

## CHAPTER 28

# God's Love Endures

On Rosh Chodesh, celebrated at the beginning of every month in the Jewish calendar, congregants at Beth El add additional blessings and psalms to their morning worship. One of these is Psalm 118, whose words *Ki l'olam Hasdo* mean "God's love endures forever."

*God's love endures forever.* Reassuring words. Reminders of something eternal. Reminders to trust in God. My father loved those words, exaggerating the "o" in *olam* as if it were "oy" when he led seders. He believed God's love endures forever; he believed God's love had saved him from death multiple times during his life. As an infantry soldier marching across Germany during World War II, he was a daily target of enemy gunfire. In 1944, a German shell killed everyone else in the circle where he was standing. In 1990, surgical complications from an aneurysm repair caused a major hemorrhage that nearly killed him on the operating table. Each time, he lived.

During those nine excruciating days after Dad's heart surgery when he lay in intensive care, I prayed to God to let him rest in peace. Seeing his arms tied to the bed, restraining him from pulling at the tube in his throat that connected him to a respirator, his systems failing one after another, and his body being maintained in a drug-induced coma . . . I knew he didn't want to live like that. He had made that clear.

"Please, God, bestow your love on my father and eliminate his suffering."

Each time friends and family asked me "What can I do?" while my

father showed no signs of life, I said, "Please recite the *mishaberach*, the prayer for healing."

Entreating God's help has a long history in Judaism. The Jewish Bible is filled with stories of petitioners asking God for everything from the simplest material needs to the highest spiritual yearnings. The belief that God hears our prayers is fundamental to Judaism.

When my father's time finally came, God took him mercifully. He did not have to live the compromised life he had so feared and adamantly rejected. Death freed him of the agonies of a protracted life-draining battle with his B-cell lymphoma. God's love for him had endured once again. When my father died, I felt God had answered my prayers and granted Dad his wish. God had shown kindness to a man whose kindheartedness was recognized by all. Knowing Dad's suffering was over, a wave of peace had washed over me.

Until I started to wonder. After doctors confirmed his death, I walked trancelike out of the hospital and began to grapple with countless unanswered questions. *Why, since the surgery succeeded, had his systems failed? Why did he die? What good were all those prayers—the many mishaberachs that were recited—when my father died anyway? And if we believe our futures are predetermined, as many practicing Jews do, why do we ask people to pray?* Blasphemous questions.

I hadn't realized I was talking aloud until my mother's words penetrated my confusion: "If you believe in God, you have to believe it's God's will." It sounded more like a directive than a spiritual response.

*It's God's will.*

My father had used those same words just before I left for college, when he gave me his Purple Heart medal and told me about the day he was wounded overseas.

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"It was November 17, 1944," he began. "I had gotten out of my foxhole and was standing around with eight other guys, just outside Apweiler,

Germany. We were waiting until dawn to attack the town. A German 88 mm shell landed right in the middle of where we stood. When I came to, the medic told me that all the others had died before they hit the ground. I stayed in the hospital for two and a half weeks. When you're nineteen years old and recovering in a hospital bed all alone, four thousand miles from home, you try to find answers: Why am I here when the other eight guys are dead? Why did I survive a round of ammunition that killed eight men instantly but only wounded me? I struggled to cope with it all. My physical injuries didn't torment me nearly as much as the agony of having lived while they didn't.

"I couldn't accept any of the logical explanations of why they died and I lived," he continued. "After much soul-searching and consulting chaplains of different faiths, I finally accepted my mother's philosophy: 'It's God's will.' Your grandmother used to say that all the time. And there is no other answer to the question."

I had been dumbfounded as he spoke. When he finished, I had no words—just a hug for the soldier who survived. Months after he died, I wondered if that near-death experience had shaped his belief in an afterlife, in the destiny of his soul, and in the importance of the Mourner's Kaddish for its fate.

Now I was trying, as my father had, to make sense of something that defies reason. Why had he survived a shell that killed the eight others standing with him? Why had he walked into one of the leading cardiac care hospitals in South Florida for an angiogram, been rushed into emergency double bypass surgery that same afternoon, and then died after we were told the surgery was successful?

*Why* was this God's will? *Why* had God taken my father now?

I sought explanations for why he died. Doctors could provide none.

"He'll be going home soon," they had repeated for eight consecutive days, like a TV rerun, right up to the day before he died.

As I recited Psalm 118 that morning, I remembered attending a bereavement support group in the basement of Temple Shalom one bitterly cold evening in February. The evening's topic was prayer.

I had posed a question to the rabbi. "What if we pray for healing and our prayers aren't answered?"

The rabbi responded, "Judaism teaches us that when our prayers aren't answered, we should pray for the promise of comfort and consolation, to draw us closer to God even in our loss. Prayer anchors us in faith."

"Well, hundreds of people recited the mishaberach for my father and he died anyway, even though the doctors told us he was going to live," I kept on without taking a breath.

"When we recite the mishaberach," the rabbi told me, "we are not only praying for physical healing; we are also praying for spiritual healing."

I was confused. I'd heard the prayer chanted hundreds of times, yet I'd seen only the part that petitioned for the restoration of physical well-being.

