**Dying On a Good Note**

**Yizkor Yom Kippur – 5776 (2015)**

**R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel**

In late January of this year, Dr. Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist and writer, popularized through his portrayal in the film “Awakenings,” was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Only a month later, on February 19, Oliver Sacks decided to confront death in the same way he embraced life. He decided to encounter it through his public writings.

In a piece titled “My Own Life” Oliver Sacks powerfully shared personal reflections. He wrote:

“A month ago, I felt that I was in good health, even robust health. At 81, I still swim a mile a day. But my luck has run out — a few weeks ago I learned that I have multiple metastases in the liver. Nine years ago it was discovered that I had a rare tumor of the eye, an ocular melanoma. The radiation and lasering to remove the tumor ultimately left me blind in that eye. But though ocular melanomas metastasize in perhaps 50 percent of cases, given the particulars of my own case, the likelihood was much smaller. I am among the unlucky ones.  
  
I feel grateful that I have been granted nine years of good health and productivity since the original diagnosis, but now I am face to face with dying. The cancer occupies a third of my liver, and though its advance may be slowed, this particular sort of cancer cannot be halted.  
  
It is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can.” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/opinion/oliver-sacks-on-learning-he-has-terminal-cancer.html>)

In the course of a few months, Oliver Sacks published a few more articles in which he shared thoughts, memories, and reflections.

On Aug. 14, only two weeks prior to leaving this world, Oliver Sacks published his final piece while still alive , titled “Sabbath.” In this very moving article, Oliver Sacks revisits his childhood experience of the Sabbath. Raised in an observant Orthodox home in England, Sacks became estranged from his family and Judaism in his early twenties after experiencing a traumatic rejection by his parents due to his sexual orientation as a gay man.

In the piece, Sacks notes that only towards the last few decades of his life, he was able to establish a healthy acceptance of his sexual orientation. In addition, through a loving embrace by his famous Orthodox cousin, Israeli Nobel Prize winner Robert John Aumann, Sacks was able to reconnect with his family and with his Jewish tradition as well. Sacks notes that Robert John Aumann hung a mezuzah at his home and hosted Sacks and his partner for Shabbat at his home in Israel.

At the very end of the piece, Oliver Sacks powerfully offered these parting words:

“And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html

On Aug. 30th Oliver Sacks left this world, with what feels to me like the kiss of God. His life complete, his work done, his conscience at rest.

It was a good death.

A few months ago, I taught a midrash that also describes a good death. Our class focused on the death of Moses and the ways in which the rabbis depict his last moments in this world. In the midrash, Moses is surrounded by holy angels and tended to by the Holy One as well. Before leaving the world, Moses is able to hear eulogies from these heavenly figures and manages to come closer to understanding the impact he has had on this world. The powerful bedside description concludes with God embracing Moses with a loving kiss of death.

At the end of class, one of our beloved members approached me and shared a pointed comment. This person said: “Rabbi, that was a beautiful description. Unfortunately, it is also highly idealized. Some people get to die that way, but many don’t. Death is not always pretty.”

This person’s comment deeply resonated with me.

First, it resonated because it is simply true. Over the years, as our community’s rabbi, I have encountered the many different faces of death. Death by a kiss and death by accident. A slow and patient death and sudden death. Death that came on time, despite the sadness that comes with loss, and death that came too soon.

Second, it resonated because of my own personal and painful encounter with the death of a loved one. A death that came too soon, too suddenly, and without a kiss.

Over the last 8 years, at different occasions, I have at times hinted and at others spoke more openly about the passing of a very beloved friend of our family.

Harel came into our life in his early thirties, about twenty five years ago or so. At the time I was in my very early teens.

Harel was the son of one of my mother’s closest friends. In his early twenties he served in the Shin Bet (Israel’s FBI). Then, in his late twenties he resigned, left Israel to NY and then SF, and finally came out of the closet as a gay man.

Hearing about this development in his life, my mom reached out to him. First through letters and later through lengthy phone conversations. In time, they adopted each other as siblings and we, the Cohen children, adopted him as our uncle.

Harel and I had a very deep, loving, and complex relationship. We were both equally stubborn, equally strong willed, and equally right. The two of us had some of the very best and most childish arguments I will ever have.

Twenty years after he came into our life, Harel left this world. He died in his early 50s, his death shrouded in mystery.

Too soon, suddenly, without a kiss.

Harel’s death traumatized all of us. My mother flew to Israel for his funeral and shiva. My brother came to Berkeley to spend the week with me. We were all in deep mourning.

In truth, I don’t think I have ever been able to truly shake off the trauma of Harel’s death. I think of it on a monthly basis. Too soon, suddenly, without a kiss.

How do we encounter such a death – a kiss-less death, a sudden death, a death too soon?

Our tradition offers an expression which I’ve been thinking about for a while. After a person passes from this world, during the first year of mourning and then during all Yahrzeit gatherings, we often say: “May the *neshama* have an Aliyah” or may the soul have an ascension. In its basic meaning, the expression denotes a belief in the eternity of the soul or its continuous existence on a different or higher plain. Just as one’s migration to the Holy Land is called an Aliyah, so too the migration of the soul is an Aliyah.

