

We all have that person in our lives for whom it's difficult to buy gifts because when they want something, they just buy it themselves. I was talking to a congregant about this very conundrum last year, and she told me about a subscription that her children purchased for her, called Storyworth.

And once a week, she's emailed a question that she thoughtfully answers. After a year, all of her responses will be printed in a book for her children and grandchildren to read one day. She may not live forever, but her words and stories will surely outlast her.

What lives on after we go?

When working with grieving families, I'm often asked difficult, impossible questions. Rabbi, what happens after we die? Does Judaism believe in heaven? Are they in a better place, Rabbi? Tell me that death isn't all there is.

Words convey our stories and help us live on in our loved ones' memories, but stories pale in comparison to the reassuring squeeze of a husband's hand when we feel alone or weak, or the tender closeness after laying our heads on a parent's shoulder. Sometimes, that's all we want.

Memories pale in comparison when we yearn to be close to a person, but memories are all we have at that juncture in time. In their absence and in our pain, we seek explanations for why our loved one died and what comes after. But our tradition doesn't have one satisfactory answer to what happens after we go.

After that congregant told me about Storyworth, I was inspired to purchase a subscription for my dad, the one thing I knew he wasn't going to purchase for himself, and I had already refused to go in on the chainsaw that my brothers wanted to buy for him.

It's become this fun Monday tradition to read his answers and sometimes ask follow-up questions about the stories I've never heard. But again, reading the memories one day won't hold a candle to hearing his thoughts and stories in real time.

But in lieu of certitude to what happens after we die, memory is the reservoir from which we draw comfort, and the closest will come to an answer. It's the well and life force that makes their lives a blessing, and gives us the strength to continue.

You might be wondering, Rabbi, what does death have to do with Rosh Hashanah?

The High Holy Days, to be exact, the period of time extending from Tisha B'av, the commemoration of the destruction of the Second Temple, all the way through Sukkot, the holiday where we erect temporary huts to signify the fragility of life is meant to transform our souls.

Yom Kippur has been described by some rabbis as a rehearsal of our deaths, so that we can be our purest selves by the time we are written and sealed in the book of life.

Beginning with Tisha B'av, we start to undergo *cheshbon hanefesh*, reflecting on where we've fallen short and what we can do to be better, and then as the final month of the Jewish calendar creeps in, we endure the Jewish ritual of repentance to *shuvah*, so that the new year can start on a clean slate.

In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, we take part in a series of rituals and prayers that reenact the soul's journey through the world, from birth to death, so we can experience brokenheartedness and open our hearts to God.

This is why next week on Yom Kippur, traditional Jews will wear a kittle or white burial shroud, and why many of us, for 24 hours, will neither eat, drink, or enjoy life's pleasures, because it's an outward expression of the change that's happening internally to our souls, which, in a way, is being reborn.

But if our tradition believes that we can come back by the time Yom Kippur has concluded, then why can't this happen for our loved ones who have passed away?

*Vayeilech*, the *parashah* that follows what we chant on Yom Kippur, *Nitzavim*, takes place hours before Moses dies. In fact, *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilech* are read together as part of the weekly parsha schedule, and as I'm sure you all remember from your days in Sunday school, because of a lapse in faith and judgment, Moses is punished by not being allowed to enter the promised land.

And Deuteronomy is Moses's final speech to the Israelites before he ascends Mount Nebo, which will be his final resting place.

Soon, the people will no longer have Moses, and they wonder, what will we do without him? Where will we go after he goes?

Moses dies, and the people cross the Jordan. Though their leader and guide is no longer with them, the Israelites carry Moses's teachings and Torah into the Promised Land.

Where did Moses go after he died?

Though the baton of leadership was passed to Joshua, the Israelites find their patriarch and access his wisdom in new ways. It is because of Torah and Moses's teachings that the people have the strength to cross the Jordan and settle in a new land.

Our great sage Rashi imagines that the Israelites access Moses through his words, and though they won't be able to go to his grave to mourn his loss, they can find comfort in the teachings he has left behind.

What we leave behind is what lives after we die.

It's the recipes that will be passed down, the handwritten letters that remind us of a certain person, the latent smells still perfuming old jewelry boxes, vacation photos that transport us,

memories of kibitzing on couches, and reminders of what it was like to simply be in each other's company, these are what persist after the physical fades.

Even with the acknowledgment that the physical is what we truly yearn for, we have to find satisfaction in memory more than answers, because memories are the life force after our loved ones have gone.

Our sages imagined the moment when God tells Moses to ascend the mountain because he will soon join his ancestors. The Kli Yakar, a Polish rabbi who served Prague in the 16th century, taught that when a student recites a teaching in the name of their teacher, the teacher's lips move in the grave.

Was there life after death, or was there just life in the grave?

Rabeinu Bahia, a Spanish rabbi and commentator from the 13th century, likened the passing of Moses to the way the sun's light manifests in the moon, enabling it to illuminate the earth even after it has set. Though a person is no longer in our lives physically, their energy shows up all around us.

