

Rabbi Sarah Marion
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Congregation B'nai Israel

Accompanying the Living

Her husband and her two sons had died.

She was dizzy...she was falling...she was nothing.

This is the opening scene of the Biblical book of Ruth. Here, we meet Naomi, a woman who embarks on a journey to Bethlehem along with her husband, Elimelech, their two sons, Machlon and Chilion. Machlon and Chilion's wives are with them, too – and their names are Ruth, and Orpah.

Over the course of the journey, Elimelech dies suddenly, and then Machlon and Chilion perish, too, each one right after the other. In the wake of their deaths, the text offers a glimpse into Naomi's broken heart.

“What now? Who am I, now?” Naomi cries out. Her anguish is palpable from the page. “What am I supposed to do, without my partner, my children? What am I supposed to do, without the ones who steadied the ground on which I walked?”

Naomi tells her daughters-in-law Ruth, and Orpah, to go and leave her alone in her pain.

“Turn back, my daughters,” she says to them. “Turn back, to where you came from. I have nothing more to give to you.”

Orpah does not need much convincing to turn away from her mother-in-law's sadness and sorrow.

But Ruth, on the other hand, refuses.

“I will not leave you,” Ruth says to Naomi, defiantly.

“I will not leave you here, on your own, as you grope your way through the dark and lonely caverns of grief. I will not leave you. Wherever you go, I will go too. I will not let you go through this, alone. You do not have to go through this, alone.”

And the two of them walked on, together.

It is a tremendous task to turn towards someone who is drowning in pain. It is a tremendous task, to care for someone who is unaware of just how much care they really need. A tremendously challenging task, no doubt. But, a sacred task. A holy task. A true task, of love.

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My mother-in-law, Jean Marion, never turns off her phone.

Sometimes, over the course of a day, she receives up to twenty calls from one, specific number.

That number belongs to Jean’s first cousin, Leslie, who has a developmental disability. After Leslie’s mother passed away five years ago, Jean became Leslie’s legal guardian and caregiver.

With admirable responsiveness and devotion, Jean oversees all of the intricate, day to day details surrounding Leslie’s medical care, housing, and quality of life. Every blood test, every cat scan, every change to her medication. Jean is more than Leslie’s guardian, and she is more than Leslie’s caretaker. Jean is Leslie’s “person.”

“Hi Jean” Leslie says, each time she calls, paying no heed to the phone call that they just had about five minutes ago. “When is Passover? Am I coming down for the holiday? How’s Seth? How are the kids? When am I seeing you next?” Leslie has the purest, most beautiful heart.

Lovingly and patiently, Jean answers all of Leslie’s questions. And then, after a few minutes, she says, “Ok Leslie honey, I really have to go now, I’ll talk to you again soon.” They hang up the phone, but it’s often not long until the phone rings again. Now I know that Jean doesn’t always answer - and every time her phone rings, I can maybe, just maybe, make out the smallest flicker of frustration in her eyes. But when she picks up, any ounce of exasperation almost always softens into brightness, and cheer.

“Hi Leslie, what’s going on honey?”

Jean’s phone number is Leslie’s physical and emotional lifeline. Even when she is sleeping, even when she is out of town, and even when she is out of the country, Jean’s phone is on. Wherever Jean goes, Leslie goes, too. It is a tremendous task to provide such ongoing care to someone who cannot fully care for herself. It is a tremendous task to care for someone who is unaware of just how much care she really needs. A tremendously challenging task, no doubt. But, a sacred task. A holy task. A true task, of love.

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When former first lady Rosalynn Carter founded the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving, she stated there are only four kinds of people in this world: those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will become caregivers, and those who will need to be cared for.

We are a caregiving breed. Caregiving is an inescapable part of what it means to be human.

At some point or another, and in some way or another, we will care for family members young and old, healthy and unwell, who cannot fully care for themselves. And, oftentimes, we will do it without any prior training. We will have no other choice, but to figure it out as we go.

We will steady the ground for loved ones who are grieving.

We will support our family members who are vulnerable, who are frail, who need assistance, companionship, and care.

We will be there for parents, grandparents and friends as they age, deteriorate, and decline.

We will be called upon to help preserve another's dignity and wellbeing, in the midst of their falling apart.

And although may not always think of ourselves as "caregivers," we all know what it is like to worry about someone else. All of us are tethered to another person in such a way that if that person aches, we ache, too.

This is why we put them on the bus for the first day of kindergarten...or this is why we bring them to college, thousands of miles away...and then spend the rest of the day thinking about them, wondering if they are ok.

Because you are my child, and wherever you go, I will go too.