The word Aliyah is also used to designate each of the seven sections that divide a Torah portion. I believe that this very designation of Aliyot in the Torah can be informative to my own question regarding difficult encounters with death.

The Jerusalem Talmud notes that the reading of each Aliyah cannot conclude with mention of curses. The Rama in his commentary to the Shulchan Aruch codifies this practice. The Rama notes:

וִיכַוֵּן שֶׁיַּתְחִיל תָּמִיד לִקְרֹא בְּדָבָר טוֹב, וִיסַיֵּם בְּדָבָר טוֹב

**Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayyim Siman 138**  
One should aim to always begin to read on a good note and to end on a good note as well (Or Zarua and Meimuni, Chapter 13 of Hilkhot T'fillah).

Based on the Rama, our accepted custom is “to eschew, if at all possible, ending an Aliyah on a melancholy or disconcerting note. In fact the current division of Aliyot appears to interpret the Talmudic injunction underlying this principle relatively stringently.” (<http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/8-2009/Stulberg.pdf>)

Consider these few examples from Ephraim Stulberg’s article on this topic:

Joseph’s famous speech to his brothers in Egypt, after he reveals his true identity to them, “is awkwardly divided between two Aliyot in order to highlight the suggestion that his sale into Egyptian servitude was in fact a blessing in disguise. The editor’s division of Aliyot here forces the reader to focus on the narrative’s single silver lining.”

“In Parashat Vayishlah, the fifth Aliyah is especially lengthy, and passes over two separate paragraph breaks before ultimately stopping in the middle of a paragraph. A close look reveals that the two natural paragraph breaks that were skipped mention, respectively, the defiling of Jacob’s daughter and the death of Deborah, Rebecca’s old nurse. In a similar vein, Parashat Bereishit ends with the “ascent” of Enoch, rather than with the deaths of any of the other members of the genealogy, in order to avoid ending the Aliyah with the mention of death.”

In all these instances, the editor’s division of the Alyiah forcefully buries violence or death into the rest of the biblical text.

Finally, in Parashat Vaera, “three out of seven Aliyah endings occur in the middle of paragraphs, although the portion offers many opportunities for endings that coincide with paragraph breaks; the divisors were evidently reluctant to end any section with the depressing mention of Pharaoh’s refusal to release the Israelites.” (All examples were very slightly adapted or directly quoted from <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/8-2009/Stulberg.pdf>)

I would like to believe that the division of Torah Aliyot by our rabbis offers a critical insight about the way we lead our lives and the way we can encounter the death of loved ones.

The rabbis have empowered us to be the editors of God’s story, to accentuate good over bad in the way we read the biblical narrative every Shabbat. Certainly this imperative must also extend to the way we tell the stories of our own lives. As human beings, and primarily as story-tellers, we must also cut, paste, and edit.

In that spirit, maybe, just maybe, when we speak of an Aliyah for the soul, we also express our desire to learn to edit, to cut and paste, and at times, even alter ever so slightly, the way we remember a person’s life and death. In other words, the rabbis’ imperative to aim to always end on a good note, even if it means forcing a particular reading of the biblical text, must also apply to the living text, to the stories of our own lives and our memories of others.

In reflecting about my traumatic encounter with Harel’s death through this particular practice and the insights it provides, it suddenly occurred to me that over the past 8 years, since his passing from the world, I often thought about his death, and very seldom about his life. In other words, in my own state of trauma, as an editor I have placed more emphasis on the bad note – on the way that he died – rather than on the positive, on the high notes that filled his life and the time we spent together.

Through the lens of this practice, I now understand the blessing of – “May the *neshama* have an Aliyah” – as a spiritual and emotional imperative. To me, it means that I must carefully examine the way I have chosen to remember the deceased and do my very best to accentuate and highlight the positive notes.

Towards the end of the summer, Yossi Piamenta, a 64 year old [Orthodox Jewish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Jewish) [singer-songwriter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singer-songwriter) and guitarist, who was best known for introducing the electric guitar to [Jewish music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_music), passed from this world. He died on the same week as Oliver Sacks.

During the week of shiva, friends and fans of Yossi Piamenta posted a moving video documenting an incredible moment from his last days on earth. In the video, Yossi is seen lying in his bed holding a guitar in hand. It is clear that he shed most of his weight and that this was his deathbed gathering. The bed is surrounded by close friends who are led in song by Yossi: *“Avinu Malkeinu ein lanu Melech, ein lanu Melech elah atah…”* – “Our Father, our King, we have no other King but You.”

Like Oliver Sacks, Yossi Piamenta confronted death in the same way he embraced life. He decided to encounter it through music and song. Like a wonderful Torah reader, a great editor and story-teller, Yossi Piamenta met his end, quite literally, on a high note.

As we now turn to our own encounters with death through the Yizkor service, I bless all of us with the powers to accomplish an Aliyah for the *neshama*, an ascension for the soul of the deceased.

May we cut and paste, may we edit and retell, and may we recall, in such a way that our memoires and the memories of our deceased will truly be for a blessing.