

I'd venture that most adults at some point in time imagine their deaths. Some of us might imagine a sudden death by heart attack, or accident but most probably imagine dying peacefully at home, surrounded by loved ones, having said their goodbyes. That is certainly what surveys show that people want, though too few get. In fact, if you google the term "a good death" you get about 2 billion hits in less than a second- articles, photo montages, interviews, resource guides. And the themes are pretty consistent-- a good death is one in which there is an absence of pain/or pain is well controlled, a person dies on their own terms (decisions about treatments are clear), and the death occurs in a supported and dignified setting.

Some descriptions also include having ones affairs in order, having few regrets and / or the ability to do a life review, having a sense of completion and the ability to say goodbye.

In this week's torah portion, Va-y'chi, the last in Genesis., Jacob is preparing for his death. Knowing his time of death is drawing near, he summons his sons, he tells them where he wants to be buried, among his ancestors in the land Canaan- which involves transporting his body out of Egypt, and he describes how they should mourn- according to tradition. He imparts his values- and the importance of lineage and kinship. He bestows his blessings on his sons and grandsons. (I do want to note that there is no mention of his daughter Dinah, and I would say that some of the blessings sound more like chastisement, which must have felt pretty terrible to sons Rueven, Simeon and Levi). Jacob's son Joseph is able to weep over his father and kiss him goodbye and reassure Jacob that his wishes will be carried out. By all accounts Jacob had a good death.

When I agreed to lead services tonight- I believe, it was back in August or September, I had no idea what the Torah portion was or what would transpire in my own life in the intervening months. For those of you who don't know, my parents died, 6 days apart, in early October. I helped them through numerous health crises over the last 10 years, appreciative that they survived, grateful for them living on what seemed borrowed time. I spent the past year going back and forth to Evanston IL to take care of them as their health declined- 18 trips in a year in fact. My siblings and I spent much time the past couple years, helping my parents get their affairs in order. I was with each of my parents when we had a "do not resuscitate" discussion with their doctor. I had the incredible privilege and solemn responsibility of being with both my mother and my father when they took their last breath.

And as you can imagine, I've reviewed the last year and those final days over and over and over and over in the two months since. I have a devoted daughter's guilt that I couldn't do more to alleviate their suffering or the slow inexorable loss of privacy the last couple years of their lives. I suppose I can say my parents, had a "good death". I am reassured that neither was in any pain, that neither was alone, and that both were treated with dignity.

But I will forever wish that they had shared more clearly what they thought about death, how or whether they wanted to be buried, and what they wanted us to remember. I wish I could be confident that they faced death without fear. And I wish they would have done a life review with us, of some sort. But perhaps those are greedy desires on my part.

I have a good friend who has asked Jane and I to be part of her end-of-life team. She participated in a program called Five Wishes, which helps people explore and put in writing their beliefs about death and their desires for how they wish to be treated medically, emotionally, spiritually and physically at the end of life. I can't read what she wrote without crying. It is such a gift to her children and those who love her to know what gives her comfort, what she fears, what will preserve her dignity, and how she views death. It is such a gift to know how she wants her loved ones to make decisions when faced with gray areas that inevitably arise.

I wish I had such a document from my parents. But instead I must look to their lives-- their community involvement, their leadership, their volunteerism, their generosity, their open hearts, and their vast circle of friends, as evidence of their values. I look to their tenacious grip on life despite so many health challenges to know that they didn't welcome death. I'm profoundly grateful that the love between us was never unspoken.

None of us know when or how we will die but our sacred texts and our traditions give us guidance on how we can face death, how we can guide our loved ones through the process and how we can support each other in grief. We also each have the opportunity to share our values, fears, and wishes with those we love, not only so that we can have a "good death" but so that we won't leave our loved ones with numerous unanswered questions. May we each summon the courage and fortitude to do so.

Shabbat Shalom