

Threads

HANNA TIFERET SIEGEL

From our first breath to our last, life is a vulnerable experience. With great anticipation, we await the birth of a child although beneath the joy is uncertainty. No matter what we do to protect ourselves and our children, the lifespan of each person is finite and physical safety is often beyond our control. This is what makes our existence precious and moves many people toward faith. “Teach us to treasure each day that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12) It doesn’t take long for us to learn what is dangerous, hot, off-limits, and painful. But the human spirit is adventuresome by nature, driven to explore, understand, touch, encounter, and learn what brings pleasure and meaning.

The world we live in is also vulnerable. The harmonious balance of earth, air, and water is being threatened with smog, radiation, pesticides, rainforest destruction, genetically modified organism (GMO) foods, terminator seeds, and the inhumane treatment of animals, resulting in climate change, super storms, and seismic eruptions. We are defying the covenant of stewardship that we accepted from the beginning of creation, “Let us make humans with the spark of the Divine and let them be the guardians over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, and over all the earth...” (Genesis 1:26)

Integrating and balancing our stewardship, despite the uncertainty and temptations of being human, is never easy. One dear friend,

who managed gracefully to do so, recently left this world after a five-year encounter with cancer. Her name was Denise Guren, *Binah Yashara bat Ganit v’David*, and this essay is a tribute to her life with her husband, Doug. Their house in Bellingham speaks of their values — a solar hot water heater on the roof and a south-facing greenhouse attached to the front

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of their house; a fig tree, tomatoes, and other plants are growing happily in the sun’s warmth. Inside are spinning wheels, dyed and natural wool, a violin and an accordion, photos of their two grown sons, a menorah, and Shabbat candlesticks. Doug grinds the flour for their bread, and in their yard are a vegetable garden, apple trees, another greenhouse, grazing sheep, and the bike she rode to work. They lived simply with minimal income.

Denise referred to herself as “a canary in the coal mine,” knowing that we are all part of the same world through the air we breathe, the food we eat, the thoughts we hold. Her friends marveled at how she continued to live with enthusiasm rather than despair even as her body swelled with tumors. She immersed herself in everything she loved and was able to do. “I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have

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Ya’aleh, An Agent of Redemption

On Yom Kippur evening, in traditional services, the prayer “*ya’aleh*” is recited with an open ark — just at the beginning of marathon prayers and intense self-reflection. *Ya’aleh* rests on three verbs: to ascend, to come, and to appear. Our voices offer up a sacred progression as we match the rhythm with a hope that our voices will reach and alter the cosmos. And the melody achieves what the prayer does with words: “May our supplication ascend from the evening, and may our cry come from the morning, and may our song appear till evening.” Our thoughts, deepest needs, and vulnerabilities follow a trajectory. We wail in the evening, watching the letters in our prayer books travel from their pages heavenward, propelled by our voices and our will to change the world, to change ourselves. We wait for the hopefulness of the morning and then the promises of the evening. This *piyyut*, this ancient poem, forces me to see myself as a verb, as an agent of redemption, partnering with God in the creation of a new self. *Ya’aleh*’s progression mirrors the way that we enter the cocoon of prayer and emerge transformed. —Erica Brown

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set life and death before you, blessing and curse: choose life that both you and your seed may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

During the last six months of her life, she took on a new *mitzvah*. It came about while designing a healing service for the planet. The planning committee was searching for a ritual that would unite the community and acknowledge the need to heal the world. Shonna Husbands-Hankin suggested a green thread, similar to the *techelet*, the blue thread described in the third paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. (Numbers 15:37-41) The *P'til Yarok-Ad*, the Ever Green Thread, would connect us to the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) that guides us to live in harmony with the planet we inhabit so that we, and our children, can experience Heaven on Earth. (Numbers 15:37-41)

We asked Denise to spin the green threads that would remind us to live harmoniously with our vulnerable planet. She enthusiastically agreed and offered this *kavana* (intention) as preparation: “For the sake of unifying YHVH and the *Shekhina*, I am now ready and prepared to fulfill the positive *mitzvah* of spinning *tzitzit* as it is written in the Torah: (Numbers 15:38) ‘...Tell the Children of Israel to make *tzitzit* on the corners of their garments throughout the generations...’ I spin this green *tzitzit* to serve as a reminder of the intricate ecosystems of Mother Earth and our commitment to live in harmony with her.”

Denise died at home at the age of 56 in the arms of her husband. She chose a “green” bur-

ial, wrapped in a white shroud, and was laid to rest directly in the earth she loved. She wanted a cedar — an evergreen — to grow out of her remains. Several weeks before her death, she wrote, “The best legacy I think anyone can give someone with cancer is not wearing ribbons of whatever color, but supporting environmental organizations and doing our part to lessen the toxic burden of this earth.”

We say, *barukh Dayan haEmet*, blessed be the True Judge, when someone dies, regardless of the circumstances, because we are all vulnerable; our lives precious and precarious. May we be guided to choose life in the face of adversity and cultivate respect for our whole world. 

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Hanging by a Cell Phone

JOSH ROLNICK

The afternoon before my mother’s heart surgery, her cell phone battery died. She had gone to the hospital with my father for pre-op screenings when it happened, and by the time my flight landed in Boston, her upset was palpable.

‘I’ll get your phone fixed, I told her. But I was frustrated and concerned. Here she was, 16 hours from surgery to fix a faulty heart valve, all *verklempt* over nothing. She needed, above all else, to *relax*.

Fortunately, I found a store nearby and quickly returned the phone to her. “Mom,” I said, as I was leaving that night, “you’ll be fine. I’ll see you when you wake up.”

And at first, she was. The surgery went well, without complication. And then, two days later, a tiny piece of plaque — perhaps loosened when they clamped her aorta — lodged in an artery in her brain. She suffered a massive stroke. For several days, she was intubated, unresponsive — near death, her doctors told us.

She survived — I sometimes think — by the sheer force of her own will.



A few months after the stroke, I asked my local Chabad rabbi: How are we supposed to deal with our knowledge of human frailty? What is the religious response to the notion

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