



Shabbat Vayeshev
20 Kislev 5778 / December 8, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

After almost 18 years in the rabbinate, I've learned a few things about dying and loving and grieving and getting back up again. Here are some thoughts and suggestions that may be of help. I'm not an expert. This is simply what I've learned in the school of hard knocks and loving people.

Every person's journey is unique just like every human soul is unique. Yes-it is true that your uncle may have had the same tumor or a similar cancer-and he responded totally differently. We understand the desire to empathize and make sense of the mysterious; still-everyone's journey is unique. Remember this.

There are far too many euphemisms we use for death. I get it. Death is terrifying and sad and final and awful. And still-using words other than death or dying-especially for the person who is actually dying-isn't helpful. The dying person knows they are dying. As hard and painful as it is, using the language of death to talk about death actually enables us to be intimate and tender and loving in moments when we need it most.

When you visit someone who is dying and their loved ones: Be tender. Let them take the lead. Humor is often ok. Don't be afraid to show real, human emotion. Tears are ok. Hysterical wailing and sobs are not.

Do tell the person who is dying what they mean to you. BE SPECIFIC! Generalities are for Hallmark cards, not humans. What do you love about this person? What have they meant to you? What do you treasure? What's a funny story or a tender memory or wild story to share? Please: Be real and be specific. This is a gift for the person who is dying and those around them.

Please: Avoid platitudes like "Be strong," or "If anyone can beat this, you can!" Sure-it often comes from a place of love. But it isn't useful and actually shuts the door to intimacy.

Silence is ok. Truly. Sitting together in peaceful quiet can be quite a gift.

Don't overstay your welcome. Think of dying as the inverse of being born: For most people, dying takes a lot of work. There is a bunch of stuff we can't see happening in the body and the soul and it is exhausting. Come for a few minutes-I use 18 minutes as a good gage-and then depart.

Before you go for a visit, do a little bit of spiritual prep: Think about if this were you, what would you want? It may be exactly what the dying person wants. And it may be the exact opposite. It is good to be aware of our own needs and desires so that we can be fully present to what the dying person and their loved ones need-even when our choices and decisions might be different.

Do NOT-under any circumstance-tell the dying person or their loved ones that there is a reason for their suffering and/or that they are going to a better place. You may believe that and that is 100% your right. But it is not acceptable to impose our theological beliefs onto others. And I've never, ever seen it work out well.

If you want to offer help, be specific. Dying is hard work. Don't make the person who is dying or their loved ones do the work. "Can I get you water" "Do you need a blanket?" "Can we make you a meal?"

Dying people are people. Until they absolutely cannot do anything for themselves, respect their power and their autonomy and do what you can to support their independence. Do NOT make decisions for people who are dying unless you are the person/people who have been expressly granted permission to do so.

Despite how fabulous you are, you can't take this suffering away. But your presence and your love can make this suffering sufferable. We are all going to die. That is a simple fact of human nature. So given that fact, offer up as much love and kindness and tenderness as you have inside your soul-and then offer more. No one ever regrets being told they are loved.

People grieve differently. This includes spouses of the dying and their children. Some folks are weepy in public and some people are quiet. The more spacious we are in understanding that we all grieve in our own way, the more love we bring into the world.

People die. Love doesn't.

This is written with love and I pray it is received with love.

Shabbat Shalom,
Michael
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