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Rosh Hashanah 5783*

Accompanied By Angels

For over two decades, Wendy Bloch's mother, Audrey, lived in an apartment building on East 69th Street in Manhattan. And for over two decades, Artie was one of the doormen who held the door open for her when she left, and who greeted her, when she returned.

As one of her protective and reliable gatekeepers, Artie managed the ordinary, humdrum rhythm of Audrey's daily routine: her package deliveries, her dry-cleaning schedule, her daily visitors, her comings and her goings.

Although they only ever interacted at that front door, that knowing eye contact between them, as Audrey came and went, revealed the kind of special intimacy that develops between a resident, and her doorman. Artie knew the small and subtle intricacies of her everyday life, just as well as she did. In fact, as Wendy often quipped, why would her mother need to go to assisted living – she had a doorman!

Audrey Bloch died in August of 2016.

And there was one person, in particular, who showed up at Audrey's funeral, at Westchester Reform Temple, in Scarsdale. One person, who never in a million years, did Wendy expect to see at the service.

Artie, her mother's doorman.

Artie *took the time* to travel from Manhattan, all the way up to Westchester. And when Wendy turned around, and saw her mother's doorman, standing there, seemingly out of nowhere, she simply burst into tears. She was so touched that he came all that way.

But I wonder, if perhaps there was also something else, behind Wendy's tears. Something else, that had to do with...finality.

Even Artie is here. This must really be happening. *Even Artie is here.* Which means that my mother, must really, be gone.

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My Grandma Gertrude died this past Spring.

About two weeks before her 99th birthday, her breathing slowed, her appetite diminished, her mobility and her control over her own body came to a close. Soon after, I was on a plane to Hawaii, where she lived - not sure if I'd be there for her birthday, or her funeral.

Eleven hours and five thousand miles later, and I arrived at her small, one bedroom cottage, where the rest of my family had already gathered. Immediately, I could sense the way that death had been dawdling at the doorsteps.

Her hospital bed took up the entirety of the bedroom. Her wrinkled, paper-thin skin looked like it was melting into the sheets.

"Hi darling," she whispered to me, through her parched, dry lips.

She didn't say much, after that.

The next day, a family friend, who is also a naturopathic doctor, came to visit, and she took note of my grandmother's hypnotic gaze up towards the left hand corner of the ceiling, and her repetitive, upward and downward salute.

"Are the angels here, Gert?" she asked, without missing a beat.

My grandmother nodded.

We mentioned this interaction to the hospice nurse, later that day.

"Yes," she answered. "When the angels come, that means the end is near.

When the angels come, that means it's almost time."

And *we* had a good time, imagining who those angels might be.

But whoever, or whatever, they were, from that point on, my grandmother's angels never left the room.

About a week later, she closed her eyes, and she took her last breath.

Because when the angels show up, that means it's time.

When the angels show up, that means it's really happening.

And like steady and reliable doormen, our angels are the ones who accompany us, who guide us, who show us the way.

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The Hebrew word for funeral is "levaya." At its most very basic meaning, "levaya" means "to accompany."

We know that "halvayat ha'met," accompanying the dead for burial, is a mitzvah that is of limitless, immeasurable value. Regardless of the prior relationship that we might have had with someone, showing up at their graveside, laying them to rest with a tender and loving burial - this is the ultimate act of kindness and compassion. This is sacred, heavenly, holy, work. This is the stuff, of angels.

And we know, as well, that it is not just the deceased who needs *accompanying* from the bed, to the grave. Anyone who has lost someone knows that grief is like waking up in the middle of the night, disoriented and confused...only it is daytime, and everything looks and sounds the same, but, actually, in fact, nothing is the same. Nothing will ever, be the same. How is it that I supposed to go from my bed, to my loved one's grave, and back? How is it, that I am supposed to go on? We are, in a sense, so deeply alone.

But at the same time, a Jewish mourner is never, ever alone.

From the graveside service, to the seven days of Shiva, to the thirty days of reciting a loved one's name aloud and saying Mourner's Kaddish in the presence of community...these are acts that are done, with others.

