death, broadcast on the CBS program *Sixty Minutes*, was witnessed by over fifteen million people. The second was that of Professor Morris Schwartz, whose dying was recorded by his student, the sportswriter, Mitch Albom, in the best seller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which has sold so many copies.

What I didn't realize until I read Dr. McHugh's essay was that they both died from the same disease: ALS or, as it is often known, "Lou Gehrig's disease." The disease may have been the same, but there is an enormous contrast in the way they died.

¹In this citation, there are many layers of wisdom. The Talmud teaches: "Whoever reports a saying in the name of its originator brings redemption to the world" (Megillah 15a; Hullin 104b; Niddah 19b). Rabbi Elazar said so, quoting Rabbi Hanina as his source. The prooftext was from the Book of Esther: "And Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai [a message that saved the King and later, indirectly, the Jews]." My father was critical of the tone and content of Dr. McHugh's article, but he honored him with proper credit and attribution.

In the first case, Dr. Kevorkian came in, made a perfunctory examination, asked the patient to sign a consent form, invited the family to please leave, and then killed him by intravenous injection of poison to stop his heart. In the second case, the patient died naturally and in peace, surrounded by his family and friends. Previously, he recorded on television for Ted Koppel's program, *Nightline*, and on tape for his student, Mitch Albom, whatever wisdom he had to offer to those who will live on after him. Dr. McHugh doesn't like Morrie's wisdom. He considers his reflections banal – and they may be, but that is not the point that I want to make in discussing these two deaths and what we can learn from them.

The point I want to make is that our Jewish tradition insists that life is sacred up to and at the end. I don't know if Dr. Kevorkian thoroughly interviewed Thomas Youk, or whether he found out that his desire to die stemmed from temporary depression or a well-thought-out decision. Dr. Kevorkian is a pathologist, not a psychiatrist, and so I am not sure that he is trained to distinguish between the two. I know that more than once in my life – when my mother said that I had to go to bed on time, when my first girlfriend and I broke up at the age of 11, and when I got a bad mark on my report card – I said, "I wish I were dead." Fortunately, no one ever took me up on my impetuous expression, or I would not be here today.

There is a wonderful Jewish folktale about a poor man who was in despair because of all his problems. One day, he was carrying a heavy load of wood and it fell and scattered all around. In his misery, he cried out, "I wish that the angel of death would come." A moment later, the angel appeared and said, "You called?" He answered, "Yes, would you please help me pick up these logs?"

Dr. McHugh cites a modern parallel to that old Jewish folktale. He tells of a man named Noel David Earley of Rhode Island who in 1996 began to demand euthanasia for his advancing condition, and found a health worker who was willing to give him a syringe with which he could commit suicide. Mr. Earley announced that he was going to kill himself on December 4, 1996 – a date that was far enough in the future to give him time in which to tell his story and to propagandize against the laws forbidding euthanasia.

In the intervening months, he testified before the Rhode Island Medical Society, before the state legislature, and before many other public agencies. When December 4th came, he decided that he still had too much work to do, fighting for his cause, and so he put off his death for another six months. And then, because he was so busy fighting for this cause, he put off his self-murder for another six months. During these second six months, he died, unexpectedly, in his sleep. But his friends reported that, in these last months, when he was busy night and day crusading for the right to die, he was more cheerful and more chipper than ever before.

The lesson is simple. ALS is a dreadful disease; there is no denying that. And no one who is not confronting it or involved with a loved one who is enduring it has any right to be judgmental. I surely don't. But there are some things that can sometimes be done for the patient to alleviate the pain, and there are some things that can sometimes be done by the patient that can give meaning to the last days of life.

Nowadays, whenever someone dies, the phrase that I hear most often, the phrase that comes to everyone's lips almost immediately is, "At least she is no longer in pain" or "Thank God, he is no longer suffering." I respect that sense of relief, and I have no desire to minimize these feelings, but I am concerned that they have become the only things we can say in time of loss. They have become the only words of comfort that we can think of, because, in this so secular age, we have lost all sense of purpose in life and I death, all sense of awe before life and before death, and all sense of responsibility and obligation in life and in death.

Think of Stephen Hawking who has ALS and yet writes books on the meaning of time and does cosmological research at Cambridge University, with the help of electronic devises. Think of Franz Rosenzweig, who probably had something similar, though the disease had not yet been named. He could write with only one finger and could not speak for years, and yet, during those years, working that way, became the most influential Jewish thinker of the twentieth century. Think of Lou Gehrig himself, who, when the Yankees let him go, was made an officer of the New York city Parole Board by Mayor LaGuardia, and worked effectively at that job for a year.

When these people died, those around them could say something more profound than, "At least they no longer have pain." They could say, "My God! Look what human beings are capable of!" or "What a blessing this person's life was, and how fortunate we are to have had him!"

Again, please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that everyone gets the opportunity to be so heroic. Sometimes pain is so debilitating that it drags us down to being barely human. And sometimes pain and illness gnaw away at our humanity and take away our ability to think, to feel, to live, to the point where there is only relief when it ends. I have seen this happen. I know that, and I respect that.

I remember watching someone I loved dying some time ago. And as we sat at the bedside, helpless to do anything to save her, watching her life gradually ebb away, knowing that there was nothing more that could be done either by her or for her, all we could think of was how to persuade the nurses and doctors to move up the schedule of the morphine. We knew that doing so would not only diminish her pain, but also hasten her end. We did that, I confess. And all the

learned discussions on whether you should or should not do so that are found in the sources and in the philosophical books that I have read on the subject, were suddenly irrelevant. All we cared about at that moment was diminishing her pain – period.

So do not think me dogmatic on this subject. My pain threshold is at least as low as anyone else's. I know that not everyone is made to be a hero. And I know that much of the pain that we see in this world, not only at the end of life, but also throughout life, is of the kind that makes no earthly sense, at least not to our human eyes. And yet, I share these reflections with you today, out of caution. Because it is my sense that when the winds of the culture are all blowing in one direction, we ought to do whatever the word is for what sailors do ... to lean in the other direction.²

When the whole culture is saying that the reduction of pain is all-important, we ought to be saying that the achievement of purpose is all-important. When the whole culture is saying that feelings are what counts – even temporary feelings, we ought to be saying that responsibilities are what counts. And when the whole culture is saying that what you want is all that counts, we ought to be saying that some things are right and some things are wrong, some things are permitted and some things are forbidden – which is the whole point of this Shavuot holiday and what God told us at Mt. Sinai.

When the culture is saying, “Anything goes – as long as it doesn't cost pain,” we ought to be saying, “*Men tur nisht* – you are not allowed, even if it is painful.” When the rest of the culture is saying, “Whatever turns you on,” we have to say that we are not machines to be turned on or off, that we are human beings made in the image of God.

Human life, civilized life, is based not only on avoiding pain, but on living well, on living reasonably, on living a holy life, on living a life that will be remembered and learned from by those who come after us.

²From a cousin, Corey Stone, who is an expert sailor: “The phrase ‘leaning to windward’ may be closest to what your father described. When you sit as far out on the edge of a small boat as you can, it's called ‘hiking out’ or ‘hiking to windward.’ See it pictured here. The physics of this aren't exactly fighting the wind. Rather it's a sort of jiu jitsu of using the wind's energy to propel one against it.” That sounds a lot like my father – and his inclusive, balanced approach to life. Corey didn't know, but my father also happened to be a black belt in jiu jitsu.



In an age of unprecedented, unbridled individualism, in which I can go my way and you can go your way, in which I can do my thing and you can do your thing, and in which nobody has to answer to anyone else, or to any Higher Authority, we need to say, “You are not alone, even at the end of your life. You are the inheritor of a long and wise heritage. You are the child of God, who lent you life and who will someday take it back. And you are the teacher of the future generations by how you live – and even by how you die.”

The late, great Hayim Greenberg, the Labor Zionist philosopher, once told a story that I have come to treasure. He used it to explain why he would not join the euthanasia society, tempted though he was:

When the Chassidic rebbe who was known as the Yid heard that his friend, the Maggid of Kozenitz, was incurably sick, he summoned two of his disciples and told them, “Go to Kozenitz and sing before the Maggid.” They arrived on a Friday and were invited to sing the Sabbath hymns. With every song they sang, the sick man, who had told his friends that he no longer had any desire to live, felt in himself more and more strongly the awakening of a new force. He finally exclaimed, “Blessed be life! My friend, the Yid, knew that I have walked in all of the spheres of life except the sphere of song. He sent me his singers to remind me that I still have a task to perform in my earthly life – to explore the sphere of music.” And his will to live returned.

My parents used to say, “*Tsu shtarben, darf min och hoben mazel*,” for dying, you *also* must have luck.” And it is true. Some of us will be fortunate enough to have blessed deaths. Some of us will be fortunate enough to die surrounded by love, connected to others. And others of us will not be so fortunate. We will die connected only to tubes and wires. How we die may not be in our hands, but to the extent that it is, we need to face it – anchored to tradition, tied to principle, linked to those who came before us and to those who will come after.

This is not an easy sermon to hear, and I apologize for that. It is not an easy sermon to give either. But it is a sermon that we need to think about in the moments before Yizkor, for someday it will be our turn. May we learn from those we have come here to remember this day. And when our time comes, may those whom we love be able to learn from us.

Let me finish with testimony that comes from someone who has lived through a difficult death. Her words explain, better than any of mine, what I mean by a good death. Jews believe that a person has work to do, up to, and even at, the very end of life. The last days and hours are a time for reciting the Vidui (confessional deathbed prayer), and for making peace with one’s family, one’s friends, one’s enemies, and one’s God. Those who love a dying person have work to do, too, even at the moment of death.

