


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. 

## Upcoming in Sh'ma

- Mystery & Awe
- A Jewish Lens on Guns
- Weddings: New Thinking on *Kiddushin*
- Genomes & Jews
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- Moral Conscience and Divine Commandment
- Philanthropy & Controversy: Allocations & Agendas
- Jewish Poetry and *Tehillim*

## 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 *verklemt* 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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that, at a moment's notice, we — or our children, our spouses, our loved ones — could simply be gone? How are we to cope with that vulnerability?

My rabbi told me that when Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson's wife was dying, he took to quoting Ecclesiastes 7:2: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that is the end of all man, and the living should take it to heart."

It is part of God's plan, the rabbi explained, that we always be confronted with death. When we go to the house of mourning — even when we see stories of suffering and death in the media — it sensitizes us to the fact that any moment could be our last, which, in turn, compels us to live more fully. It's a tool, he said, to encourage us to seize the day.

That worked for a while. At some point, though, the steady reminders of other people's pain just left me feeling more exposed.



The other day, I was listening to NPR as Diane Rehm interviewed the author Colum McCann, whose latest novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, begins with the true story of Philippe Petit, a French high-wire artist who, on August 7, 1974, strung a wire between the Twin Towers and walked back and forth, eight times.

McCann's novel imagines what it was like for people on the ground looking up that day — transfixed by what appeared as a tiny man, a flyspeck, standing on a wire a quarter of a mile in the sky — "all of them reassured by the presence of one another."

Hearing McCann read that line, it hit me: it's the same way with Judaism.

We pray in a *minyán*, which demands a quorum of at least ten people, together. At the

end of each week, we gather — as families and communities — to usher in Shabbat. On Yom Kippur, the benches are overflowing with neighbors, friends, family, and strangers, each hoping to be inscribed and sealed in God's Book of Life. We come together: for a *brit*, to welcome a baby into our people's covenant with God; for weddings; for Passover and Sukkot.

"While each life-cycle ritual ... has its own symbolism and message, and each holiday ... celebrates a different value or event," writes Daniel Gordis in *God Was Not In the Fire*, "what ultimately makes them powerful is the sense of community they provide."

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**Community ... is the ultimate tonic. We gain strength and courage from others, not because they have heroically faced what we are facing, but simply because they are *there*, caring that we endure.**

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This is perhaps most trenchant at a Jewish funeral and in the rituals of sitting *shiva* and saying kaddish, when mourners are reassured that they are not alone.

Community, Judaism seems to insist, is the ultimate tonic. We gain strength and courage from others, not because they have heroically faced what we are facing, but simply because they are *there*, caring that we endure.

My mom, I believe, understood this all along. Hours before her surgery, when her phone battery died, she found herself suddenly cut off from all of those who had been helping her face that day: Her mother; her children; her sisters and brothers; Ellen, her best friend.

At her moment of greatest vulnerability, mom needed her *minyán*. Just like the rest of us. 🕯

### Hearing and Silence

*"The great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard."*

The world has never been louder — the 24-hour news cycle, the constant buzzing and beeping, and the tethering of humans to their communications systems.

We need to protect the quiet moments so we can experience the small and large silences in which God's truth can be apprehended.

Toward the end of our lives, when we have perhaps attained wisdom and garnered life experience, often our voices lose their power and people have to lean toward us to hear our words. We become closer to the silence. Our task, then as now, is to hear the still small voice after the glory of the loud shofar. And in the absence of vivid sound, we might feel and hear the pulse of the world. —Sara Paasche-Orlow