



## **Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783: Do the Next Right Thing Rabbi Grushcow**

### Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783: Do the Next Right Thing

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of an older woman who came to see her, at the urging of her adult daughter. Enid's husband had died unexpectedly two years earlier, and since then, her mourning had consumed her – so much so that her daughter said, “I lost both my parents the day my father died.”

“At first,” Remen writes,

Enid and I sat and looked at each other in silence... “Talking seems a waste of time” [she said]. “No one could possibly understand.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yes, of course,” I said. “You have lost your life. Only your husband could understand what you have lost. Only he knew what your life together was like.” ...I nodded again. “If he were here, Enid, what would you tell him?” I asked her.

She considered me for a long moment. Then she closed her eyes and began to speak to her husband aloud, telling him what life was like without him. She told him about going to their special places alone, walking their dogs alone, sleeping in their bed alone. She told him about needing to learn to do the little things he had always taken care of, things she had never known about. She reminded him of times that only he would remember, old memories that no one else had shared. And then for the first time since he died, she began to cry. She cried for a long time.

When her tears stopped, I asked her if there was anything she had not said. Hesitantly she told me how angry she was with him for abandoning her to grow old alone. She felt as if he had broken a promise to her. She missed him terribly and all that he had brought into her life...

“Enid,” I asked her, “if Herbert were here, what would he say to you about the way you have lived the last two years of your life?” She looked startled. “Why, he would say ‘Enid, why have you built a monument of pain in memory of me? My whole life was about love.’” She paused. Then for the first time I saw the hint of a smile. “Perhaps there are other ways to remember him,” she said.<sup>1</sup>

“Every great loss,” Remen suggests, “demands that we choose life again.” *Uvacharta b’chayim*, as we read in the Torah earlier today: choose life.

As a Jewish community, our mourning rituals recognize just how hard it is to lose someone we love; just how hard it can be to choose life in the face of death. We accompany our dead all the way to their burial, and then, when we return home, we sit on low chairs, staying close to the ground. We stay with our dead until we have to leave them, and only then do we slowly climb the path back up to our lives, through shiva and beyond.<sup>2</sup> For most, it is not as extreme as for Enid, but it’s not obvious, when you’re in mourning, that you will ever return fully to your life.

One of my cherished mentors and teachers is Rabbi Larry Hoffman. It has been just over a year since his wife, Gayle, died, and he has written openly and beautifully about his mourning. It has given him more understanding, he writes, of his mother, who, when her husband died, slowly but surely loosened her own hold on life. Reminiscent of Enid’s daughter, Hoffman says, “When my father died, my mother died too, but a little bit at a time.” He is determined not to go down that path, but he understands its pull. “The State of Grief is a marshland,” he writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York, 2000), pp.36-37.

<sup>2</sup> This insight comes from David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 2002).

The trails are barely marked; it is easy to get lost in the jungle of despair. Worse yet, at some point the marsh becomes quicksand. Look away, for even a second, from the promise of deliverance on the opposite bank, and you risk stepping into the quicksand, and then sinking into deeper and deeper desperation, rather than holding out hope for dry land again.<sup>3</sup>

When I read those words from Rabbi Hoffman, a line came to mind. It goes like this: “This grief has a gravity/it pulls me down.” The source? A song called “The Next Right Thing,” in the Disney movie, Frozen 2. Forgive me. But both Rabbi Hoffman and the rabbis of old have taught me that we draw on what surrounds us, and as a parent, Frozen is part of my ecosystem. A fellow rabbi and parent of young children, my friend Rabbi Sari Laufer, sets the scene for this song:

Anna, one of the main characters, is stuck in a cave, fearing her sister is dead, and that her best friend is dying in front of her. Alone and frightened, she remembers advice given to her earlier--that when she is not sure what to do, she should do “the next right thing.”<sup>4</sup>

Do the next right thing. It’s not an original idea; it also appears in everything from the writings of Carl Jung to recovery movements like Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>5</sup> But even in the context of the movie, there is a lot behind this phrase. The director, Chris Buck, lost his 23-year-old son Ryder after the first Frozen film came out; having survived cancer, Ryder died when he was hit by a car. It was a devastating loss. In the words of the songwriter, Kristen Anderson-Lopez, “We were there as [Chris] just took a step and another step and showed up... and made it through, one breath at a time, the unimaginable.”<sup>6</sup> She wrote the song with him in mind. Then Kristen Bell, who sings the song for the movie, shared how she relates to it from her experience of anxiety and depression:

A lot of people feel that feeling: What do I do when I don’t know what to do? My personal mantra is you just do the next right thing... What do I do when I don’t want to get out of bed in the morning? You just do the next right thing, and that’s

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://blog.lawrenceahoffman.com/2021/10/08/the-state-of-grief/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Sari Laufer, Kol Nidre sermon 5783, Stephen Wise Temple.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/ordinary-magic/202207/finding-power-in-doing-the-next-right-thing>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/29/movies/frozen-2-songs.html>.

stepping out of bed. The next right thing is brushing your teeth. The next right thing is eating your breakfast. The next right thing is looking at your calendar and going to work...<sup>7</sup>

We do not rush ourselves out of our mourning and struggles. But neither do we want to sink into the quicksand of despair, or be lost forever in the marshland of grief. We do what we can, when we can. We do the next right thing; we climb our way back up to life. *Uvacharta b'chayim*.

It is not an accident, then, that the first mitzvah, the first commandment we are to do immediately after Yom Kippur is to begin to build a sukkah. The sukkah is a temporary structure, as fragile as we are mortal, yet filled with life and joy. In Rabbi Laufer's words: "We move from the edge of mortality into the next right thing – a celebration of abundance, of family and friends, of light and wind and sun and rain."

Soon, we will build; we will do that next right thing, helping to hold each other as we climb back up to life. But not quite yet. For now, we linger a little longer with our losses. We remember: *Yizkor*.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://youcanhavehope.com/do-the-next-right-thing/>.