I got an email a few months ago, which I consider a sacred document. It comes from a young rabbi, whose name is Karen, who was married to a young cantor, only 29 years old, named Josh. For weeks, as Josh lay ill, waiting for a bone marrow transplant, Karen kept us posted, via e-mail. All around the country, rabbis and cantors prayed for him at her request.

And then the day came, when we got the sad news that Cantor Joshua Gluckstern-Reiss had died, at noon, from complications of lung and kidney damage. Karen wrote:

“Josh died peacefully, under heavy sedation, with his loved ones by his side. We played our wedding video, allowing that to be a chance for him say good-bye to his loved ones. As each of us in the room said our good-byes, Josh’s senior recital was playing in the background. Then when it came time for Josh and me to be alone, I sang “Ve’eyrastikh,” the song [taken from Hosea’s vision of betrothal 2:21-22] that Josh and I had sung to each other every Shabbat of our marriage. The tears never stopped flowing as I said good-bye and told him how much I love him over and over again. As the doctors arrived to reduce Josh’s oxygen to a standard level, we played Hazzan Rosenblum’s tape of Psalm 40. Hil and I then stood by Josh’s side, and kept him company, while reciting psalms until his death. Just as we started singing Psalm 3, the doctors arrived to tell us that Josh was legally dead. “*Ufros alav sukkkat shelo-mecha* – may God protect Josh’s soul under a [canopy of peace]...”

And then she writes: “Information about the funeral and donations will follow. Thank you to all who have recited Psalm 40 and who said Mishebeirachs [prayers for healing] for Josh’s healing.”

It seems to me that Joshua Gluckstern-Reiss’s death was infinitely more meaningful, infinitely more holy, than that of Thomas Youk’s, whom Dr. Kevorkian killed, and even than that of Morrie Schwartz. Josh died, not only connected to tubes and wires, but connected to the Psalms of David, and in the presence of the people who loved him. Do you sense, as I do, the dignity and the beauty of his passing? They sang his soul out of the world with words and melodies that were handed down to him and meant the most to him. Isn’t that a blessed way to go?

God willing, may we not end our lives in sterile, antiseptic isolation. Instead, may God give us, whenever our time must come, the company of people who love us and the presence of the Schechinah over our heads. May we have the wisdom of our ancestors to guide us, tranquilizers to soothe us and ease our pain, and the ability and courage to go in peace.

Let us spend Tuesdays with Morrie, and holy days with God. Amen.

You Don't Know What To Say

by Jehiel Orenstein

Introduction Debra Orenstein

Below is my father's sermon, flanked by an introduction and a conclusion I wrote. I delivered it as my/his/our Yizkor sermon on Yom Kippur morning of 5778, corresponding to September 30, 2017. I began speaking while seated in a chair on the pulpit, away from the lectern and near a music stand, in exactly the same spot where my father had been sitting seven years earlier. - Debra Orenstein

My purpose now is to introduce Yizkor, and I want to begin with some personal reminiscences. Some of you remember my father. He spoke on this bimah just once. It was the day of my installation - a celebratory day, a very beautiful and auspicious day. But it was also, in some ways, a hard day. It was the first time my father used a wheelchair. About five months after he had been diagnosed with ALS, he could no longer get up and down from a bimah on his own two feet.

I remember, he sat in a wheelchair, where I have placed a chair now, and he had a little music stand nearby, as I do, to hold his notes. He spoke eloquently on the meaning of three words: Congregation, B'nai, and Israel.

Some of you may remember that talk, too. It was everything my father was. It had warmth and humor and depth. It was gracious and relatable. It was profoundly Jewish – and universal. He wanted to include and to touch everyone, whatever their age or background.

He set the bar very high for preaching in this building.

At the end of the ceremony, after my father was wheeled off the bimah, I went to collect his notes, and I found a single piece of paper, with three words on it: Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. My father wanted to be sure that he remembered and pronounced correctly the name of the rabbi who had influenced me most, other than himself.

The music stand was there only to hold Reb Zalman's name. Otherwise, my father spoke entirely without notes.

I can't say that I was surprised. My father's preparation tended to be very internal and organic. He would read. He would think. And then wisdom would come out in his sermons. Even for High Holidays and the most formal sermons of the year, he would hardly ever have notes. And the notes he did have were often scrawled on the back of an envelope or napkin.

Sometimes, on Shabbat, he would work out what he wanted to say by telling the family a sermon over dinner, and then we would go to the 8 o'clock Friday night

service and hear an entirely different drash. It drove my mother crazy. He was led by the spirit.

About three years after he died, a close friend of my parents called my mother up to say, I found one of your husband's sermons. "No you didn't," she laughed. "You must be mistaken. There's nothing to find." It turned out that my dad had been cleaning out his office shortly after his retirement – and years before he became ill. Somehow, one of his sermons had been transcribed. There was a single copy of it, and he gave it away to this friend, who happened to be with him in the office at the time, without ever making a copy. The friend found it years later, among some of his papers. The sermon was a Yizkor sermon, written ten years before my father was diagnosed with ALS. The topic was: lessons from living and dying with ALS. My mother didn't remember the sermon, which had been given during Passover a decade before. Perhaps she missed shul that day, although she was usually there.

With four Yizkor services a year, my father gave close to 200 Yizkor sermons over the course of his rabbinate. If he remembered that ALS sermon, he never mentioned it. Once his illness came, he simply lived it.

The title of that sermon was: "Tuesdays with Morrie, Yontif With God."¹ That sermon was so precious to me that I shared it during Shavuot, at Yizkor time two years ago. I subsequently published it in a small booklet about drawing up your own ethical will, creating a written document of your moral legacy and your advice to the next generation.²

"OK, Rabbi," I can imagine some of you thinking. "This is very touching, but we were *here* for Yizkor two years ago on Shavuot. Or we read the booklet. And we wrote our ethical wills."

And, even if you didn't – yet, this is all old news. I'm sure you're too polite to say so, but my father died of ALS over four years ago, and his ALS sermon was found and read on this bimah over two years ago.

I am not so sure that there is such a thing as "*old news*" when it comes to Yizkor, but, in any case, I have an update.

A few weeks ago, my mother was attending morning minyan when a *different* friend leaned over to her and whispered, "I found a sermon of Jehiel's." And my mom politely answered, "Yes, I know. Isn't it wonderful to have that ALS sermon?" But it *wasn't* the ALS sermon. It was a new one. Lighting struck twice.

1. Printed in this booklet on pages 6-11.

2. The first edition of this booklet, of course.

For the second time, my father, who never wrote out a single sermon, had one of his sermons transcribed.

For the second time, it showed up posthumously, out of the blue.

For the second time, it is a Yizkor sermon.

There is nothing I can say or do better today, to prepare us all for Yizkor, that to share my father's words. He entitled his sermon: "You Don't Know What To Say."

He stood to deliver it and so will I.

You Don't Know What To Say
by Jehiel Orenstein

You are called to the deathbed of your father, and you don't know what to say. But you know that you have to say something.

Your father has arrived at the limit of his life, when he cannot do one thing more. But he has this yet to do - to die. No one has any past experience dying. There are no means, no resources to master. He will either do it well or badly, bravely or in collapse, resolutely or cowering, and he will do it alone. Your father has known for sometime that he will have to do this. He has often thought of it. He has often prayed and willed himself to die the one way or the other. He has prayed for courage all of his life, understanding, as did Aristotle, that courage is not simply the first on the list of equivalent virtues. Courage is one of the transcendent virtues. It is a virtue that makes other virtues possible.

To be good and truthful requires bravery, to be open and generous requires courage. To be a friend to someone else and make yourself vulnerable in their presence - that takes courage. To take any risk in business or love or life requires a certain fortitude of spirit. To die well also takes courage.

And *you*, you are called upon to be there when your father is at this limit of his life, this limit of whatever virtues he has found in this life. And you, you are at the limit of your powers of language. There is something to be said and you're not sure what it is.

The nurses say, "I am glad you have come!" They have done their part to make him feel comfortable and dignified. The nurses and the physicians know that now *you* must do something that they cannot do. You have to say something to the one who is dying.

What can you say? You have to say something that language *cannot* say, some-

thing that is not in the resources of common discourse to be able to say.

Anything that comes to mind sounds vacuous and absurd. You think to yourself, “Maybe I don’t have the skills in speaking,” or maybe you say to yourself, “I can’t think of the right thing to say because I have no experience in this kind of situation.”

You have a friend, who, when summoned to his mother’s deathbed, didn’t go. It was too frightening, too much responsibility. He was too demoralized by the terrible fear of having nothing to say – as if, by being speechless he, too, was being carried away into the region of death and the silence of those going and gone from this world.

Not you, though. You’ve found the courage to answer the summons. Now you must say a word. You end up saying something like, “It’ll be alright, Dad.” Then you feel stupid. You know it’s not going to be all right, and so does your Dad. He knows that he is dying and in important ways he’s braver than you are.

But he doesn’t reproach you for what you said. Maybe in the end, it doesn’t matter. What was important was that you were there and that you said something – anything. Maybe it was important that your hand held his hand as he died, and that the warmth of your voice joined with his breath as he breathed his last. Maybe it was important that the light in your eyes met his, as he turned to where there is nothing to see.

Now the children of Israel were summoned to watch Moses die, just as children have always been summoned to the deathbed of their parents from time immemorial. His time had come. And God spoke to Moses in the middle of the day – *be’etzem hayom hazeh* – and said to him: “Moses, you shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and you shall be gathered to your kin – *Veheyasef el amekha*.”

The people of Israel were summoned to watch Moses ascend the mountain from which there would be no return. They were summoned to watch God give Moses permission to die.