And this is why we keep meticulous track of their pills and dietary needs and doctor's appointments. This is why we become experts in complex medical terms and treatments; this is why *their* illness becomes *our* illness. This is why we are brave and strong and steady in their presence, but lie awake at night, plagued by all of the most terrifying "what ifs" that our minds are capable of conjuring...

Because you are my son, or you are my daughter...or because you are my husband, my wife, my sibling, my friend...and wherever you go, I will go too.

This is why we keep our cellphones close by at all times. And when the assisted living facility calls to tell us that mom's breathing sounds funny, this is why we come home early from our weekend away...

Because you are my mother, and wherever you go, I will go too.

And this is why we visit dad at the Jewish home every week, even though he no longer knows who we are; even though our relationship with him was complicated and fraught; and even though we are losing him, long before he is gone...because loving people even as they diminish is what it means, to love...

And because in spite of it all, you are still my father, and wherever you go, I will go too.

And this is why we make impossible choices about their treatment and care, and then spend days agonizing about whether or not it was the right thing to do. This is why we sit by you at bedside, watching as tubes and IVs wind their way in and out of your body. This is why we do the things that we never thought we'd ever have the strength or the courage to do. This is why we allow ourselves to become up close and personal with the true magnitude of human frailty.

Wherever you go, I will go too. No matter how hard, no matter how exhausting, no matter how painful.

Day after day after day.

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But we are not always like Ruth, are we.

We are not always like Ruth - endlessly loving, patient and devoted.

Sometimes, our patience and our compassion run thin.

And sometimes, something gets in the way of our ability to show up, at all.

Sometimes, instead of turning towards, we make the choice to turn around, and look the other way.

When we recount the biblical story of Ruth, we don't often speak about Orpah, the other daughter-in-law. The one who decided to turn back, and turn away.

We don't often speak of her, perhaps because her turning away is a reminder of the times in which we, too, avoided the opportunity to provide presence, comfort, and care. We don't speak of her, perhaps because her actions stir up our own complicated feelings of guilt, regret, and shame.

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My Grandma Adele lived fifteen minutes away from my childhood home. My "Fama Del" as I started calling her, long before I could say complete words, was my most spirited, most active, most fun-loving grandparent. I cherished her constant presence in my life. Every minute with her was an adventure.

"Camp Grandma," as my cousins and I used to call her two-bedroom apartment, was a place of magic, mayhem, and make-believe. The sign that hung in her kitchen said it all: "What happens at Grandma's house, stays at Grandma's house."

During weekends at Camp Grandma, the stately lobby on the first level of her apartment building became our prime location for lengthy and elaborate games of hide and seek.

But my favorite room at Camp Grandma, by far, was her closet. I would get lost in there for hours - dressing myself in her velvet and lace-trimmed jackets, her designer high heel shoes, and her dazzling costume jewelry.

And every day at Camp Grandma always ended with a mug of warm milk and honey, a plate of donuts, and a book of Mother Goose fairy tales, as she tucked us in to her king-sized bed.

As time went on, my grandmother's cognition began to deteriorate and decline. Four years ago, her increasing dementia compelled my family to sell her apartment, and move her to an assisted living facility about an hour away.

Today, visiting my Grandma Adele is a heartbreaking reminder of what was, and no longer is.

And seeing her stirs up old wounds, ongoing tensions and upsetting conflicts within my family, which I would much rather stay far, far away from.

It is hard to see her, this way. I have not been there for her, as much as I should have been. I have turned away more than I am proud to admit.

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From the moment we are born, to our last breath on earth, we yearn for human connection. As babies, as children, and as adults, we need to know that someone will answer when we cry out in need. We need to know that someone will care for us, especially when we cannot fully care for ourselves.

But even though illness, pain and vulnerability can be the loneliest, most isolating experiences in the world – and even though *we know* that connection and companionship are the salve to life's toughest realities – there is still something, every now and again, that gets in the way of our ability to show up for one another.

Every so often, we make every excuse in the book not to visit the parent, the grandparent, or the relative in the hospital, or in the nursing home.

Or we find every reason not to visit the family member who has just been moved to hospice.

Or we convince ourselves of all the reasons why we shouldn't reach out to the friend who has just lost a child...or who has just discovered that she has cancer.

Every so often, we turn away - when, instead, we should be turning towards.

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The high holiday season is known as the season of turning. T'shuvah, the Hebrew word for "repentance," literally means "turning." T'shvuah, in its most basic sense, is the process of turning back towards the aspects of our lives that we often want to avoid, run away from, or ignore.