And then there is the lesser known but equally notable ritual of getting up from Shiva after the seven days have ended, and taking a walk around the block, accompanied by family and friends, who hold the door open for us as we step outside, and who hold our hands, as we tread forward. Just one, slow stroll around the block, meant to acknowledge just how hard it can be to simply walk out the door, and out into the world, and then back inside, again.

Because death creates a hollowness that follows us wherever we go. And it takes time, and effort, and energy, to rebuild our lives, around it.

In fact, it takes time, and effort, and energy, to rebuild our *brains* around it.

Dr. Mary Francis O’Conner, a psychologist and neuroscientist at the University of Arizona, has something powerful to teach us in her book “The Grieving Brain,” where she outlines the tremendous effects of grief on the brain, and on the body.

Grief is type of learning, she writes. When someone dies, the brain has a problem to solve.

On the outside, love looks like hand-holding, embracing, long distance phone calls or long walks on the beach.

On the inside - inside of our brains – Dr. O’Conner tells us that love looks like a specific series of proteins and neurons that are fusing, firing, and folding together.

And so, what happens, inside those hidden corners of our minds, when someone we love, is no longer here?

What happens – Dr. O’Conner explains - is that our brains experience an incongruity of dramatic proportion.

Because while that person is no longer here, in body – that person still physically exists – in the elaborate wiring of neurons still buried deep within our minds.

And so after death, the brain must literally *rewire* itself.

After death, our brains are literally operating within two, incompatible worlds: an outer world in which our loved one is gone from all dimensions of space of time, and an inner world, in which that person is still very much present, and still very much alive.

This is why grief can be so utterly disorienting.

This is why we continue to automatically set a place for them at the table – even though, we very well know, that they are no longer here.

Or this is why we may jump at the sound of the front door opening – thinking, for a split second, that it is our loved one who is about to walk through that door, just as she always did. And then we feel a fresh wave of sadness, all over again. Our brains do everything in their power to keep us united with the ones that we love. They need enough new “front door” experiences to learn that that person, is never coming home, again.

This is why grieving can be such a process. This is why working through grief can take so much time.

And this is why ritual, in the presence of others, is so utterly crucial after someone has died.

Because when the angels show up...this helps our brains to grasp, that this is real.

When we see our friends, neighbors, community members at the funeral or the Shiva, this helps us understand: this is really happening. When *even our doorman* shows up – and, in fact, *especially* when our doorman, shows up - this is when we start to understand. This is real. This is really happening.

Because if even *Artie* is here...if even *my old colleague* – *who I haven't spoken to in years* - took the time to call, to write such a nice note, to send flowers...then my mother, must really, be gone.

This is what showing up does – in all of its many, many forms. Showing up helps someone to overcome the dissonance between what was, and, now, what is. Showing up helps someone to integrate the loss...*to live* with the loss. *Halvat ha'met*. Accompanying the dead for burial, and accompanying the

living, in their first, tiniest baby steps, back towards the present. Back towards life.

I want to tell you about something that recently happened within our community. This story prompted both me and Rabbi Schultz to talk about the importance of showing up in our sermons this morning, and Rabbi Schultz is also sharing this story in his Rosh Hashanah sermon in the sanctuary. We share this story, with permission:

About a year ago, a well-connected member of our community lost her father. In the condolence email that went out to the congregation, she advertised the date and time of the funeral, and the date, time, and address, of the Shivah. Expecting a large crowd back at her house, she prepared, arranged, and waited. And then, barely anyone from the synagogue arrived.

A few weeks later, she sat on Rabbi Schultz's couch, and sobbed. I'm so involved with this community, she shared with him. I've held leadership positions. I've volunteered. I've given so much of my time, and my energy, to this place. And, yet, after my father died, the most I heard from congregants, was on my Facebook page. Three people from the synagogue texted me, she said to him. Barely anyone showed up at the Shivah. Isn't this what a community is supposed to do, she asked, as she buried her face in her hands. Aren't we supposed to show up for one another when a loved one dies? I just do not understand.

As a rabbi, this is a gut-wrenching thing to hear. And I think, for all of us, this is a gut-wrenching thing to hear. Because, yes, this is exactly what it means to be a part of a community. A part of a *sacred* community.

