

The Transcendent Why

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"I've always said that if I could have chosen my path, I'd be Buddhist."

I say this to a small cadre of close rabbinic colleagues in early April. We meet each Thursday morning by Zoom. After this conversation I'll jump in the car to get to the synagogue. We're running through some new technology in the sanctuary. Our team is preparing to move completely to in-person services and programs by Passover, a first since Covid.

"It's just that Buddhism is the spiritual system that makes the most sense to me," I say. "But what can I do?" I add with Ashkenazic inflection "I was born Jewish; I have *Yiddishkeit* in my *kishkes*."

The rabbis good-naturedly laugh in support and understanding.

Except for Seth, whom I've known since seminary. Seth is my friend and I love him in part because he has no compunction about offering insights that disrupt the equilibrium in a room.

"That's bullcrap," says Seth. Only he doesn't say crap.

"Ruth," he exclaims with his usual intensity and affection, "if you had wanted to be Buddhist, you'd be Buddhist. You're not. You're Jewish. You made your choices."

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Like the stick of a Zen master, Seth enlightened me.

Of course, he's right.

I have chosen this path.

And now, with all that has transpired in the last six months, I walk this path with purpose.

The cohort of eight senior and seasoned rabbis from around the country is guided by Larry Dressler, my wise teacher and professional coach. As with other helping professions, the rate of rabbinic burnout is exceedingly high, especially since Covid. We gather, in the words of our group's charter (yes, we have a charter—we *are* mostly congregational rabbis after all) "to

co-create a trustworthy and energizing community of practice, through which we challenge and support each other in living out our most impactful and fulfilling rabbinates.”

We call ourselves *Vayinafash*. The name comes from the seventh day of Creation when God, gratified that the crown jewel of Creation, humankind, is *tov m’od* “very good”, sets aside a day of rest, to *vayinafash*, to refresh the divine soul. In the rabbinic cohort, we set aside time from the hassles and pleasures of being a rabbi to reconnect with our original impulse to choose the rabbinate, or, as our Christian friends might say, to reconnect to our “call to ministry.”

With gentle facilitation by Larry, we use our time together “to join our soul to our role,” in the words of Parker Palmer. Joining my soul to my role—feeling a sense of alignment and vitality in all my personal and professional realms—is exactly what I seek at this moment in my life.

Not long after that Zoom meeting, Rich, Suzannah and I careen down I5 in an Uber to catch an early morning flight out of SeaTac. We’re about to spend the first days of Passover with Dad and Pauline in their gated community in Florida.

From the car, I see the sunrise over Lake Washington, and the green hills of the Eastside set against the slate and bluish sky, and Mount Rainier looming above it all, lost in the clouds, a magnificent shadowy presence in the dusky light. I am filled with gratitude. I say a personal prayer of thanks that I am here, in this city, serving this congregation, working with lay leaders and a professional team who support their senior rabbi taking this trip, even though it takes her out of town at the start of a Jewish holiday.

We have recently learned that Dad has Mild Cognitive Impairment or MCI, the mildest diagnosis on the dementia and Alzheimer’s spectrum. Thanks to Pauline’s loving support, Dad’s life continues with its normal rhythms. He is forgetful, sure, but he and Pauline still live independently, seeing friends, playing bridge. Dad is ninety, after all. “All things considered,” he says during every phone call, “I’m doing pretty well.”

As a rabbi, I have borne witness to the courage and heartbreak of families who have endured the long and slow goodbye of dementia and Alzheimer’s. I plan to savor this visit. I bask in the tropical sun and in Dad’s paternal pride which shines as warmly as ever. Dad is delighted to hear about Suzannah’s summer plans, *kvell* over Richie’s parenting, and grill me about the congregation’s finances—a favorite subject of his. Even so, Dad is a little vacant around the eyes, and unusually quiet when more than one person speaks at a time.

For first Seder, Pauline has arranged a table for us and their friends in the chandeliered clubhouse dining room. As we walk through the lobby, I eagerly point out to Suzannah the stunning flowers and glittery blue and silver Passover decorations. This is the sort of event I would have dreaded as a young woman, but not tonight. From the enormous ice statue of a Jewish star to the eager patter of the hired local cantor to Dad, Pauline and their friends

dressed to the nines competitively sharing stories about Seders from long ago, I love every minute of the evening.

Towards the end of the meal someone opens the door for Elijah, harbinger of redemption. The cantor leads us in singing *Eliyahu Hanavi*, and once again Dad asks who is leading and once again, I say, as if for the first time, "She's a cantor." I put my arm around his shoulder, point my camera at us, and say "*Sing*," a little more firmly than I had intended.

Dad laughs when he sees the camera, leans in, and together we join the others. *Eliyahu*, hurry, we sing. Come now, bring us peace.

I didn't know it then, but this is the last video that we will take together.

