

A Lasting Legacy Yizkor 5777

Perhaps the only thing more tragic than the sudden loss of a loved one is the loss of someone young, with potential locked within and possibility left unrequited. This frustrating grappling with fate seems crueler still when the person has worked and committed and sacrificed in preparation for a daunting goal, only to see the fruits of those efforts short-circuited by the travails of flesh and blood...and crueler even still when the goal was one of service and healing.

Such was the challenge Paul Kalanithi faced as he reached the zenith of advanced medical training, only to learn that he had a terminal cancer that would end his dreams of becoming a

physician. In his poignant and brief memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, Kalanithi recounts the painful realization that his long term plan and extended vision would not be realized. Like so many of us, Kalanithi put his medical career front and center and his personal life as secondary, hoping that, once having achieved his goal, he would recalibrate a healthier balance between profession and family. He cites John Lennon's counsel, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." Our tradition puts a starker, faith-inflected edge on it: "Man plans and God laughs."

Not that God would rejoice in this tragedy, *God forbid!* But often, our best-laid strategies that look to a long time horizon don't unfold in the

way we want. We don't have that kind of power nor control. Better to live and love and laugh now than to completely mortgage the present to an unseen future.

Kalanithi was a bit unusual in that he was as passionate about his studies of literature and writing as he was medicine, a seemingly unlikely pair of pursuits. His literary talent amplified his ability to express his struggle cogently and beautifully.

In considering perhaps his greatest loss, the chance to see his baby daughter grow up, Kalanithi reflects on feelings that are central to this moment of remembrance and this season of return:

“Everyone succumbs to finitude. I suspect I am not the only one who reaches this pluperfect state. Most ambitions are either achieved or abandoned; either way, they belong to the past. The future, instead of the ladder toward the goals of life, flattens out into a perpetual present. Money, status, all the vanities the preacher of Ecclesiastes described hold so little interest: a chasing after wind, indeed. Yet one thing cannot be robbed of her futurity: our daughter, Cady. I hope I’ll live long enough that she has some memory of me. Words have a longevity I do not. I had thought I could leave her a series of letters—but what would they say? I don’t know what this girl will be like when she is fifteen; I don’t even know if she’ll take to the nickname we’ve given

her. There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant, who is all future, overlapping briefly with me, whose life, barring the improbable, is all but past. That message is simple: When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing."

It is a touching and evocative message, indeed, providing further insight as to why we commemorate our loved and lost on this sacred day, and why we embrace memory so ardently in

this time of reflection, repentance and renewal.

During these Days of Awe, we see ourselves, our lives, our attitudes and our actions, not only through God's eyes but the eyes and lives of those who have passed from our present. And we do so, not to open up old wounds of grief, but to seek a measure of the worth and impact of our brief sojourn in this world. *Am I accomplishing what I set out to do? What course correction must I embrace to align my values with my life? In what ways does my life reflect appreciation for and tribute to the service, selflessness and sacrifice of those who went before me?*

And in the final analysis, when the tallies of professional accomplishment and personal conviction are weighed in the balance, we will be

**faced with the ultimate measure of a truly
successful life: *How many lives did I touch? How
much pain did I assuage, how much loneliness
did I alleviate, how much joy did I bring to others,
and thus generated for myself?***

**As the rabbis teach us, on that day of days,
we will not be asked why we were not like Moses,
or Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King. We will
be asked what we ask of ourselves now: *Am I the
best, most connected, most compassionate, and
most outwardly compelled person I can be?* And
it is for that question that we all stand in judgment
before God, before one another, and before our
ideal selves. Amen.**