God had always loved Moses with a special love. God had spoken to Moses face to face. God was more intimate with Moses than with any other person – then or since. Now, it was Moses’ time – *be’etzem hayyom hazeh* – in the middle of that day.

One midrash tells us: “*hishlim Moshe nafsho lemitah*.” Moses accepted his own death. His soul came to peace with the inevitable. He knew that death could not be stopped, or even delayed. When he realized that he had reached the limit of his life – in the middle of that self-same day – he was ready to let go.

But, according to another midrash, God was not ready. God cried, quoting the words of Psalm 94:

“Mi yakum li im me-rayim?”

“Who will take my part against evil people?”

“Mi ya’amod leyisrael besha’at ka’asi?:”

“Who will stand up for Israel when I am angry?”

“Mi ya’amod lahem bemil-chamtam shel banai?”

“Who will stand up for my children in battle?”

“Umi yevakesh rahamim alayhem besha’a shechot’im lefanai?”

“And who will ask for mercy, at the very hour when Israel has sinned before Me?”

God did not want to let Moses go. God had decreed that Moses would die, but even so, *even for God*, it was hard to say goodbye.

Moses was tired. He had lived 120 years. His work was complete. It was time to join his brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam.

“Be’oto sha’a neshako hakadosh baruch hu.”

At that moment, “God kissed Moses,” and, in so doing, gave him permission to let go.

“Venatal nishmato benishikat peh.”

“And God took his soul with a kiss of the mouth.”

“Vayeyasef el amo.”

And Moses was gathered unto his kin.

The Children of Israel mourned him. They had lost their shepherd. And God mourned, too, for God had lost a beloved friend.

And so, the people stood at the base of the mountain and they learned three things “be’etzem hayyom hazeh” - right in the middle of that difficult, disorienting day.

First, they learned that, when summoned to a deathbed, you must go.

Second, they learned that about the only thing you can do at the outer limits of life, is to extend a hand, offer a kiss, and say something, anything, that gives permission to your beloved to let go.

And, finally, they learned that when Moses died, he did not die alone. God was

with him. And, I believe that what was true for Moshe is also true for each and every one of us. We are never alone. God is always by our side. This what Judaism has always affirmed through the millennia.

But why do our loved ones have to die? And why do some of them suffer, or die young? Why don't they all, like Moses, live to be 120, with their vision and vigor intact? And what about our own fears, and our own mortality?

These are some of the questions that come to my mind at this moment. I imagine that questions like these probably come to your mind as well. So let me just say a few brief words and then move out of the way and let you be with your questions, undisturbed.

I want to tell you one simple story that I read recently, a true story, and then give you one small bit of financial advice. Those who know me must be smiling when they hear that I am going to give financial advice. You must be thinking that I am about as qualified to give financial advice as I am to teach driving. When I talk, E.F. Hutton listens – and then tells its customers to do the opposite. The only stock tip that I have is: when everyone else is selling chometz, that is when I buy, and a week later I've cornered the market.

But I do have one word of financial advice to give you, and I will share it with you, right after I tell you this story.

I read this true story in the newspaper a few months ago, and I cut it out and saved it for this day. It is a vignette called "the Legacy of Her Legacies," and it was written by a woman named Adeline Spekter Sneider. I was moved by her story and I hope that you will be too. This is what she writes about her parents:

They came to America broken in spirit and in body, survivors of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. Slowly, very slowly, they established themselves in a Midwestern town.

They raised two good children and finally had some small measure of financial security.

He died suddenly, but not before living to enjoy one grandson's Bar Mitzvah and to watch – but never understand – several Little League baseball games.

My father had refused to make a will. His rationale: A will would be an insult to his children. He knew that they would always take care of their mother, and he did not need to put that in writing.

He was right. All his assets were routinely transferred from our legacy to her bank account.

He thought [these funds] would provide for her always. He did not know about inflation, or perhaps – having surmounted poverty in his adopted, beloved America – he thought he was affluent. My mother thought so, and was very comfortable with her circumstances.

But the money ran out, and it would have been unthinkable for my brother, his wife, my husband and myself to let her know it. So, by devious means we kept her unaware that she was being subsidized. After so many years of struggling, working, and selfless giving to us and others, she must never know that she was a dependent. The grandchildren conspired with us, and all was well.

Then she decided to write a will. A dear friend who was also a lawyer was let in on the secret that he was collaborating on a useless document, but, being the *mensch* he was, he did so with grace and finesse.

Mama and the lawyer spent several evenings (he would stop on his way home for a “house call”), and they came up with a simple but rather long will. It was put away and more or less forgotten - until Mama died.

After the week of *shiva*, I started putting our lives back in order, beginning with Mama’s effects. I took out the will, and I cried in true anguish for the first time since she had left.

It was Mamma, that will. She had left bequests to many family members long gone (we never told her of deaths in faraway places; we did not want to sadden her). She left bequests to every synagogue she had ever set foot in, in any city she had ever visited. She left bequests to every Jewish organization ranging from left-wing Zionists to right-wing Orthodox institutions. She left bequests to every orphanage, yeshiva, and home for the elderly that she had a *pushka*³ for – and she had 19!

Crying the whole time, I sat at my desk and wrote checks. Not for vast amounts, but whatever she had wished to leave and thought she could leave. I called a cousin in New York for some of the addresses, and she cried, too, telling me that some of the synagogues had been burned out long ago, vandalized, deserted by their congregations.

After a few hours, I was through - through writing and through crying. A great healing had taken place. I was cleansed, inspired, full of love, and as always when faced with my mother’s character, overwhelmed with pride. What a legacy her “legacies” were for me. She had just, in death, given me one of the happiest days of my life.

³ Tzedakah/collection box.

That is the story.

And now this is the financial advice that I would have us learn from it:

That which you give away is your only permanent possession.

In different words, that is what Baron Rothschild said. That is what Rabbi Hillel taught. That is what Mama – Mrs. Sneider’s mama and so many Yiddishe Mamas – bequeathed to us, in word and in deed.

That which you give away – of your time or your money or your love – no one can ever take away from you. That is your real legacy. That is what you will be remembered for – *that and only that*.

If you – and I – could only learn this truth, if we could *really* learn it, not only in our heads but in our hearts and guts, as well, how different our lives would be!

As you reflect now on the lessons in the lives of those you have come here to remember, reflect, too, on this word of financial advice. And when we leave this place, may we take this truth with us as we go.

But what about your friend? The one who was summoned to his father’s deathbed.

It was the hardest moment in his life, but in *his love* he found the courage to speak. He said some of the only words that matter when a person’s death is inevitable, when they have reached the limit of life.

“I love you. If you can’t hold on, if you’re too tired, if you’re in too much pain, you can let go. I will be all right. My life will be immeasurably diminished without you, but I will go on until it is my time to join you.”

As you listen now to the still small voice within you, imagine giving this message to those who have already departed this world. I believe it is not too late. They have gone ahead, and they are waiting for you.

We take time now for contemplation and conversation. In silence, we now offer – and prepare for – some of the most important conversations we will ever have.

So ended my father’s sermon.

It is a beautiful Yizkor sermon – in and of itself.

Delivered posthumously now, it adds one more lesson, one more layer of depth.

Now, it embodies what my father talked about when he was alive: that life and relationships continue past the grave.

My father, and *all* our ancestors, still have Torah to teach.

Maybe someone will find yet another sermon from my dad. Maybe you will find some forgotten letter, some unexpected keepsake of a loved one. Maybe there will literally be a message for you from someone beyond the grave.

Or maybe not. In fact, probably not.

But with or without anything new and tangible, the conversation continues. The people we remember today still have Torah to teach us, through their deeds and misdeeds; through the words that were spoken and the words that were understood; and the wisdom that will come to us now, in silence.

To quote my father: “We take time now for contemplation and conversation. In silence, we now offer – and prepare for – some of the most important conversations we will ever have.”

Please rise now as the ark is opened and we take some quiet time before the start of our Yizkor liturgy.

Following the silence, we sang from Psalms 90:12, using Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s melody and translation: “Teach us to treasure each day, that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom.”

Many Years in a Few Paragraphs

Jehiel Orenstein (1935 – 2013) was a person of diverse talents, enthusiasm for life, and profound teachings. An acclaimed teacher and speaker, he was the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth El in South Orange, NJ for thirty-five years. He was a gifted pianist, magician, tennis player, chess master, writer, and friend. He fulfilled the Talmudic instruction to “raise up many students,” even as he and his wife, Sylvia, raised three children and seven grandchildren.

Jehiel was born in Brooklyn to Romanian Jewish parents, Max and Mathilda Orenstein. He grew up in Jamaica, Queens with three brothers, Anci (Arthur), Ben, and Arbie. After graduating from Columbia College, he attended The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, fulfilling the dream he had had since age 8 of becoming a rabbi. There, he won the academic prize in Hebrew Literature, a subject about which he later published a book and teacher’s guide. At the Seminary, Jehiel served as personal secretary to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel for two years. During and after his rabbinical school years, he advocated for – and worked with – Soviet Jewry. He traveled to the Soviet Union for the first time in 1959 with his new bride. Over the years, he taught and mentored refusniks, bringing books, medication, kosher food, and, most of all, hope to Jews behind the iron curtain.

After serving in the United States Air Force as a Captain and chaplain, he held a pulpit at Beth David synagogue in Lynbrook, New York. At the time, he was the youngest rabbi on Long Island serving the oldest congregation there. Subsequently, he served as assistant to Rabbi Mordecai Waxman at Temple Israel of Great Neck, where he was mentored by that great spiritual leader and mentored others, in turn, including several students who became rabbis.

