Rabbi Daniel Berman Yizkor Yom Kippur 2025

The man I visited every Friday afternoon was missing three teeth. One, two, three. He was painfully self-conscious about it, looking slightly away or covering up his face when he found something in our conversation amusing or light-hearted.

When I first visited him, he had already been lying on his back for the 97th straight day - the days written on faded paper, 19 sets of five tally marks, four straight lines down and one strike diagonally across the middle, plus two lonely lines. He couldn't move for risk of injury or infection outside his sterilized room in the Cardiac ICU, which would compromise his place in the miraculous and unbearable line for a new heart.

I sat down next to him for the first time, in a chair low to the ground, mindful of the ancient Jewish teaching that God's presence is particularly intense immediately above the head of one who is ill.

"Are you in a lot of pain?" I asked him?

“I’m ok.”

“Your heart?…” I began to say.

He interrupted me. “Where are *you* from?”

He’d do anything to avoid talking about his heart transplant. He had talked enough about that with the medical staff and family and friends and everyone else.
It’s amazing the things you’ll talk about when you’re not talking about the heart. Where you’re from. How many Jews live up there in Maine anyway? Baseball, of course. Climate change. The economy. We played cards. Sometimes I’d just sit there until the silence became heavy.

A month already into my visits, he asked me if we could light candles before Shabbat. He didn’t seem terribly concerned by petty minutia - like lighting fire in a hospital room in the Cardiac ICU - and he’d be on me constantly to bring in real candlesticks and candles and matches. I found electric Shabbat candles.

You just plug them in and twist the top plastic flames that turn from pale white to pale orange with a splash of red glimmer. “Aaaah, Shabbat,” he’d say.

In time we added Kiddush with ice water.

Ha'Motzi with flavored ice cubes.

Another few weeks, close to two months of visits, he took my hand.

"When are you going to ask me," he begins - and I swear I thought he was going to finally want to talk about his heart - "about my three missing teeth."

It was an opening at least, not exactly the one that I had been waiting for. But an opening.

There are few very, if any, experiences as intensive as waiting for a new heart.

He had been on the transplant list for many months. Twice he was scheduled to receive a heart. He was ready, medically prepped. Twice a doctor came into his room and told him, "I'm sorry, there's a problem. Not this time," his physical heart, the blood pumping, life giving organ, hanging in the balance of time, timing,

circumstance and luck, his *neshama*, the soul that contains the life-source, hanging onto faith.

I was there when his family was called to meet together with him and the medical team. A third possible transplant was scheduled. I sat in the meeting and watched him breathe slow, insufferably long breaths.

I noticed his energy was fading. "Tell me where you're at," I said.
He took my hand and placed it on his chest. "This is my heart," he said. "The heart I was born with. The heart that broke when I lost my wife - and that I built back up over ten years. Everything is in here. The heart's not a symbol of one's life. It's everything. You're whole life is contained there,

His own heart was in end stage failure. He could feel it. We knew it.
He was doubtful the next opportunity would come through. He asked to be taken off the list.

Before he died, I came in to turn on those ridiculous plastic candles that now seemed transcendent as if lighting up the entire unit. Everything is intensified in these moments of anticipation.

“Do you think I gave up?” he asked me.

“I do not,” I said. “Letting go is not giving up.”

“Some think I did,” he said.”

“I know.” “What about you,? I asked

“I do not,” he said.

I twisted the plastic flames and told him a story.

Rabbi Yehudah Ha’nasi, Judah the Prince, was one of the great sages in ancient Jewish history - an unmatched scholar, extraordinary teacher, and beloved friend to many. He compiled and redacted the collection of Jewish oral teachings called the mishna, which became the foundation for Talmud, the development of Judaism as a living tradition.

In the Talmudic volume called Ketubot, we learn about the end of life of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi.

The story goes like this:

On the day that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died, the Sages decreed a fast, and begged and prayed for Divine mercy so that he would not die. They said: anyone who says that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi has died will be stabbed with a sword.

Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi had a maidservant who cared for him. She went up to the roof and began to pray: "The upper realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and the lower realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi! May it be the will of God, she cried out, that the lower worlds should impose their will upon the upper worlds that he may live."

However, when she saw how many times he would enter the bathroom and remove his tefillin, and then exit the bathroom and put them back on, and how he was suffering with his intestinal disease, she said: "May it be the will of God that the upper worlds should impose their will upon the lower world that he may die."

The Sages, meanwhile, would not be silent; they would not refrain from begging for mercy so that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would not die.

Seeing that they continued to pray, the maidservant of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi took a jug and threw it from the roof to the ground. Due to the sound of the shattering ceramic, the Sages were distracted, and were momentarily silent, refraining for just one moment from begging for mercy, and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died.

"It's a good story," he said.

"yeah."

"You have a jar?"

"Not with me, no."

"It's ok," he said.

It is a unique gift to tell someone whom we love who is suffering and ready to die, "you may go." I think of my old friend often and wonder what life may have brought had he decided to continue waiting for a heart. Ultimately he decided to let go, which was a final act of dignity, and which comes with its own blessings.

There is a beautiful midrash, an ancient rabbinic story, about the interaction between the Israelite people and Moses at the time of his death. In Torah, it is "*b'etzem hayom*" - the middle of the day - when God tells Moses that he will die in the wilderness, and not cross over to Eretz Yisrael. The midrash claims it was essential that his death be during the *day*, not alone at night, so that the people could encounter his final moments. They were summoned to the deathbed of Moses to witness the loss of their spiritual leader.

How would they react? Would they cry out? Protest? Pray for his life? Try to hold him back before he stepped away from them to ascend the mountain and die there? No words are recorded in Torah - the text gives us only silence. So what were they summoned for? The ancient midrash suggests that they were summoned to watch him leave, and in their quiet, give him permission to step back from them and allow him to return to God and to the earth.

The midrash is even bolder than this, imagining that God, too, was in mourning and expressed regret, crying out in prayer, "who will stand up for Me now? Who will stand up for the Israelites if I, God, became angry? Who will seek mercy and forgiveness when they have transgressed?"

The midrash ends with God's acceptance: God kisses Moses, and draws out his soul with that kiss.

When a child is born, we listen closely for the sound of the child's first cry, a first breath. We can learn to *just as closely* hold a person who is breathing her way *out* of this world.

This kind of loving embrace and acceptance is a unique *gift*.

Endowing the end of a life *with a sense of gift-giving* helps us to endure the pain of the loss.

As with all gifts, we do not earn these gifts, and we do not own them. We receive gifts and we let them go.

Letting go is not giving up, or quitting, or deciding one has had enough. Letting go is an expression of agency, of openness to begin the process of dying.

The openness is also the essence of Yizkor - we stand in painful memory of those whom we have lost, and as we say kaddish, we become their loving companions, shepherding and guiding them back to their Source. We take care of them, give to them, as they have always given to us.

During this Yizkor, may all those you are remembering be a blessing for strength, for healing and for meaning. May you be enriched by their memory, even as you live with the pain of their loss. May their *neshamot* continue to echo through our lives.

Our community has endured many losses this past year.

We lovingly remember:

Millie Kessler

Dorry Silver

Robert Guterman, husband of Myrna Guterman

Steven Goldstein, husband of Erika Kates

Phyllis Spier, mother of Cindy Speier

Stanley Spier, father of Cindy Spier

Sally Green, mother of Susan Green

Michael Stollar, son of David and Carol Stollar

We begin our Yizkor service on 290