

Nearly four years ago, I wrote a song for a couple in our community challenged by a debilitating illness. The refrain is “Hasn’t always been easy, but it’s always been love.” Four years on, it still isn’t easy, but it still is love.

A year-and-a-half later, this song took on a new personal meaning for Ellie and me when she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. A line from one of the verses of that song suddenly resonated with us, as though it was prescient: “Out of nowhere, like lightning it struck. / What happened? Why us? Just a case of bad luck?”

At about the same time, in response to a tragic turn of events in the lives of another two people in our community, I wrote a song titled “Twilight on the Bay.” It’s a love song; it’s a wistful remembrance ... and a fond farewell.

One verse begins “We kiss goodnight, and who’s to say we haven’t kissed goodbye.”

We do not know, we cannot know, when will be “goodbye.”

We’ve seen “goodbye” happen at the end of a 70-year fulfilling relationship; we’ve mourned “goodbye” at the close of a life after too **few** decades. So often, “goodbye” comes as a surprise, no matter how long we’ve had to prepare for it.

On my side of our family, the last remaining member of my parents’ generation died early yesterday. 103 years! Frail though she had been for years, until recently her mind and memory were reasonably sharp and intact.

Aunt Leah, my late father’s baby sister, was the repository of family recipes. She dropped her filters at a much younger age than most. She maintained contact with and knew the whereabouts and whatabouts of her grandchildren and many great-grandchildren, most of whom live in Israel. And she fought tooth-and-nail to stay in her own apartment,

conceding only a short time ago to accept full-time help.

Goodbye to Aunt Leah will bring together her communities: her wide-spread family and such friends who are still on this planet; the synagogue at which she did the books for years and to which she remained dedicated.

103 years, and, yet, when I passed the news on to one of my older cousins, her response verged on dismay: “I just spoke to her the other week!” 103 years ... and it was still a sudden “goodbye.”

I mentioned on Rosh Hashana that a first-millennium sage, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus taught that we should repent, make amends — do *teshuva!* — the day before we die. Which, of course, is every day ... since we just don’t know!

Rabbi Eliezer’s words aren’t a warning. Rather, they should be seen as a gift, reminding us that we have a daily opportunity — an obligation? — to tell the people we love that we love them, even if we told them just yesterday!

Should we say goodbye to our loved ones every day, while we can?

It may well be that emailing or calling everyone we love every day is more of a challenge than we can manage. One way we can say goodbye is with an ethical will, a document we write or dictate, or that we record on video. Through an ethical will, we can convey stories of our growing up, our relationships, express our hopes for those living on after us, and share what was important to us.

An ethical will can be passed on after we’ve passed on. And, really, an ethical will is not saying goodbye — it is you saying, “Hello, here I am!” ... for generations.

In our sacred literature, our Tanach, the Hebrew bible, we have descriptions of and attitudes toward life and death.

In Bereishit, Genesis (25:8), we get poetry: And Avraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered unto his kin.

By contrast, Kohelet Ecclesiastes (12:7) is blunt: the dust returns to the earth whence it came and the spirit / the soul returns to God who gave it.

There is even a tale about the dead returning to this world. In the Book of Samuel, King Saul is fearful of the mustering Philistines. His mentor, as it were, the prophet Samuel, has died, leaving Saul without an adviser, without a life-line to God.

Despairing, Saul contravenes Torah and his own dictates by approaching a diviner, an ESHET BA'ALAT OV, a woman known to be a ghost wrangler. Saul demands that she bring up the prophet Samuel from *she'ol*, that biblical-era waiting room to which the dead descend.

Samuel responds to the summons; the woman sees an old man in a robe coming their way. Saul bows in homage and fear. Samuel says, "Why have you disturbed me and brought me up?"

Saul: "I need your help." Samuel: "Too late. Here's the bad news..."

On the web site Ritual Well, Rabbi Chaya Gusfield offers a piece titled, "You Can't Bring Back the Dead"

*You can't bring back the dead, but you can live with them inside your feet and your hands, guiding your cooking, your dreaming, your words. Singing melodies of comfort, so sweetly.*

Despite ourselves, we often do bring back the dead in those and other ways. Sometimes vividly, sometimes dreamily, sometimes sorrowfully, sometimes joyfully.

At burials, I've described a reason for our tradition of putting rocks on the grave marker:

*Visiting the cemetery  
we place a small raw stone  
on the hewn/carved/etched/polished  
grave marker;  
each stone unique  
in size/shape/color/texture —  
likewise, each memory.*

This ten-day period — *asseret y'mei teshuva*, from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur, is for focused introspection and reconsideration, and, perhaps, reconstruction of relationships with the living and, yes, with the dead. We have our joys, our regrets, sorrows, proud moments, mistakes.... So did they.

What comes to you in life may be thrown at you, it might be presented on a silver platter. However it comes, you get to determine how to react to it, how to reshape it, and how to live with it. Likewise, you own your memories.

So you kiss goodnight, perhaps saying goodbye.

And every morning, you wake up knowing that it is not always going to be easy. But you are the only one who can make sure that it's always been, and always will be, love.