At Congregation Beth El in South Orange, he created a vibrant, loving, learned, and participatory community. He also reached out beyond the borders of the synagogue, building many relationships with clergy of other faiths, co-founding the annual South Orange Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration, and raising money for countless worthy causes, including Golda Och Academy (formerly, Solomon Schechter Day School), Israel Bonds, the Interfaith Coalition for the Homeless, and the Sister Rose Thering Endowment.

He was a volunteer chaplain for the New Jersey State Troopers for over twenty years. He taught classes not only in synagogues, but in law offices and tennis clubs, extending his outreach to people wherever they gathered. Though he had a truly brilliant, synthetic mind, he was not the least bit intimidating or abstruse. Everyone could relate to him, learn from him, be cheered by him, and laugh with him.

In addition to public, communal work, Jehiel and his wife Sylvia practiced a more personal form of lovingkindness – opening their home to out-of-town Sabbath guests, prospective rabbis, prospective converts, and students from Israel, who stayed for up to a year at a time. They also informally adopted a political refugee from Cameroon, who found safety and a new family with them.

Jehiel Orenstein died on May 5 after a heroic battle with ALS. Jehiel Orenstein is survived by his wife of 54 years, Sylvia, by his children (born, by marriage, and adopted) Aviva, Debra, Craig, Susan, Raphael, Yossi, Christophe, Natalie, and Ernie; his grandchildren David, Michael, Ben, Elliot, Sam, Emmett, and Hannah Mathilda; his brothers Anci (since deceased) and Arbie; and countless other friends and relatives who will miss his fascinating stories, wise words, and deep kindness. They hope to follow his example and live by his frequent exhortation to “enjoy life!”

Here are Jehiel Orenstein’s own words about his rabbinate, prepared for the 50th anniversary of his ordination and delivered at the Rabbinical Assembly convention in 2011:

“After serving two years in the US Air Force as a chaplain, I commenced my first congregational pulpit in Lynbrook, NY, where I served for five years. I then became the associate to Rabbi Mordecai Waxman *z”l* at Temple Israel in Great Neck, NY, where I stayed until 1970. For the next thirty-five years, I served as rabbi of Congregation Beth El in South Orange, NJ. When I applied for that position, there were three congregations in search of rabbis in close proximity; two in South Orange and one in neighboring Millburn. Rabbi Theodore Friedman *z”l*, the outgoing spiritual leader of Beth El in South Orange, assured me that his congregation was the best choice and that he would be the best rabbi emeritus in the country — because that country would be Israel. (And he promised not to bother me long-distance.)

“My goal in becoming spiritual leader of Beth El was to create a large, loving family, Jewishly knowledgeable, and dedicated to actively pursuing mitzvot. I insisted that no matter what differences arose, everyone should be treated with respect. I derived the greatest pleasure from teaching and attending to the congregation’s pastoral needs. For me, teaching could involve a class full of adult Bible students, a couple coming to my home to prepare for conversion, or twenty kids hanging out with the rabbi to play simultaneous games of chess. I turned most of the administration over to the congregants, giving them a sense of ownership.

“Since my retirement in 2005, I’ve continued to be with the congregation as rabbi emeritus and recently flew to Atlanta, GA, with forty members of the congregational “family” to celebrate the marriage of a young woman whom I had named, at her birth, thirty-nine years earlier. The four tables, filled with Beth El congregants, made me feel that my thirty-five years at Beth El were well spent.

“Of my children – our daughter, Aviva, teaches law at Indiana University. She recently delivered the Rosh Hashanah sermon at her shul in Bloomington. Our second daughter, fellow Rabbinical Assembly member, Rabbi Debra, serves a congregation in Emerson, NJ, and her publications have achieved their own fame. Rafy, our son, volunteers as a music teacher, Torah reader, Purim spiel playwright, and pianist at his synagogue in Chapel Hill, NC. He is a physician specializing in physical medicine and rehabilitation, and he recently spent a month of his sabbatical working in Peru. I had the joy of joining him there this past summer to witness his work in a clinic and orphanage high in the Andes. Our family is blessed with seven grandchildren — six boys and, finally, one girl, ranging in age from four to twenty-eight.

“My wife Sylvia, in addition to being a wonderful rebbetzin, is also an appellate public defender, fierce in her dedication to justice, community and family. We just celebrated our 52nd wedding anniversary. I cannot imagine having made this journey without her as my partner. Sylvia is the daughter of Rabbi Israel and Libby Mowshowitz ז”ל, and the line of rabbis in her family goes back for five generations that we know about. I am the sixth generation, and our daughter is the seventh in the family chain.

“Looking back, I realize that I had the rare privilege of teaching Torah in a congregation that practiced regular acts of loving-kindness. I really felt a bit guilty for being paid for work that I would have chosen to do for the sheer joy of it.”

The Last Lecture

by Aviva Orenstein

The Last Lecture is an honor bestowed on a professor by the graduating students of the Indiana University Maurer School of Law because they wish to hear that teacher's thoughts about life and law. The conceit is that the professor delivers a summary of her philosophy, worldview, and what is important in life. Aviva Orenstein, Professor of Law, Val Nolan Faculty Fellow, Associate Dean of Students, and beloved daughter of Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein, received this honor in 2016. The following is a transcript of her lecture.

Dear Students,

It is an honor to be asked to deliver my “last lecture” and a little bit daunting – although any lecture could be my last. Life is precarious, and I am only one bad tuna sandwich from great beyond.

Nevertheless. I would be distressed to think that the lecture I give today would be the same as the one I would give when I actually retire. That would mean that I had learned nothing new of value and that my thinking would be just the same as it was in 2016 – a truly depressing thought.

So this is not a projection of what my last lecture will sound like. I would actually put bets on a profanity-laced screed from someone with dementia, but who knows? I may have something to say then.

My goal for today is to give some advice and make some observations from my heart and from my soul. My mind, not so much. We have plenty of time to share intellectual conversations whether about the utility of notice pleading or the contours of the hearsay rule. These are important matters, but hopefully the class material – even when the law is at its most magisterial – is not all your professors have to offer.

I want to give you advice on some subjects – things I still struggle with myself. The benefit is that I've thought about these subjects a lot. The detriment is that I haven't totally conquered the topics I will be discussing. You've heard of the blind leading the blind? This is more of the professor with bifocals leading students with eye strain from reading casebooks with 9 point font print. In essence, you are eavesdropping on my internal conversations and challenges.

There's a lot of good advice out there – and I decided to organize it by time and by source. You'll hear a lot about Rabbis in the next 20 minutes or so. The first Rabbi I want to quote is my grandfather, who observed that for a talk to be immortal, it need not be eternal.

I decided to organize the talk around the legacy of my late father, a rabbi, who, I believe, has a lot to teach me still, and whose story and worldview I'd like to share.

One impetus for focusing on my father is the fact that my mother is in the audience. My parents were married for 53 years, and she does not tire of listening to stories about him.

Is it hard to live with your mother for a semester? Well, it depends on the mother. My mother has been incredibly generous and fun. We have a deal that I do the grocery shopping and she pays for restaurants, so as you can imagine, we go out almost every night.

The one negative is being her fellow teacher. A student enthusiastically told me that her class was his favorite in law school. "Wait a minute," I said. "Didn't you have me for evidence?" The student was unapologetic; in very convicting fashion he drew some invidious comparisons. I admire that kind of truth telling.

So, because my mother is here, and because I think my father's legacy is one of the best things I can share, I'd like to tell you about him and about what I learned from him that I am still trying to incorporate in my own dealings with the world. My goal is to subvert the thought of Mark Antony: "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." Today, we'll be talking about the good.

My father grew up in New York City, one of four sons. His father, Max Orenstein, was a cabin boy who jumped ship and entered America illegally. My Grandpa Max started selling dishware from a pushcart in the lower east side, until he realized that clothes were more profitable and less heavy to schlep around. By the time my grandfather died of lung cancer in his 60's, he had built a profitable business. My father was raised in comfort, if not exactly luxury, given my grandmother Mathilda's notoriously bad cooking.

My father and his younger brother, unlike the older two brothers, were never groomed for running the store. Once, while trying to wrap a shirt for a customer, my father actually got his tie caught in the packaging – a story that lived on in family lore and marked him for a path outside of retail. Instead of working in the store, he played piano, went to synagogue with his grandmother, and studied. He was too young for WWII and by the time he graduated Rabbinical School, he was married to my mother, had me, and was headed to Lackland Airforce Base to serve as a chaplain from 1961 to 1963. I could give a whole separate talk about his experiences in the military, but that would make this the second-to-last lecture.

My father was named Jerry, but at some point he decided that he preferred to be

called by his Hebrew name, Jehiel (translation: God lives or may God live). He was a congregational rabbi – a pastor, preacher, and teacher in the same synagogue for 35 years. He was witty, very well-read, an accomplished pianist, an entertaining magician, and an amazing chess player. He took up tennis in his 40's and was invited to join the local tennis club that once had had a no-Jews-or-Blacks-allowed policy. He became a good tennis player, and some people were taken aback by what a ruthless competitor he was. He didn't like to lose. He also used his tennis prowess for good. On one famous occasion, when a kid didn't want to continue his Jewish education, my dad found out that the young man was on his school tennis team and he offered a wager. They would play a game, and if the kid lost, he would continue in Hebrew school. Of course my Dad won. He consoled the student, telling him: "It's not your fault, God was on my side."

Most of all, my father wasn't a snob, and he wasn't afraid to look ridiculous. Family lore has it that he once took my five-year-old sister out to a restaurant and called over the waitress to ask whether French fries should be eaten with a fork or with fingers. The woman looked at Deb and said, "Sweetheart, you should use your fork." "Aha!" Deb said pointing to my father. To his credit,

I'm sure my Dad left a generous tip anyway, as he always did.

