A Life in 150 Words

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Judea – Tarzana, Ca
December 7, 2001

Shabbat Shalom! As some of you know, I am writing a book. It is not a book for publication, but rather one that will never be read or at least never by anyone but me. Since my first days as a rabbinical student I have kept a journal of all of the life cycle events that I have officiated at, from brit milah to B'nai Mitzvah, weddings to funerals I record the names, dates and a few lines about the people whose lives touched mine along this journey. For such a high tech rabbi, I cherish this very low tech record of the lives that I have come to know, the souls that have crossed my path. Most weeks, the entries are of Bar and Bat Mitzvah's, occasionally a bris or baby naming, and about every two weeks or so, I record a funeral. These notes are a bit longer, as I try in a few words to capture the essence of the person who I had come to know, often only after he or she had passed.

This week I wrote in my book five times. Thank God for the Bris on Tuesday morning, this week it was truly a blessing, because the other four entries were all of the longer variety. Our congregation added three names to our Kaddish list this week, and will add a fourth on Sunday. Four remarkable souls, four unique and incredible people. It is a challenge for me

in the few words I write in my journal to capture this uniqueness. How do you in a sentence or two maybe three or four capture the essence of a person. Those things that celebrate the uniqueness of their life, lesson and insight they have brought to the world? It is not an easy thing, re-reading my journal entries; I fail more often than I succeed.

Jany Scott is a writer for the New York Times, earlier this year she wrote the following describing the work of the famed Times obituary writer Alden Whitman. She wrote, “The emissary from the hereafter rode out from the city. His subject, Bette Davis, served him lunch. He was writing a newspaper article about her coming made-for-television movie — at least that was his pretext. It was the truth, but not the whole truth.

He asked questions and she answered; she talked, he listened. Hours rolled by, teatime arrived and she finally said: "May I ask you a question? You've spent an awful lot of time asking me questions that you couldn't possibly be using in this article."

He offered lamely, "I like to be thorough."

But Miss Davis persisted. "By any chance, are you interviewing me for my obituary?" he remembers her asking. Cornered, he confessed. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am." Whereupon she disappeared into the kitchen and

returned with a shaker of martinis. He remembers her saying, "In that case, why don't we get rid of this silly tea and have a drink?"

As some of you may know Whitman, and by that I mean Alden not Walt is the Godfather of obituary writers. His style, sensitivity, attention to detail and work ethic set the standard by which all obituary writers are judged and measured. Whitman probably thought about death more than any man in America. It was his sacred and not always pleasant task to pre-write obituaries for the greatest men and women of our age. His files were legendary, as was his tact and tenacity for delicately interviewing his subjects while they were still in a position to talk about their lives.

A phone call or a visit from Whitman signaled two things to the subject. One that you had made it, you had arrived at some social status or station, and two that you might be departing rather soon. When asked about the peculiarity of pre-writing obituaries for the notable and noteworthy Whitman replied, “Death, the cliché assures us, is the great leveler; but it obviously levels some a great deal more than others.”

Whitman took his craft quite seriously. As some of you have perhaps observed or heard repeated a great many people when looking at a tombstone note that the what is most significant on that marker is not the date of birth nor the date of death, but the dash, the hyphen between them.

That dash some have observed is the life line; it is along that dash that people lived and experience life. It is interesting I think to note, that no matter the span in years between one date and the other, the length of that dash is always the same. I think this is to show that there is fullness and meaning in every person's life. No matter its span, we can find in every dash the moment or moments that defined and shaped that person. And that, according to Whitman, "[is] what an obit is supposed to be—a picture, a snapshot. It's not a full-length biography, it's not a portrait. It's a quick picture." It is the point or points along that dash that define a person, tell the story of their soul.

As some of you know I am an avid reader of the New York Times. Ever since September 11th, the Times has been printing obituaries for those killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Perhaps you have seen or read some of them. Every day the paper fills a full page with 10 – 15, 150 word snapshots of the lives lost on that harrowing morning. They have set for themselves the goal of capturing the lives of every victim of the Trade Center Attacks, even with a self imposed 150 word limit for each, it will take them almost a full year to pay tribute to all those that were lost.

Wendall Jameson, Whitman's successor at the Times has taken on the role of Editor for the project. Jameson says that the goal for he and his

fellow writers is to capture how the victims lived not how they died. He explains that even in 150 words, they are still committed to the principles of their craft, to have a compelling beginning and a last sentence about the deceased that, "stays with you" even after you turn the page.

I would have thought that with 5,000 deaths the greatest challenge would be connecting them all, finding commonality between them. But what I found so interesting in Mr. Jameson's description of his work was that the greatest challenge was just the opposite, with just 150 words how do you celebrate the differences and unique qualities of an individual.

The Torah teaches that when God created the world, God created human beings *b'tzelem Elohim* in God's own image. Some may read this passage to mean that we all look like God. But Judaism and many traditions read it differently; it is not that we look like God, but that we have the many attributes of God as part of our soul. What makes us different is how we use those God given abilities to affect the world we live in, the people we encounter in life.

The Midrash teaches that on the sixth day; when God began to create human beings in God's own image the angels who had been ministering to God through all of the previous creations complained amongst themselves. They said one to another, "Should mere mortals be so gifted as to be

endowed with the Divine image?" "No," they said, "This is not right. We should hide the divine image from humans." One of the angels suggested hiding it in the sea, reasoning that the sea was so deep surely humans would never find it there. Still another suggested hiding it at the top of the highest mountain, close to heaven where the angels could keep an eye on it. But the shrewdest angel dismissed their plans. "The human being", the angel said, "is ambitious, and will search high and low to find such a treasure. Let us hide it within the soul of every human being. It is the last place in the world a human would think to look.

Friends the message I wish to bring to you this Shabbat is that we must celebrate our differences as well as our commonality. We must see every person and every life as a unique blessing. It may not be an easy thing to see what makes us all so similar, but it is a far harder and greater thing to appreciate the unique qualities in each of us. To love and respect one another not for how alike we all are, but for how different and uniquely blessed each of us are in our own ways. To do this we must really get to know one another, not just generalize and summarize each others lives. We must become as a great rabbi in Jewish tradition explained, Geologists of the Soul. There are great treasures in the soul: there's faith, there's love, there's awe, there's wisdom, all these treasures you can dig--but if you don't know

where to dig, you dig up mud or you dig up stones. But if you want to get to the gold, which is the awe before God, and the silver, which is the love, and the diamonds, which are the faith, then you have to become a geologist of the soul, you have to know where to dig. We can't just start poking holes in people and hope to find the treasure within, rather we have to dig carefully, deliberately, and intelligently, to find that divine image within each of us.

Friends in this time of miracles, on this Shabbat before Chanukah, in a time of New Year's resolutions and family celebrations. Let us become geologists exploring the souls of those who have so blessed our lives by their life and their presence. Let us begin to write our own book, keep our own journal. Not of the lives that we have lost, but a true Sefer Chayim, a book of life, a detailed record on paper or in our mind of those who mean so much to us, whose lives have made our lives whole and better. Let us face this challenge for everyone who matters to us in our lives. Can you in 150 words tell of the essence of their soul, the unique beauty of their life and its blessing. Until we know each other at least that well, we don't really know each other at all, and it is not good for us to be strangers. Let us start writing, I have a hunch we won't want to stop.