

Every year, as Yom Kippur nears, I run around looking for my kittel, this plain white cotton robe I have worn now for 24 years. Just to refresh your memories, a kittel is a plain white pocket less garment Jewish men traditionally wear for the first time on their wedding day. Subsequently, the kittel is worn every Yom Kippur and every Passover seder. The owner of the kittel is also buried in it.

My kittel is precious to me. It's a powerful piece of attire. I put it on and remember the great joy of my wedding day. I look at it and can see, despite my dry cleaner's best efforts, wine stains and even food stains from a few of the spicier Passover dishes that have graced my seder table.

I remember all the different bimahs I have stood on wearing this kittel, first as a rabbinic intern in Muncie, Indiana, then Tulsa. OK, Arlington, TX, and, finally, at last, here at Temple Beth Avodah. From a newly wed student to a 50 year old rabbi. As Jerry Garcia, alav hashalom once sang, what a long, strange trip it's been.

And, speaking of trips, that's exactly what this is. Let me remind you of the poem with which I began on erev Rosh Hashanah.

Birth is a beginning and death is a destination. And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity and youth to age;
From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps, to wisdom;
From weakness to strength or strength to weakness. And, often, back again;
From loneliness to love, from joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion,
From grief to understanding, from fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat. Until looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage a sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning and death is a destination.
And life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage [- to life everlasting.]

I am journeying forward, as are we all, moving towards the end. Whenever I put on this kittel, I am forcefully reminded of this truth. I am reminded that the very last time I wear it, people will be putting it on my corpse.

This may sound frightening or morbid. But it's just the simplest, most basic truth. This is **exactly** what these next 24 hours are for. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death. We act like dead people on Yom Kippur, neither eating nor drinking, nor procreating; and traditionally wearing this kittel, which, in the end is nothing more or less than a burial shroud.

This talk of death can make one a bit uncomfortable, maybe even squeamish. You are in good company. The poster child for squeamishness, Woody Allen has said of death:

"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying."

He has also said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

But it's not all bad. Woody says, "On the plus side, death is one of the few things that can be done just as easily lying down."

Squeamish or not, uncomfortable or not, each of us is on this journey, a journey that becomes a sacred pilgrimage when we acknowledge where we must go.

Rabbi Jack Riemer wrote some years ago, In our synagogue we conduct a burial service for holy books that are damaged beyond repair. This ceremony provides our children with an opportunity to visit and tour a cemetery. Every time we schedule a book burial, at least one parent confronts me and says, "I don't want my child to go. I don't want my child traumatized." I respond, "It's up to you. You don't have to send your child if you don't want to, but I think you are making a mistake." It would be nice if we had a contract with the world whereby our children were shielded from all disturbing or traumatic experiences until we felt they were ready for them, but we have no such contract. Therefore, it is better for them to know before they need than to need before they know.

We spend months teaching our children how to be bar or bat mitzvah, but we never teach them the Vidui, as if they will never need to say it. This prayer to be said when dying no longer even appears in many modern prayerbooks. It reads: "Dear God, I want to live. But if this is Your decree, then I accept it from Your hand. Take care of my loved ones, with whom my soul is bound. Into Your hand I commit my soul.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The Vidui ought to be reinstated in our prayerbooks and taught in our schools.

We are all born to die. That is what we learn from wearing a kittel, from going to a book burial, from reciting the Vidui, from the serious teachings of this Day of Atonement.

A hasid of Rabbi Pinhas of Kinsk, a grandson of Rabbi Yerahmiel, once came into the master's room and found him lying down and playing with his watch. He was surprised because it was almost noon and the rabbi had not yet prayed. Just then Rabbi Yerahmiel said to the hasid: "Are you surprised at what I am doing? Do you really want to know what I am doing? I am learning how to leave the world."