That is why today, on Yom Kippur, we turn and we face the one thing that we all try turn away from, and yet, none of us will escape. We who live, and who will die. On Yom Kippur we fast. We purposefully deny ourselves of the things that make us feel alive. We spend the day imitating our own deaths. Today, we turn and we confront the inevitability of our own eventual demise.

Caregiving, as well, is an act of t'shuvah – an act of turning.

Caregiving involves a conscious, ongoing and intentional turning towards the ones who need us the most.

Caregiving involves a conscious turning towards the kind of pain and suffering that can be so hard to look at, up close.

And just like on Yom Kippur, caregiving often forces us turn towards our own human frailty – towards our own, eventual, mortality.

Perhaps that is why, at times, it can be so, very hard. Going to the hospital, or to the assisted living facility, is a jarring reminder that *all of us* are only human. When I see you in the hospital, or in the home, I

have no other choice but to accept that you are not the same person you once were. Or that we do not have the same relationship that we once had. And seeing you there means that I have no other choice but to accept that someday, you will die. And someday, I will too.

And when I call you because you have just lost someone precious to you, or when I call you because you have just learned that you have cancer, I have no choice but to remember that life is so unbelievably fragile. I have no other choice but to admit that this could have happened to anyone...I have no other choice but to admit that this could have happened, to me...and that, someday, this could still happen, to me.

But during these days of t'shuvah - during these days of turning - we are reminded that we have the power to turn towards one another even when it is uncomfortable...even when it dredges up old baggage and old wounds...even when we are running on empty. In spite of it all, we still have the power to get out of our own way and become sources of love, compassion, and care.

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha. For neglecting our loved ones, who needed us.

And, yet, with all of that said, while there are some wounds that we can transcend, sometimes, there are some, that we can't. Sometimes, there are people we cannot turn towards, because the pain that they have inflicted is just too deep; because the wounds they have left behind are just too tender. Jewish tradition, in fact, prohibits us from providing care when it will cause harm to ourselves, or to our families, in return.

Caregiving, is messy. And it is complicated.

Because even *when* we are like Ruth as we care for children, partners, parents and relatives – even *when* we go wherever they go - we still have our moments. We still run out of patience. We still question whether or not we have it in us. We still say or do things that we later

regret. We still lose our temper in the midst of unbearable situations. And we still beat ourselves up, convincing ourselves that we should have done more, that we could have done more.

I suspect that we all owe ourselves some forgiveness, for not always being the kind of caregivers we wish that we could be...or for not having been the kind of caregivers we wish that we could have been.

No one is perfect, at caregiving.

No one has it all figured out.

It all depends on the kind of story that we tell ourselves, about the kind of caregivers that we are. We can tell ourselves that we are failures, that we just can't do it, that we will never get it right...

Or, we can tell ourselves that we are only human, so often simply trying to do the best that we possibly can.

And so as we hold our hands to our hearts and admit to our caregiving mistakes, perhaps we ought to add in another whisper, as well...

I forgive myself.

I forgive myself.

I forgive myself.

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In preparation for this sermon, I spoke with several of you who so graciously shared your caregiving journeys with me. Though all of your stories were unique, there was one common theme throughout: the supreme importance of self-care. As one of you said, self-care may seem selfish, but when you are a caregiver, it is the most unselfish thing that you can do.

This fall, I will be co-facilitating a caregiving support group here at B'nai Israel, along with a social worker from our community. When we join a congregation, we join with others who know, who understand, who are

going through similar caregiving experiences, of their own. Here, in this community, we can lean on one another for support, for guidance, for strength. Please reach out if you are interested in joining our group.

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I sit with my grandmother in her tiny, studio-apartment-sized living space. We all go to see her - Seth, the kids, even the dog. She is so happy to see us. I've had a good life, she says to me. I tell her about all of my favorite "Camp Grandma" moments and memories, but she does not remember. It is hard. But we get through it.

We all have dinner together in the dining room, on lower level of her building. After dinner, as we are walking her back to her room, we approach an elderly woman slowly pushing herself forward with a walker. Another woman is there, next to her, her hand resting gently on her back.

"Oh, Sarah!" My grandmother says. "I want you to meet Norma. She is 105 years old!"

"And this is my daughter, Elaine" Norma says, pointing to the woman next to her. "She is 77, can you believe it?!"

I say hello to Elaine, and as she looks up, her eyes exhale a familiar mix of sadness, exhaustion, love and pain, all wrapped up together.

"Ok mom, let's go on now," she says.

For a split second, my kids stand there and take in the sight of this complicated, messy, painful, beautiful and sacred thing that we call caregiving. And then, a second later, they are off, running towards the elevator, arguing about who will get to press the button.

The rest of us follow behind - all of us, walking on, slowly, together.