My father honestly didn't care how wealthy people were. This is a little unusual for people in religious vocations who are always soliciting for the building fund, the Sunday School, or poor families in Israel. My dad just wasn't a suck-up. To his detriment in the short run, but to his credit when I look at the arc of his life, my Dad ignored the pecking order of social class and instead gravitated to interesting, kind, and smart people wherever he found them.

My Dad used to like to quote from Pirkei Avot—a book assembled around the year 200—which contains ethical aphorisms of ancient Rabbis. A favorite of his was "Ayzehu chacahm? Halomed mikol adam. Who is wise? One who learns from every person."

One lesson I continue to learn from my Dad is that everyone has an interesting story, if you're willing to listen. There are no boring people, just bad interviewers. And people who are commonly treated as functionaries in the lives of others, because of their profession or status – waiters or cab drivers, for example – have something to teach you if you are open to learning. Admittedly, sometimes the thing they will teach you is patience or forgiveness. But more often than you think, people have great stories to tell. As I kid, I was mortified by the fact that my Dad would start up conversations with people he didn't know, people other fathers treated like wallpaper. When ordering at a restaurant, he would always ask, "What's good here?" Occasionally the servers would be annoyed. More often, however, his question would produce a good tip or a memorable conversation. One server answered, "I don't know, I wouldn't eat here. Get out while you

can.” To which my Dad, with a broad smile answered, “We’ll have the grilled cheese and tomato.”

This principle of learning from everyone has been hugely influential in my personal and professional life. Getting to know my pro bono clients, I find that someone who looks superficially boring or unremarkable may be heroic. One person is caring for her grandchildren, now abandoned by drug-addled parents. Another is facing a cancer diagnosis with deeply admirable calm and grace. I believe that my effectiveness as a lawyer has been enhanced by my willingness to see clients as complex and interesting people.

Similarly, I relish getting to know students. A highlight of my year this year has been working with various trial teams. Late night practices and long car drives mean that you really get to know someone. And getting to know a student well always makes me like him or her more, even as it improves our teacher-student rapport and connection. I feel inspired by the wondrous, unique aspects of each person who is a variation on the theme of what it means to be human. My Dad used to like to quote Talmud Sanhedrin 38a (which I will be studying next year on my sabbatical): “To tell you the greatness of the Ruler of all rulers: if a person mints many coins from one mold, they are all alike, but the Holy One, blessed be God, fashioned all people in the mold of the first human, and not one resembles the other.”

My observation to you is that searching for the unique imprint of each person is a fulfilling way to live.

My struggle, however, is that I can let the demands of deadlines and workload collapse people into what they can do for me. I attribute bad motives rather than realize that I can’t correctly surmise what it feels like to be the person I’m frustrated with, I reduce other people to their occupation or service, failing to see the person inside. What I learned from my Dad is that the extra time it takes to make a human connection is almost always worth it.

My Dad didn’t give a lot of thought or energy to other people’s negative assessments of him. This may seem odd given my first point: seeing people as individuals to be appreciated and interacted with as such. My father cared a lot about what people thought generally, but he didn’t much care what people thought about *him*. He was certainly not spiteful, psychopathic, or anti-social. He just didn’t care about other people’s judgments. He did not crave approval or have a need to impress. He did what he thought was right and didn’t mind if other people misunderstood or disagreed. This was maddening when he was in the wrong, but truly inspirational when he was in the right.

I will tell you a story that I’ve told a lot since his death. First, you have to understand that an important part of his job was ministering to the sick. He gave

people hope. If someone told him that the doctors said she had weeks or months to live, he would respond: “The last person who told me that outlived the doctor by eight years.” I believe that my Dad had healing hands. There was a magnetic power to his touch. Equally important was the fact of his showing up. Once he flew from New Jersey to Wisconsin for a 20-minute visit to a congregant who had been in a car accident there. On another occasion, he flew to Florida to visit someone who’d had a stroke. About three weeks later, my Dad received an angry letter from the person, chiding him for not writing or calling. Evidently, the man had forgotten the visit entirely.

What did my father do? Well, he didn’t do what I would have done, or, I venture to say, what most people would have done – tell the guy: “I certainly do care about you! I even flew down to visit.” Instead, my dad wrote back saying that he was sorry the man was hurt and that he was holding the man in his thoughts and prayers. From my father’s perspective, the only reason to tell the man he had visited would have been to justify himself and to protect his own ego and reputation. That would have come at the cost of embarrassing the man and pointing out his mental impairment and unfairness.

I don’t know that my dad made the right call. Maybe the congregant would have felt better knowing about his visit. But whatever my father did, he did for the right reason. He felt confident that he had been a good rabbi to the man, and he didn’t need any external validation of that fact.

Recently, I heard the story about a *bris* (a circumcision ceremony & celebration that names baby boys and brings them into the Jewish covenant) where the mohel (the person who performs the procedure) was agitating to commence, although some important guests had not yet arrived. My father agreed that, yes, ceremony had to take place immediately, and began by saying a few words – well, more than a few. He prattled on about the history of the *bris* for twenty minutes. The second the relatives walked in the door, he ended his meandering monologue. Bottom line: he focused on doing what was right, even if it made him look bad in someone else’s eyes.

Like most people, I struggle with my ego, am sometimes defensive, and worry about how I will be perceived. I find myself wanted to justify my actions and have people like and understand me. What I learned from my father, but I have not yet been able to fully execute is that such self-justification is always a losing game. Doing good is a challenge. It is a waste of time to insist that you not only be good but look good.

In sum, learn from everyone, and surrender control of what they think of you.

The third major lesson I learned from my father was communicated by the way he faced death. My father died of ALS. At the time of his diagnosis, he was told

that he had three to five years to live. Because he had a congregant who had died of ALS a few years before, my father knew the slow and steady physical deterioration that was expected to follow, until he could no longer move any part of his body below his neck. Eventually, he could not eat without a feeding tube and could not breathe without a mask. As his ability to talk diminished, he would be restricted to communicating in short phrases and then in one-word sentences.

I learned by watching my father go through this that you are not your body. The outer part is a shell. The true essence of a person—the soul—dwells inside.

Despite his catastrophic disease, my father maintained his sense of humor. We would lift him into a chair and ask, “Are you comfortable?” He would reply, “I make a living,” — a reply that would never fail to delight and, weirdly, surprise.

It always caught me unaware and always made me smile.

He taught me a lot about how to be a good patient. He has able to ask for help, which was a tremendous gift to his caretakers. And he was never embarrassed. His arms didn’t work and someone had to scratch his nose, so he would say, “Aviva, nose.”

One time, a visitor was crying, saying, “I can’t stand to see the rabbi this way,” my Dad beckoned me over and said: “Please tell him I am mentally competent.”

He made a choice to live – for personal and religious reasons –when many others might have refused interventions to prolong life. What he did was to separate the corporeal from the spiritual. He made it easy for us to help him by not being embarrassed by his body’s deterioration. He loved exercise and was a physically powerful person until his disease, but his body was not him. He may have felt some frustration, but no shame at the course of the disease.

Finally, I want to talk about my father’s signature phrase. “Enjoy Life.” It was how he said goodbye to people and it didn’t change even with his terrible illness. What he did he mean by it? Not to indulge, or wallow or be a hedonist. He meant that you should enjoy the life you are living.

Too often people of your talents get sucked into doing what they are good at instead of doing what they enjoy. I call it “the curse of competence.”

Too often we live for our resume, our expectations or the expectation of others.

Too often, even when we are doing exactly what we claim we want to do – anxiety, fear of failure, ego — all intervene to deplete the activity of joy.

Law school is hard work, but so is studying for the bar, and so is being a new attorney, and so is being a new parent, and so is being the senior attorney. There’s

no time that life will get less hectic or less challenging. There is no point in grimly getting through the next few years because that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is a moving target continually just beyond reach. The key is to enjoy the beautiful rainbow during your pursuit.

The advice I have culled from my Dad—to connect deeply with people, to let go of the impulse to justify yourself, to know that you are more than your body, and to enjoy life—have one important thing in common. They all demand a certain form of being present without ego. Following this advice will liberate you to spend you emotion and spiritual energy on things that truly matter.

When my father was the youngest rabbi in the oldest congregation on Long Island, he was featured in Parade Magazine, an insert to the Herald Tribune, and they started a file on him. Every year — right around the Jewish High Holidays — a reporter would call him up and ask, “Rabbi, what can we add to your file for your obituary?” Turns out, that’s a sobering question.

As I reflect on the man and what I learned from him, it is not the great accomplishments — the awards, the founding of an annual event, the amazing travel, the spectacular interventions to help others — that testify to my father’s place in history and in my heart. It is the small kindness, the genuine connections, the willingness to laugh at himself and at the strength of ego, rather than justifying his actions once he’d searched his conscience. That is the legacy I have been bequeathed and the example I will try to emulate.

My advice to you: Enjoy Life!

“Remembering Abraham Joshua Heschel”

by Jehiel Orenstein

selections from a speech given in April, 2011

Serendipity is a word that includes magic and mazel [fortune]. After graduating from Columbia College, I was given the choice by the [Jewish Theological] Seminary of a partial or a complete scholarship. I decided on the complete scholarship, feeling that my parents had put me through college and that was sufficient. I also wanted never to doubt that I owe the Seminary my total allegiance. I was informed that if I received a total scholarship, I would have to become the secretary of one of the professors. For two years I was the secretary of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw Poland on January 11, 1907. He studied in a traditional yeshiva, and then went on to the University of Berlin and a liberal rabbinic ordination under the great scholars of the time: Ismar Elbogen, Leo Baeck, and Julius Guttmann. Later he taught Talmud in the same school where he had studied.