I also deeply believe that we all have the very best of intentions. I am certain that we all want to be there for others.

But then our minds get in the way.

What if I don't know anybody there.

What if I do or say the wrong thing.

What if I write the wrong thing.

I haven't seen them, in years.

Or: they *hardly know me*. What if my presence seems awkward, random, out of place?

But I know, as a person, as a rabbi, I know, that the more that I do it, the easier it gets. And the same is true for anyone, rabbi for not. The only way to get good at showing up for others, is to simply do it. Again, and again, and again.

And when someone chooses to advertise the day and time of the funeral, the day and time of the Shivah, or their address for a condolence note, I also know that this is a veiled request for community. Please come. Please come and be with me. Please come and learn about the one I so deeply loved. Please come to remind me, that this is really happening, and that I do not have to go through this, alone.

When my grandmother died, I was already home in Connecticut, while the rest of my family was still in Hawaii. When my mom called me with the news, the first emotion I felt, was loneliness. Alone in my room, I looked out my window as the cars and trucks and buses continued on their way to work, just like it was any other ordinary day. I wanted to scream to them: *don't you know that my grandmother just died?!* But then Chris Rocha – our dear Chris Rocha – called me and said – I'm bringing you dinner tonight. What do you want me to make. And I ate her homemade salmon and ziti and meatballs as I watched my Grandmother's funeral service on Zoom. And then, in the days that followed, so many of you sent me the most beautiful, heartfelt notes and cards. And then, I didn't feel so alone.

We can be a synagogue that shows up for each other. We can be a community that says to one another: This is really happening. But you do not have to go through it, alone. We can be a community that accompanies one another from death, back towards life. We can be a community, of angels.

This morning, Rabbi Schultz and I are suggesting three ways that you can earn your B'nai Israel "angel card" in the coming year:

"Angel Action" #1:

This morning, as you exit the Sanctuary or exit the Tent, you'll find little bundles on the tables near the exists. Each bundle contains three condolence

cards and three stamps. We are inviting each household to each take one bundle of cards. We are hoping that you will send out these condolence cards to three congregants in the coming year. You can send these cards to someone you know, or to someone you've never met before. Addresses are shared in the condolence emails that we send out to the congregation. And if you need, we also have a separate page with some suggestions on what to write.

“Angel Action” #2:

Our Chesed Caring committee, led by Sara Laden and Jim Grutzmacher, does such important work within our congregation, and they are always in need of more volunteers to help make or deliver meals to those in our community who are experiencing illness, grief or loss. If you'd like to get involved with our Chesed Committee, please let me know, I'd love to help connect you.

“Angel Action” #3:

And finally, if and when you are able to, we want to encourage you to attend funeral and shiva services when they are advertised to the community. Even if you do not know the congregant or the family very well. Even if you do not know them, at all. I know that this is not an easy thing to do. It isn't always easy for me, either.

But from now on, I am going to remember Artie. From now on, I am going to remember, that the greatest comfort, and the greatest kindness, can come from the one who hardly knows us, but who takes the time to show up anyway. From now on, I am going to remember that the ones who we *least expect* to see, can sometimes be the ones who we value seeing the most, of all.

And from now on, I have one more idea.

From now on, I am going to start a “Team Angel Shiva List.”

For those who want to show up more – but need a little extra help, or prodding, to get there – let me know, and I will put you on my list. And then, the next time I am going to a shivah – I will call you – and we can go together. Let's do this, together. Let's show up, together.

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A few years after Wendy's mom died, she and Jim went for a walk through her mother's old neighborhood, and they found themselves standing right outside of her old building. And in a superbly serendipitous turn of events, they immediately recognized the doorman who was standing at the entrance that day. Artie.

They stopped for a few minutes to chat and say hello. Artie told them that he had just lost his daughter to Covid. He showed them pictures of her on his phone, and they hugged and they cried.

And the cycle began, again.

Halvayat Ha'met.

Accompanying the dead for burial...

Accompanying one another from life to death,

and then back to life,

again.