I don't know what exactly the great Kinsker rebbe was learning about dying as he lay there on his back and played with his watch. But I do know how important it is for us to think about how to die a good death. Not that we can always plan it out. One hardly ever knows when death will come. But I think the Kinsker Rebbe had the right idea. Far from denying death, he invited it closer, to better understand what the end may be, and how to get there with dignity and clarity.

This past year I flew to Madison, Wisconsin, to learn more about how to leave this world from a remarkable woman. Evelyn Clark, Debbie Fellman's mom, Ron Fellman's mother-in-law, Becky, Matt and Dan Fellman's grandmother called me on

the phone. I dropped everything to speak to her. Not because she was dying, which she was. I dropped everything when she called because well, that's what we all did whenever Evelyn called, healthy or not.

Evelyn phoned me from a hospice in Madison, Wisconsin, after flying there from Florida and barely surviving the flight. In terrible pain, Evelyn had boarded a commercial carrier because she just had to deliver a tallis she had embroidered for her grandson in honor of his Bar Mitzvah. Her doctors did not prevent her from going, not because they thought it was a good idea for her to travel. It was a terrible idea. They just knew her well enough to get out of her way.

She arrived in Madison, was immediately hospitalized for a couple days, transfused, released, driven to the temple where she gave her grandson his tallis and then along with her husband, the indefatigable Major Al Clark, recited the torah blessings for their aliyah. And here's the thing: she looked great! I saw the video. If you didn't know anything about Evelyn, and had just walked in to pray at that temple that morning, you would never have guessed that the woman standing there with her husband was deathly ill.

Over the next couple of days it seemed that she was going to die very soon without getting back to her home in Sarasota, and she really wanted to get back home. Reluctantly, she entered a hospice, a beautiful, peaceful hospice.

Things aren't going so good out here, she said. I don't know if I'm going to make it back home or not. But I'm sure they're taking good care of you, I said. Yeah yeah, but you know, Rabbi, they all look so, so Swedish. All these Lutherans. There aren't even any Jewish doctors out here, no familiar faces. It's weird.

Evelyn's voice was tired, her breathing labored, but she still had enough strength for social commentary.

You know, if you could come out here and visit it would be great; I have some things I need to discuss with you.

As it happened, I was going to my nephew's Bar Mitzvah in Austin, Texas the next weekend. So I figured, I'll just get to Texas via Wisconsin. Once you're in the plane, what the heck...

Evelyn, how can I say no to you? She answered, Yeah, I was counting on that.

When I arrived at Evelyn's bedside, she had taken the laborious task of getting rid of her hospital gown and putting on street clothes, just for me. She looked tired and worn, the cancer advancing without mercy. But let me hasten to add that she by no means appeared frail or defeated. Evelyn had the look of a boxer who, up against a tougher opponent than she, is unwilling to concede.

We spoke privately for quite a while, as she drifted in and out of a morphine cloud. And I tried to take it all in – what she wanted, what she feared, what she still hoped to do. Evelyn knew she was dying and did not deny it. She just wanted to go on **her** terms, wanted to do the Jewish equivalent of Max Von Sydow’s playing chess with Death in Ingmar Berman’s *The Seventh Seal*, by keeping the Malach Hamavet the Angel of Death, at bay, never giving up.

When Evelyn’s pain became too severe to continue talking, she was given some more morphine and slept for awhile. I looked around her room, still absorbing this lesson on dying. When she woke up, we spoke a little more, but the remainder of the day was not good for her and I left late that night, giving her a kiss goodbye, assuming that we would probably never see each other again. Of course, the delicious Clark family irony of the moment was that my flight was cancelled and I did see her again – about 2 hours later... And it was the last time we saw each other. It broke my heart to be so far away when she died. But I knew we were good. We were complete.

I kept close track of Evelyn’s journey from across the ocean. I was neither shocked nor surprised to learn that she had managed through sheer will and courage to stave off the Angel of death long enough to take a special medic flight back to Florida, where she did indeed die in her own bed in her own home.