In late October 1938, when he was living in a rented room at the home of a Jewish family in Frankfurt, he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Poland. Instead of going into hiding, he taught philosophy and Torah at the Warsaw Institute for Jewish Studies. Six weeks before the German invasion of Poland, Heschel left Warsaw for London with the help of Rabbi Julian Morgenstern, president of Hebrew Union College. He arrived in the United States in March 1940. He served on the faculty of Hebrew Union College for five years and then took the position of Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America until his death in 1972.

Professor Saul Lieberman, considered the greatest Talmudist of his generation, was also at the Seminary at that time. He did not know what to make of this professor of mysticism. He assigned Heschel to teach at the Teachers Institute, and Heschel found himself trying to teach Mishnah to students who were still struggling with their Hebrew. At one point, he asked a student's comments on the next week's Torah portion. When the student said he had no idea what next week's portion was, Heschel assigned us to memorize all the Torah portions in order. I remember Golda Garmace, later to be Golda Och, setting up a group so that we could coach each other and memorize the order of Torah portions. Fortunately or unfortunately, Heschel forgot the assignment, and we went back struggling with the Mishnah.

Heschel was given an office the size of a closet in the Teachers Institute building. There, twice a week, he would dictate about 20 letters which I had to type. “Dear So-and-So: Thank you for your kind invitation to speak at XYZ. Unfortu-

nately, I am teaching full-time at the Seminary and so cannot be with you. Please give my best regards to ABC, and thank you again. Sincerely, Abraham Joshua Heschel.” I can still type that letter in my sleep.

After about six months of typing and doing odd jobs for him, Heschel called me to his office. As usual, it was filled with smoke from the cigar that was constantly in his mouth. He was clearly ill at ease.

“I understand that your wife studied at Cornell. Did she study with Vladimir Nabokov, the famous Russian writer?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“He writes well, I understand,” Heschel remarked. “And, I believe that, like me, he came late to English.”

“That’s true, professor,” I replied. “His writing is truly wonderful. Each sentence he writes is like a brick, and the paragraphs are like miniature cathedrals.”

“Well, you see,” Professor Heschel said, “I would like to read him, but ...”

Finally I saw where he was going, and I said, “Professor, say no more. I understand. Prof. Abraham Joshua Heschel cannot go into a store and ask for a copy of *Lolita*.”

So that Shabbat afternoon, Sylvia and I pushed Aviva in a baby carriage on Riverside Drive, and delivered a copy of *Lolita* to Professor Heschel in a brown paper bag by placing it in the back of Suzie Heschel’s bicycle. The drop was made. And Heschel loved *Lolita*.

Heschel himself was an extraordinary writer. Although he wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish, many of his works were originally written in English. Those books read like poetry, the language deep and rich and memorable. As Heschel observed, Nabokov’s first language was French, the language of the wealthy, educated classes in Russia at that time. He then learned Russian, and wrote his most famous works in English. Heschel’s first language was Yiddish, then Polish and German and, surprisingly, Spanish. In fact, he once told me that he thought he wrote best in Spanish. Finally, he learned English. His English was self-taught. He learned it by reading *The New York Times*. His students threw him a ‘Times Party’ the day that he read the paper from cover to cover, including the sports section, and didn’t have to look up a single word.

I remember walking along Broadway with Heschel one day when he was accosted by a man who demanded, "Brother, have you been saved?" Heschel thought for a moment. Then he replied. "That's not my question." The man was taken aback. "What's your question?" he asked. "My question is: what is the next mitzvah I can do?" "What's a mitzvah?" came the reply. And then Heschel had him. For the next half-hour, Heschel explained the concept of mitzvot to a stunned man, who probably was never the same again.

Heschel was an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam. To the amazement of his fellow professors, he was invited again and again to the White House to speak on civil rights, the treatment of the young, and care for the elderly. "When I was young," he wrote, "I admired clever people. Now that I'm old, I admire kind people." He was also a fierce advocate for civil rights and marched with Martin Luther King. Of that experience, he wrote, "Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

In the early 1960s Heschel began to speak out on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Heschel encouraged Sylvia and me to go to the Soviet Union in 1959, when few people from the West visited. He said, "You can never tell what the results of your protests might be."

Later he wrote, "Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to regain the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments."

After many protests and many years of struggle by our brave sisters and brothers in the Soviet Union, Sylvia and I were privileged to see them go free.

In many ways, Heschel was a prophet who was not honored in his own time, at least not by the institution to which he devoted his life. When he was at the Seminary, they really didn't understand or appreciate him; he was not a Talmudist. What he taught was a philosophy of spirituality in action. He taught us how to look at the world and how to live in it.

He said, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." And he also wrote, "A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers from harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair."

I was privileged to know this great man. All who learned from him will forever remember his teaching.

Remembering Jehiel Orenstein

Excerpts from reminiscences and tributes in honor of his 77th birthday

My first memory is attending shul [synagogue] during the High Holidays. My children were in the children's service, and I had the opportunity to sit as an adult and listen and pray. It was a fairly quiet, mostly adult, room. You, Rabbi, were speaking, delivering your sermon, I believe. I don't remember what you were saying, in content, but I so remember what you said, in humanity. The air was suddenly pierced by a child crying, and your sermon was interrupted. The perpetrating child was being carried out by an embarrassed parent. You stopped your sermon, looked at the family, and said, "Please stay here with us and your child. Your child was just making music to accompany my words. I appreciate the interaction." That said it all for me.

[Decades later, after your diagnosis, you performed a family wedding]. When the groom confessed to you that he had anxiety about a tic and not being able to stand still under the chuppah (marriage canopy), you said to him, "I will also have trouble standing still. We will move about together." And you married [that couple], standing there with your cane, a little less strong on your feet, your big voice just a little softer, but the words and the wisdom and the love oh so loud." – Sue Horowitz

What you've offered me is an appreciation for the brilliance of the Jewish scriptures. You know things I never would have guessed — Hebrew puns, internal rhymes and letter repetition leading to the next verse. I'm sure I haven't understood all the subtleties but I've come to appreciate the genius that has gone into these texts. I believe that's your most enduring gift to me: an appreciation for how wonderful the scriptures really are. That may be just the beginning, but I'm grateful for the start. Thank you again and again. – Peter Barnett

I have so much to be grateful for in the many years you have been my rabbi, teacher, friend, and I have loved you for your kindness, sincerity, compassion, humor, modesty and goodness. I miss you leading our Sisterhood Bible Class which evolved into a class of learning how to live using the Bible and was a springboard for the most fascinating discussions. We were a diverse crew – ranging from zero knowledge to quite advanced students. How to thank you for never humiliating us for foolish questions, for making us feel comfortable discussing profound ideas? We had many a laugh – not at anyone but sharing a naive or comical remark. We aired problems and gave each other advice. And we learned a lot – from you our brilliant teacher. – Hattie Siegel

It's only the rarest of rabbis who not only follows you as you grow up, and officiates at your wedding, but also continues to visit you well into your professional career – in Indiana, no less! What a great honor it has been to learn from you at Beth El and beyond: from being called up to do Ein Keloheinu through Adon Olam, to learning how to sit through a sermon, to learning how to understand a

sermon, to learning how to give a drash, [sermon] to being humbled by my rabbi reading my first book, to watching with patience as I cajole my infant daughter into sitting through Shabbat dinner. To this there is no equal. – Judah Cohen

Beth El was our home away from home for 27 years, and its heimish atmosphere emanated from you. You guided our children, Emily and Ari, for their b'nai mitzvah, and you set an example to all of us about scholarship and tradition and especially tolerance and understanding. We will always treasure our memories of your leadership and friendship. – Wilma & Marty Steinberg

You have always been the special guiding light for our family. Always your messages were fascinating, with gems of knowledge along with a strong dose of compassion, and sprinkled throughout with humor. Our entire family cherishes you, and we were so fortunate to have all three of our children taught for bar or bat mitzvah under your care and guidance. – the Woog family

Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein is the paradigm of what a Rabbi should be. He is a man of exceptional intelligence, wit and wisdom with great sensitivity and compassion. Rabbi Orenstein has the most extraordinary sense of his self-worth, which makes him the perfect pulpit Rabbi. A man with such self-confidence and such a sense of the love and respect his congregation could always comfortably welcome the best voices and the best scholars to share his bimah [pulpit]. And he shared his bimah with pride, respect and love because of his love for his congregation. – Marion and Murray Mohl

Jehiel Orenstein has served his congregation, his community, and God as a Rav and as a Mensch. He has taught me to be a better person and rabbi. – Rabbi Mark Mallach

In the early '90s I accompanied my late grandparents to Rosh Hashanah services at Congregation Beth El, and that's where I heard you give a sermon which went so deeply into my heart and mind that it has – and continues – to change me. Discussing the story of Hagar leaving the dying child Ishmael in the desert, you focused on the words, "God heard the child *ba-asher hu sham* [where he was]." You spoke from such a heartfelt place about God's care and compassion and closeness to us, no matter where we're at — and that's just what I needed to hear right then. I absorbed and started to use that understanding.

Some time later, when I began 12-step recovery, "*ba-asher hu sham*" was already "programmed" in me, and I took it even deeper, into my daily recovery process, where it fruited by giving me endless hope and self-acceptance. Shortly thereafter, I adopted it into my extended meditation on laying tefillin, and it is literally alive and active within me every single day. On Shabbat and holidays I often do the meditation even without the tefillin, because it is so "juicy"! Thank you so much for your lasting gifts of the heart and soul.