Larry charges us to write a concise purpose statement that describes the *transcendent why* of our rabbinate, our core gifts, and the impact we seek to have in this world. I am slow to write my statement. The concept of a "transcendent why" has me flummoxed. It feels important to get it right.

I reflect on the purpose statement as I engage in ongoing conversations with our lay leaders regarding my contract renewal. The Board has guided me through thoughtful discussions about the future of Temple Beth Am; my vision for my rabbinate; and about how we hope to transform the role of our synagogue in the lives of our members. It has been the most intentional and inspiring contract conversation of my career.

It dawns on me that the purpose of my rabbinate has shifted over time. As a young woman, I was obsessed with living a meaningful life. I became a rabbi because Judaism helped me tap into a sense of awe and a realization that I participate in something bigger than myself. I was driven to share my discovery with others. I also had the *chutzpah* of a Gen X white feminist who believed that Judaism could include me and everyone who, like me, was unseen and unsung in the Jewish community.

Now, I am an older woman, and I know my purpose is to help build a Jewish community I will not inhabit. The lessons of Covid and of the Black Lives Matters and Me-Too movements, as well as my own aging process, have fired me up to break down old structures that do not meet the needs of this generation of young people. This is our moment to create a synagogue home for *all* our members, no matter who we are, how we identify, whom we vote for, whom we love, or whether we are digital natives or immigrants. *All* of us together can create a Jewish home where we are emotionally and physically safe, morally challenged, and spiritually elevated.

Just before Shavuot, I share my rabbinic purpose statement with our Board of Directors:

To have the courage to create a new kind of Jewish community that draws on the wisdom of our ancestors and serves as a spiritual and emotional refuge for our descendants.

We have planned a quick Florida visit with Dad and Pauline in August. The week before we are supposed to leave, they both catch Covid. Pauline has mild symptoms and Dad is asymptomatic.

I call and ask Dad to take a Covid test before we arrive. On the phone, Dad is more confused than usual, and cannot track my request. I tell him not to worry, and plan to speak to Pauline later. I hang up, and within a few minutes the phone rings. "Ruth," Pauline says without even saying hello, "I'm worried." Dad is not making any sense at all.

It turns out that even though Dad is asymptomatic, the Covid virus has reached his brain. Dad moves with breakneck speed through all the agitated and delusional phases of end-stage Alzheimer's. There will be no long and slow goodbye for him.

All of this happens at the start of Elul, the Jewish month of spiritual preparation before the Days of Awe. Rich, Suzannah and I hop a plane back to Florida. Dad spends a nightmarish week in an understaffed hospital until we can settle him into the comfort care of a hospice facility. Our extended family arrives, and we sit vigil with our patriarch, three generations of Zlotnicks alternating between crying, laughing, and remaining silent in the intimacy of the sacred space of Dad's hospice room.

Dad slips away on the 10th of Elul, and we follow his wishes for a speedy Jewish funeral. Shiva ends about a week before Temple Beth Am's Rosh Hashanah celebration at McCaw Hall.

Dad's final gift to my brothers and me will be that his *yahrzeit* will always fall before the High Holy Days. His memory will compel us to ask ourselves: Are we doing all we can to hold our family together? Are we being role models for the kids? Are we taking care of ourselves and our marriages? Are we living as fully as Dad did?

Here is why I am sharing this with you now. The last six months of my life unfolded in predictable and unpredictable ways. Yet here we are together on Kol Nidre, our annual invitation to honor the precariousness of our lives. On Kol Nidre we rest uncomfortably with the fact that even if we die at ninety, life is short, and we do not have a moment to waste.

During this past year, a confluence of events led me to ask penetrating questions I have never asked myself before. Over the next 24 hours, I invite you to ponder these same questions:

What is the transcendent why of *your* existence?

If you were to write a purpose statement for your life, what would it say?

What are your core gifts? Do you share those gifts to satisfy your ego or to serve the needs of others?

In the year ahead, what is the impact that you want to have in the world?

Are you doing all you can for your loved ones?

Are you being a role model for others, especially our youth?

Are you taking of yourselves?

Are you living as fully as possible?

Tomorrow evening, after the gates of Ne'ila close, we will end Yom Kippur by singing *Eliyahu Hanavi*. Eliyahu, hurry. Come now, bring peace upon us.

My month of mourning will end a day or so later. Then, with a fresh and fragile heart, I will join our congregation in building the largest sukkah in the Pacific Northwest. Leafy branches will cover the roof, revealing the stars in the sky and the autumnal beauty of our courtyard.

Immersed in Sukkot's earthy abundance, I will begin my life in Seattle as a parentless adult. You'll find me here, living with purpose, drawing on the wisdom of our ancestors, and whole-heartedly creating a new kind of Jewish home for my descendants.

And you? Where will I find you?

Wherever it may be, may peace be upon you. And may redemption come speedily and in our day.