"Open your prayer books to the mishaberach," the rabbi instructed the group. Together, we read the words aloud:

May God, who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bring blessing and healing to \_\_\_\_\_. May the Holy One mercifully restore him to health and vigor, granting him physical and spiritual well-being, together with all others who are ill, and strengthen those who tend to them.<sup>x</sup>

Had all those prayers brought spiritual well-being to my father? Had God comforted his spirit by letting him die peacefully as he'd always wished? I wanted to believe that the flood of pleas sent to God on Dad's behalf had strengthened his soul for eternity. Since he had averted the anguish of future life-sucking cancer treatments, I wanted to believe our prayers had been heard. That is faith.

The rabbi went on.

“The mishaberach also brings us closer to God. When we ask something of God for someone else, our connection to the Almighty deepens.”

As my father lay comatose in the ICU, I'd been powerless to help him. Praying for him *had* brought me peace—my defense against being overwhelmed by despair. While I prayed, I was less mired in sorrow; I trusted God was listening.

Could it be that the prayer was as much for *my* spiritual healing as it was for Dad's? Maybe all those who recited the mishaberach for him also felt closer to God. Or at least less helpless.

As the rabbi continued, I pondered what it means to truly pray.

Most of my time spent in synagogue, my eyes inched across the pages of the prayer book, trying to decipher the Hebrew letters the way a first grader reads a school primer. I strained to keep up with the leader rather than trying to comprehend the meanings of the prayers.

Questions bounced in my brain like a pinball. If I chanted the Hebrew words without grasping their meaning and significance, was I praying? If the power of those prayers came from being in community and I lagged behind everyone else, was I still “in community”?

Some days—like the day terrorists bombed the USS *Cole* in Yemen, killing seventeen American sailors; or the day the gruesome lynching of two Israeli reservists in Ramallah was filmed and shown worldwide; or the day 21 Israelis (including 16 teenagers) were killed and 120 more wounded in the Dolphinarium discotheque massacre—I struggled to make sense of how the Almighty allowed such bloodshed.

When I was angry at God, was Adonai listening to me? If I hadn't truly prayed after all these months of being in synagogue every morning and evening, what would happen to my father's soul? I was riddled with doubts. Had my intention been in vain? Did people of other faiths wrestle with these same questions?

I needed to believe that God saw me in synagogue every day bringing fullheartedness and commitment to my efforts. But did God accept this as sufficient?

As if reading my mind, the rabbi said, “Prayer requires *kavanah*,

which means not only concentration but intention in expressing ourselves before God. There must be intent in whatever we say, aiming toward closeness to God.”

*Hmm . . . kavanah means “concentration,” I thought. Concentration is pretty hard to maintain when I’m praying twice daily every day.*

During evening services, my mind wanders: Did David finish his homework? Do I have enough food for his lunch the next day? Did I pay the phone bill? And put the dinner dishes in the dishwasher? During morning services, I think about my clients and my ever-lengthening to-do list, my mind constantly interrupted by worldly matters. Was I praying if my mind strayed elsewhere?

Kavanah also means “intention.” I jolted upright at the rabbi’s words. If prayer required intention in expressing myself before God, then I was praying very hard. Maybe the commitment to my father that I brought before the Lord each time I entered the synagogue outweighed my ignorance of the prayers, my imperfect pronunciation, my doubts about God’s mercy. Suddenly, the set text mattered less. My efforts were sufficient. Praying isn’t a pass/fail test.

After his lecture, the rabbi instructed us to write our own prayer expressing what we needed from God and/or our community—one that could help us move on in our lives and find much-needed peace. I opened my journal, my ever-present companion, to a blank page. My prayer flowed from my pen as though the words, thoughts, and feelings were already formed inside, just waiting to tumble out.

Dear God,

Thank you for answering my prayer, and that of my father, that he would not suffer at the end of his days. Thank you for taking him peacefully and saving him from a grueling battle with lymphoma.

I felt your presence in my tranquility and in the warmth of the rays of your sun at his funeral. I felt your presence

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in the comforting thoughts that Dad was at peace—that he died as he'd wanted and was buried as he'd wanted. I felt you with me when I made all the arrangements for his burial; I felt you in the fortitude I had to take on those tasks, and in my confidence as I made each decision. For your gifts of strength, endurance, and peacefulness, I thank you.

But where have you been since then, and why did you take away my serenity? Why have you allowed these atrocities? I have been feeling alone and abandoned by you.

I pray for you to show yourself to me again. I pray for the strength and tenacity to be able to go through this painful time and feel less alone. I pray for the peacefulness I felt in those hours after Dad died, and for it to bolster me in the difficult months ahead.

I affirm the faith I have in you as I maintain my faith in the sun even on a rainy day, when I cannot see its brightness nor feel its warmth.

Amen.

As I closed my journal that day, the chrysalis around my heart began opening. In freely expressing myself in my own words and allowing myself to be vulnerable, I felt I'd grown closer to God, reaffirmed my faith in the Almighty, and reawakened my elusive inner peace. In writing my prayer, I regained my faith that the light of God's love and protection would shine on my father's soul and let him rest in peace. My spontaneous voice was the most meaningful kind of prayer.

I stopped my reminiscing, and turning back to the cadence of the Rosh Chodesh service, I realized God's love had endured . . . once again.

*Ki V'olam Hasdo.* God's love endures forever.