Communicating with you around your conducting my grandmother's 2010 funeral was such an inspiring thing because I was able to realize how you used speech and language and intention to comfort me and my family, to make us feel acknowledged with your compassion and attention and care. And I've started to think that part of the beauty and depth of your words is the place of caring connection that they're coming from, as in the old song: "'Tain't What You Do It's The Way That You Do It; 'Tain't What You Say It's The Way That You Say It." There are precious few people in my experience who live and speak this way; you seem to be one of them. As the late Rabbi Albert Lewis (as made famous by Mitch Album) might have said, perhaps this is your glory. – David Schwartz

You have an incredible ability to make family get-togethers and simchas even more joyful.... You have been a guiding light in our lives and the lives of our children. You amazingly inspire, Jehiel, with a quiet comment. I recall telling you that I was reading a book about a *tzaddik* [saintly hero], and your words of encouragement made my reading even more meaningful. – Anne Mirsky

At each year at our Seders, we still tell the story you told us about how each Egyptian Pharaoh picked an animal to be their own personal god. You taught us that the act of sacrificing the lamb was not just following God's directions, but also a supreme act of civil disobedience by the Hebrews because the lamb was the Pharaoh of Exodus' god (a lesson in justice as well as in living according to God's word). We remember well your lesson that all religions play with the same deck, they only rank the suits differently (not only a lesson in comparative religion, but also a lesson in tolerance). We recall with great reverence our many discussions from our readings in Pirkei Avot. Rather than simply focus on the basics of Judaism, you wanted us to have an understanding of the soul of Judaism – its core foundation in ethics.

And if we missed something in those lessons, we had many, many opportunities to learn these core values from watching your actions. You have inspired us by your leadership, on so many occasions. A great example of the way you lived what you taught is how you led change....

It was not only in your professional life that you taught by your actions the values that are so central to our heritage. We know you quietly helped scores of people in need – with donations of money, or time, or a voice, or even just a bottle of milk, if that's what they needed, inspiring us to try to do the same. And you inspire us by your never-ending romance with Sylvia. We have watched week after week, year after year, how you stand hand in hand, and side by side, always, through joy and through pain. And how you happily ceded the floor to Sylvia, with great respect for her knowledge and wisdom, during our living-room lessons. We love you both, and yes, we are not only inspired to be better Jews by your lessons and actions, but to be better HUMANS. – Sue and Brian McNamara

You were always an integral part of our Shabbatot, our life cycle events, our Jewish studies, and most certainly our “dugma’ot” [role models] in life. However, what we also loved were the “other” times: opening your home to our children when they played at the park, paying attention to our kids on our walks home from shul, attending Avi’s First Grade Siddur Play because he had invited you on one of those walks (and then writing him a thank you note!!), witnessing the joy you felt becoming a grandparent for the first time when you picked up a carriage, and not to mention your competitive tennis in our backyard even when the temperature reached 100 degrees!! – Brenda and Jerry Deener

When I see Natan Sharansky at the Jerusalem Pool or on Emek Refaim, I am reminded of the trips you and Sylvia made to Russia to visit refuseniks, the buses that Beth El filled to march in Washington, and the families that Beth El resettled — including my cousins from Moscow.

When I read in the Israeli papers about the influx of asylum seekers from Africa, I am reminded how you and Sylvia took Christophe into your home and invited congregants to your home to get to know him.

You gave a sermon (maybe more than once) about conversing with the toll takers on the Garden State Parkway and taking action to show appreciation to others we encounter in our daily lives. I have watched with pride as our children acknowledge people just this way — whether at a movie theatre, office reception desk, or checkpoint.

You have taught us well and taught us by example.

– Jo Anne Adlerstein

You inspired us in so many ways over these years. Almost every Shabbat, you gave the b’nai mitzvah a tzedakah box and told them to put their spare change in the tzedakah box at the end of the week. Then when the box was full, they should come back and talk to you about where to donate the money. You know the speech. You made it almost every week, and we listened every time!

Each week we put our spare change in our two tzedakah boxes, and you would be amazed at how quickly it adds up. We have great fun opening the boxes, rolling the coins and then picking a charity.

So it is just fitting that for your birthday, we opened our tzedakah boxes and made a donation in your honor. – Robin Sitver

I am privileged to know you, and will never forget your teachings, your philosophy of life, your approach to spirituality, the way you invite people to a more spiritual life, lived with kindness and humility. It always amazed me how your sermons resonated with me and reached my soul. Every single one!

– Lonye Rasch

We have learned from you that in life it is not where you travel but rather with whom you journey that matters. Therefore, we honor you with love and gratitude as our rabbi, our friend and our inspiration. – Bambi and Bob Granovsky

How Do You Thank a Teacher?

by Rafy Orenstein

Raphael (Rafy) Orenstein received training in music throughout his childhood and at Brown University. He shared a love and a gift for piano with his father, Jehiel. He wrote the following song on the occasion of Jehiel's 77th birthday party, a celebration which raised funds for Solomon Schechter Day School scholarships, at Jehiel's request.

Handwritten musical score for "How Do You Thank a Teacher?" by Rafy Orenstein. The score is written on five staves in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It includes lyrics and chord progressions.

Staff 1: Chords: Eb, Ab, AbM7 Ab6 Eb, Gm. Lyrics: How do you thank a teacher How can you re-pay

Staff 2: Chords: Ab, Eb/G, Fm7 Db, Bbsus9 Bb7. Lyrics: Since we Mos opened your eyes to see the world in a dif-fer-ent way

Staff 3: Chords: Eb, Ab, AbM7 Ab6 Eb, Gm. Lyrics: If you are showing an nec-tion That helps you in-der-stand

Staff 4: Chords: Ab, Eb/G, Fm7 Db, Bbsus9 Bb7. Lyrics: It's far more val-u-able than any-thing you can hold in your hand

Staff 5: Chords: Ab, G7, Cm, Cm/Db, AbM7 AbmM7. Lyrics: A tea-cher rea-ches deep-ly in to the core of you You might think it's like your gas but far as you can go but

Handwritten musical score for a song, featuring six staves of music with lyrics and chord annotations.

Staff 1: Chords: Eb/G, Am b5 7, D7. Lyrics: Who shaped you and you may find if you open your thoughts, it has the your mind that a

Staff 2: Chords: G, F/A, G7/B, C7. Lyrics: tea-cher that you knew can help you grow

Staff 3: Chords: F, Bb, Bbm7 Bb6, F, Am7. Lyrics: This is how you think a tea-cher by ta-king what you learn by

Staff 4: Chords: Bb, F/A. Lyrics: sha-ring it with others to Ex The world and heal

Staff 5: Chords: Bb, F/A, Bb, A7. Lyrics: Then the tea-cher's power will be un-furled and the tea-cher can fi-na-ly

Staff 6: Chords: Dm Dm/c, Bb, F/A, Gm, C sus4, F. Lyrics: so you are wel-come and Thank you in re-turn

Tools for Leaving a Legacy: The 6 R's

RECOGNIZE REALITY. Because he loved life and wanted to live it to the fullest, my father insisted on facing death squarely. One of his favorite books, read around the Shabbat table when my siblings and I were young, was *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker. Rabbi Meir taught, “death is very good” (Bereisheet Rabbah 9:5). My father often cited those jarring words to point out that death can focus us and provide a sense of urgency. When we count each day, we are more likely to make each day count. Dying well must first be preceded by living well.

Mortality Rate by State

(% of current residents who will die)



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Resources:

- Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*.
- Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*.
- Levine, Stephen. *Who Dies?: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*.
- Newland, Sherwin. *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*.

RECONNECT THE SPIRITUAL WITH THE PRACTICAL. Organ donation – autopsy – health care proxy/living will/medical directive – last wills and testaments – charitable bequests – heirlooms – the family home, library, jewelry, estate, or foundation. All of these have both material and spiritual motivations; all have both spiritual and material consequences, as well. What are your desires? What lessons do you want to communicate? How might you prevent strife and promote shalom bayit (peace in the family) through the legacy you leave?

Resources:

- Lamm, Rabbi Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.
- Mackler, Rabbi Aaron, “Jewish Medical Directives for Health Care.” <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/jewish-medical-directives-health-care-living-will>
- Riemer, Rabbi Jack, ed. *Jewish Reflections on Death*.

REVIEW WHAT OTHERS HAVE TRANSMITTED. From the time that Abraham, advanced in years, asked his trusted servant to swear that he would find Isaac a “nice girl” from a good (non-Canaanite) family, Jewish parents have been preparing for death by transmitting their priorities to the next generation. The model for ethical wills is Genesis 49, where Jacob instructs his children: “Assemble yourselves, and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.” Jacob offered praise, censure, and advice immediately before being “gathered to his people.” In the centuries since, countless Jews have followed this example, the majority with messages more gentle and validating than Jacob’s. The variety in tone, wishes, demands, and even humor among ethical wills reflects the full gamut of human dispositions, emotions, and relationships.

In addition to reviewing Jewish ethical wills, ethical literature in general is great to read for inspiration, as are biographies, memoirs, and poetry. May Sarton, Anne Lamott, Naomi Rachel Remen, and Mitch Albom have written enormously popular books about finding and sharing meaning in life, and offer a variety of perspectives that can help to clarify your own.

Resources:

- Abrams, Israel. *Hebrew Ethical Wills*.
- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson*.
- Davidson, Sara. *The December Project: An Extraordinary Rabbi and a Skeptical Seeker Confront Life’s Greatest Mystery*.
- Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*.
- Orenstein, Debra. *Lifecycles 1: Jewish Women On Life Passages and Personal Milestones*.
- Riemer, Jack and Nathaniel Stampfer. *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*.
- Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *The Book of Jewish Values: A Day-by-Day Guide to Ethical Living and A Code of Jewish Ethics: Volume 1: You Shall Be Holy*.