Our tradition believes that life after death is memory, which is why we say, "May so and so's memory be for a blessing, and may their soul be bound up in the bond of life eternal."

We believe that actions, both good and bad, are teachers that guide the living.

Though the early reformers were uncomfortable with it, our tradition went a step further and also believed in the resurrection of the dead.

I know an answer is sought when I'm asked what happens after we die, but really, it's the question that matters the most. Judaism, though, will never provide certainty. Two Jews, three opinions. Right?

We are a tradition that retreats from literalness and absolutes and revels in the gray space of metaphor, especially when questions broach on the limits of our knowledge, but that doesn't have to mean the limits of our imaginations.

It's no coincidence that the Hebrew word for question, she'llah, is baked into our word for underworld, sheul, which does come up in our Talmud, the rabbis' commentaries and conversations on our text.

Our earliest rabbis wrestled with the question of what happened after we died, and I hope that we too find comfort in the fact that we yearn for an answer, just as they did.

And when we die, we don't bring anything with us. There are no pockets in a kittle. There is nothing tangible to carry. It's a matter of what has been left with those who are still alive.

Even after we're done mourning, when we have an unveiling, we erect matzevot at our cemeteries, not headstones or markers, as they're called in English. But monuments, because we

believe that our dead are only physically gone. When their teachings inform our actions, it's as if they're still alive.

As I heard recently at a funeral, life is in the dash. We have no control over when we are born and when we die, but what's in between those years is where legacy lives, and what continues after we go.

What is within our power is the present, and being good for the sake of being good.

This idea is one that all our sages and rabbis could agree on. But we settle on the present because of how controversial the idea of resurrection is, an idea that's been part of our tradition since the time of our prophets Isaiah and Daniel.

Some, when they chant the words of our Amidah, our most sacred prayer that's recited by traditional Jews three times a day, pray for the resurrection of the dead. But our early reformers were so uncomfortable with this that they changed the Hebrew from Michaiye Hametim, reviver of the dead, to Michaiy Hakol, giver of life to all.

Their discomfort led them to intentionally make the text elusive, preferring to sit in the metaphor rather than the literal translation of the Hebrew.

In fact, we've always been uncomfortable with this concept. Even in the first century BCE, there was so much conflict about the idea of reviving the dead that the phrase was inserted into our Amidah just to force us to articulate the idea repeatedly.

Maimonides even said that resurrection was one of the 13 core attributes of the Jewish faith. He believed that the resurrected would not only come back, but the souls of the righteous would enjoy a spiritual, bodyless existence in the presence of God. This was one view of Olam Habaa, or the world to come.

Despite the ways our reformers tried to make this idea more palatable, I suspect we might still cringe learning that our revered tradition historically has believed in what seems like a primitive concept.

But in the words of Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, our prayer should be audacious enough to contain our hope. What we think we've lost can be reborn, and if we only pray for what's possible, why pray at all?

We can't even find biblical references to heaven or hell, and the concept of Olam Habaa is sparsely brought up in our Talmud, where we read a few stories about it, like one where the rabbis imagine that heaven would be a place where humans can't bend their elbows, so to eat they have to feed their neighbor or go hungry.

And in another our rabbis picture a heaven that entails Moses sitting and teaching Torah all day long. For the righteous and maybe even for your very own clergy, this seems idyllic. But for others, it might be a form of torture.

Regardless, the lack of detail about the world to come might look like it says more about our tradition's focus on this world and less about what may come after we go.

As we celebrate the day the world was born, Rosh HaShanah, we also prepare to rehearse our deaths on Yom Kippur because, as one rabbi wrote, we need a taste of the emptiness to give us a sense of what is at the core of our lives.

It is the only way we can bring ourselves to the edge, so we can ask, "What's worth holding onto? What must I let go of? What stories must I pass down before it's too late?"

There's a parable that describes a rabbi who was transported in a vision to the heavenly realm, where upon arrival they saw all the sages of all the faiths and the traditions engaged in deep study.

Shocked that the afterlife could look just like the life from which the rabbi had left, they remarked, "Is this all there is to paradise?"

The *bat kol*, the heavenly voice, replied, "The sages aren't in paradise. Paradise is in the sages."

Just as we might ache for one more chance to say, "I'm sorry," or "I love you," we also ache for certainty and an answer to the question of what comes after, but our tradition sits in the tension so that we can individually find a sense of shalom after we have grown around the grief.

And it will never be because an answer of absolutes was given, but because we've achieved a sense of peace. And comfort in what lives on, because legacy is what beats death.

It's the faith that words and stories, whether associated with an easy person or challenging person, inform the actions of the living. That's what lives on after we go.

Just as the Torah provided comfort to the Israelites after Moses died and enabled them to cross into the land, guiding their actions and giving them a road map, I pray that we too will find comfort in what we discover within ourselves during these days of awe.

What lies at our core? What's worth holding onto? And what's worth passing down the story between our dash?

Only then will paradise be within us, just as it was within our sages.

*Shana tova umetuka.* May this next year be full of health, happiness and sweetness.