I count myself as incredibly fortunate to have had the chance to learn from Evelyn, because she truly understood her situation, and clearly lived everyday so very conscious of the gift of life, even as she approached the end. She lived by the words of the poem: Birth is a beginning, death is a destination, and life is a journey. She knew how she wanted to leave this world.

With great honor and humility, let me try to give you what I came to understand as the most important points in the lesson she taught me.

1. Get things right with the family. If you've grown apart from your children and other relatives, start drawing them back into your life. Right now. Because one day you will need them to help take care of you, to do all the things you may be unable to do. To bring you a glass of water, to put cream on your feet, to change the cd, to get the nurse. There is nothing more unimaginably terrifying than dying among strangers. If you have little to no family, join the temple, the Brotherhood, the Sisterhood, get on a committee, volunteer somewhere, gather a circle around you that you can trust.
2. choose a person to be your primary advocate, to ask the doctors and interns and nurses and staff what they're doing and what's going on.

- hospitals tend to be so understaffed and doctors so busy that if you let the system go unchallenged you will end up clueless as to what is going on with your care. This is even more important if you end up unconscious or confused due to drug treatments.
3. Be absolutely clear with your advocate as to what kind of treatment you want and don't want. Make a Living Will, clarify to what extent you want treatments and feedings and drug regimens to continue or cease.
 4. I know that there is a vast spectrum of responses to terminal illness. There are those who absolutely refuse to talk about their imminent death, even over a long period of time. And, of course there is no 'right way' to die. But learning how to die from Evelyn, I would have to advocate that you should try to talk about death with the people you love and care for. Share your love, share your sadness, and absolutely share your laughter. Holding back leaves so many unanswered questions. Evelyn was good at making sure her family and friends knew exactly how she felt and what she wanted them to do while she died, and afterwards, too.
 5. Raise incomparably attentive, loving children. Debbie, Rosanne, and Rusty were so unbelievably present for their mother and their father throughout the final part of Evelyn's journey. Whatever Evelyn needed, whenever she needed it, they were there. In the times of quiet, in the

times when Evelyn would get impossibly agitated, at all moments they extended themselves to be there.

6. Open up your heart to all of the beauty in the world. Be cognizant as you make your way on this journey as to what really counts. Shake life. Celebrate life. Sing. Dance. Listen to loud music. Do not settle – for anything from anyone.

Tim McGraw sings a song about his father's final journey in a song called, "Live Like You Were Dying." It begins,

He said I was in my early forties
with a lot of life before me
when a moment came that stopped me on a dime
and I spent most of the next days
looking at the x-rays
Talking bout the options
and talking bout sweet time
I asked him when it sank in
that this might really be the real end
how's it hit you when you get that kinda news
man what'd you do
And he said
I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter
and I gave forgiveness I'd been denying
He said I was finally the husband

that most the time I wasn't
and I became a friend a friend would like to have
and he said someday I hope you get the chance
to live like you were dying.

Of course, that's exactly what we are doing; we're navigating the path between birth and death. We are living as we are dying. And everyday we can awaken and try to walk the walk of that phrase, 'to live like you were dying' along with 'Birth is a beginning and death is a destination, and life is a journey.' How would our lives change if we could absorb even the smallest part of Evelyn Clark's courage and wisdom about dying a good death? How would this journey change for us if we could go forward this new year, openly acknowledging this sacred pilgrimage we must all take?

This kittel, in which I was wed, is also my shroud. It reminds me of sacred and joyful moments. It reminds me that it is Yom Kippur, a kind of rehearsal for death. My kittel reminds me that I am on a journey, a journey that becomes a sacred pilgrimage when I infuse my life with meaning. instead of hanging my kittel up in a closet between holidays, I'm going to put my kittel right in the top drawer with all the socks. So that everyday, if just for a moment, I will be reminded of this journey. So that, if only for a moment, the intensity of Yom Kippur will suffuse my being, and I can, for another day, live like I was dying.