REFLECT ON YOUR LIFE. In reflecting on your life, it is good to “find yourself a rabbi and bind to yourself to a friend” (Mishna Avot 1:6). Talk with a trusted loved one and perhaps a therapist, too, about the course of your life, the lessons you have learned, and the messages you wish to teach. No matter how much love and support surrounds us in life – or death – we depart this world

alone. Take time to be with your own thoughts. Pray. Be still. Meditate. Talk to God, and listen, too.

Resources:

- Bastian, Edward W., Tina L. Staley, and Netanel Miles-Yepez. *Living Fully, Dying Well: Reflecting on Death to Find Your Life's Meaning*.
- Sacks, Oliver. *Gratitude*.
- Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman and Ronald S. Miller. *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*.

RECORD & REWRITE. We certainly don't have to wait until death is near to prepare ethical wills. Although some people may have illnesses or length of years that signal death approaching, many of us will die unexpectedly. Rabbi Eliezer used to say, "Repent one day before your death" (Mishnah Avot 2:10). His irony warns us against delay in living out – and transmitting – our deepest values.

Many Jews write and update ethical wills before Yom Kippur, which is, in many ways, a rehearsal for death: a soulful and disembodied time, out of the realm of "normal life"; a time without food, drink, or sex. The liturgy and themes of Yom Kippur – Yizkor, sin, the scapegoat, the Book of Life, "who shall live and who shall die?" – are meant to clarify our values and priorities. The exercise of writing an ethical will is a very personal way of preparing for the Day of Atonement and, ultimately, for the day of our deaths.

Some Jews choose to write ethical wills upon the birth, Bar/Bat Mitzvah or marriage of a child, or before a special birthday – their own or a child's. Any time you update your last will and testament or life insurance, you might choose to also update an ethical will or write a new letter to your descendants. The timing is up to you. The recommendation is: be a disciple of Rabbi Eliezer, and don't wait until the day before your death.

Resources:

- Goldberg, Natalie, *Old Friend from Far Away: The Practice of Writing Memoir*.
- Riemer, Jack and Nathaniel Stampfer. *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*. The afterword has a helpful guide about how to write an ethical will.

RECOGNIZE REALITY AGAIN. The biggest boon of writing an ethical will sooner, rather than later, is that it focuses you on leaving your legacy *right now*, by how you live. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "The call for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending to the grave." There is a legacy that can only be left in real time, with memories that you partner with others in creating and sharing. We are so blessed to have new opportunities, daily, to join our lives and legacies with other people. "This is the day that Adonai has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalms 118:24). Or, as my father so often said, "Enjoy life!"

Legacies Delivered in a Moment for a Lifetime

Each line below was crafted independently by someone who attended the second annual Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein Memorial Lecture at Congregation Beth El on May 22, 2016. I grouped and ordered the sentences in such a way that they now comment on one another. However, each still stands alone as a summary of wisdom learned by observing one admirable person in action.

The original inspiration for each line was this instruction: “Think of a person you admire, and then of a specific story/moment/example that shows who they were. What quality or value stands out to you in that story? In response, write a single sentence. Begin with a value (erech) or quality (midah). After the noun, use any verb except “to be.” Include some measure of time in the sentence (e.g., today, always, last spring, in old age, etc.).”

In two or three cases I guessed at handwriting or added a verb. I also added titles to the groupings I created. Apart from that, what follows is unedited. These rich lines capture the essence of meaningful moments and lasting legacies. – Rabbi Debra Orenstein

DURING A VISIT

Focus on the visitor’s presence showed selflessness at the time of his illness.
Dedication, persistence, and belief effected change then.
Sincerity, humility, and forthrightness rise to memory now.
Generosity gave back to the giver when exchanging a smile.
Devotion proved love when times were most difficult.
Awareness of living means appreciating the moment (the now).

HAKARAT HATOV – ACKNOWLEDGING THE GOOD

Gratitude eclipses complaints retrospectively.
Hope recognizes the good that will happen soon.
Appreciating others generates confidence in the future.
Patience makes tomorrow a better place.
Optimism prevails now and always.

ELLIPTICAL TALES OF LOVE

Affection commuted on a 1948 subway car.
Friendship knocked loudly at retirement.
Vulnerability invited love then.
Bravery and leadership sent him to make sure everyone got out of the building before him on September 11th.
Dreams of listening and understanding constantly populate my relationships.
...mentoring warmly in a time of confusion...
Acceptance yields riches over time.
Creativity builds endlessly.

A true teacher demonstrates the importance of being true to yourself.
Passion drives people forever.
Generosity needs no words - ever.

RIGHTEOUS LIVING

Speaking out matters - always.
Charity begins today.
Living a full life means dedicating yourself to making others feel the fullness of theirs.
Generosity (tzedakah) can be part of life always.
Always accept people with a giving heart.
Reflection leads to intentionality and mindfulness throughout one's whole life.
Speak your feelings with honesty and compassion before you die.
Passion to serve persists beyond the grave.
Perseverance takes practice - yesterday, today and tomorrow.
Be patient. What is right will eventually win out.

HOW AND WHEN TO DO IT

Empathy lands now.
Generosity leads to doing the thing now.
Action at the right time is all-important.
Dedication means keeping a promise each day and forever.
Laughter infuses joy every day.
Reverence for the beauty of nature offers love eternally.
Humility speaks without reference to the impression it is making when lunching with friends.
Humility will make you happy, always.
Connection between generations becomes more important as we get older.
Inspiration resonates all throughout the person's lifetime.
Open-mindedness is more important today than ever before.

The Yahrzeit of Jehiel Orenstein: Anniversary of a Death, Legacy of a Life

25 Iyar - Day 40 of the Omer - Hod Shebe Yesod

Sefirot of Thought

- | | |
|----------|------------|
| 1. Keter | |
| 3. Binah | 2. Hochmah |

Sefirot of Action

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| 5. Gevurah | 4. Hesed |
| 8. Hod | 7. Netzach |
| 9. Yesod | |
| 10. Malchut | |

What are the Sefirot?

Sefirot have been defined as Divine emanations, expressions, faces, dimensions, and/or qualities. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan wrote: “Sefirot are garments or vessels for the light of Ein Sof [Infinity] that fills them... They are [both] essences of the Divine and vessels of the Divine. They are ten windows through which we perceive the Divine and ten tools God uses to direct the world.”

Each day of the week is associated with one of the seven lower sefirot (divine emanations), as is each of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. As a result, every day of the omer is associated with a pair of divine qualities. The 40th day of the omer is designated as Hod within Yesod.

Hod refers to beauty, glory, aesthetics, thinking, sincerity, humility, surrender, and withdrawal. Hod can be a hidden or private part of the holy.

According to Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Hod asks of a project or idea: “How am I going to get this idea to find space in people’s hearts? How shall I market it? How shall I package it? Netzach is like a Jeep. Hod is like a Ferrari.”

Rabbi Ted Falcon teaches: “Hod brings sensory information that already contains mental and emotional form. It represents the images, touches, sounds, tastes, and smells that we perceive. Physical sensation and perception allow us to know our world and to discover ourselves within it.”

Yesod refers to foundation, relationships, emotions, life-force, bonding, and truth. Yesod represents embodied passion, and it maps onto the Kabbalistic “physical man” in the area of the sexual organs. Yesod is identified with the righteous: “a tzadik (righteous person) is the foundation of the world” (Proverbs 10:25).

According to Reb Zalman, Yesod asks of a project or idea: “How can I produce it today and tomorrow so that it can keep going and be nurtured in a sustainable way?”

Rabbi Ted teaches: “Yesod represents the ‘Foundation’ of our separate sense of self, the self-awareness that we call ego. The ego identity is the body identity, which is deeply connected to our generative abilities, sexual and otherwise.”

A Meditation by Rabbi Simon Jacobson: Humility in Bonding/ Hod ShebeYesod

“Humility is crucial in healthy bonding. Arrogance divides people. Preoccupation with your own desires and needs separates you from others. Humility allows you to appreciate another person and bond with him. Healthy bonding is the union of two distinct people, with independent personalities, who join for a higher purpose than satisfying their own needs. True humility comes from recognizing and acknowledging God in your life. Am I aware of the third partner – God – in bonding? [Am I aware] that this partner gives me the capacity to unite with another, despite our distinctions?

“Exercise for the day: When praying acknowledge God specifically for helping you bond with others.”

For The Yahrzeit

Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein was a master of humility and of relationships. His yahrzeit is a special day to draw on and learn from those strengths.

What might we do, individually or in groups, to honor the memory of this very special soul?

For Every Yahrzeit: Questions to Contemplate and Discuss

What was a favorite saying of the person who died?

What do you think were the three most important values in this person's life, in priority order? (If you are with a family group, write your answers and then compare notes.)

In one word, how would you describe the deceased's sense of humor?

What was the deceased favorite holiday, and why?

What text would be meaningful to study in this person's memory and merit?

What was most precious to your loved one about Judaism and/or Jewish identity?

What did they do (or not do) that continues to be an example to you today?

Describe one happy experience you had with this person.

What did this person teach you by example?

What would you want a new friend to know about this person? How would you describe the deceased?

Is there any physical possession(s) you received from this person? What do(es) it (they) mean to you and how do you use it (them)?

Tell a joke or story that the deceased loved.

Tell stories of the deceased's childhood.

Describe something unusual about this person. What made them unique?

Which organization(s) or cause(s) could you support to honor him or her?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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