Write Your Own Eulogy: Inspired by the Legacy of IDF Sgt. Shawn Mondshein

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One of the most meaningful things I do as a rabbi is sit with families before a funeral and talk about their loved one.

It's a profoundly holy experience to listen to them tell the life story of this person who meant so much to them.

And, yet, as we sit around the room reminiscing, I'm always mindful of the fact that we're talking about someone who's not there to speak for themself.

There are children and grandchildren and siblings and in-laws, but almost every time the one voice missing from the story is the voice of the person who died.

I say "almost" every time, because there have been a few occasions in my career when a person has actually written their own eulogy.

Seriously. Their family members handed me some paper and said, "My dad wrote this eulogy," or "my mom wrote this letter," and they wanted it to be read at the funeral.

I admit, I found it a little unusual at the time.

But I've rethought it recently, and now I get why they did it. And I respect it.

I actually think it's something we should all do.

Here's why:

Most people die without telling the story of their life from their *own* perspective. They leave it to others to *interpret* what was in their heart, and how their experiences affected them, and how they felt about the life they'd lived.

Now, our family members *are* usually the people who know us best. But at the same time, we can't help but interpret other people from our own perspective. So, no matter how close we are to another person, our picture of them is always a partial one.

• The way I see you might not be the way you see yourself.

• I might experience our relationship differently than you experience it.

• If you and I have a fight and we haven't talked in a while, you might think it's because I'm holding a grudge, but I may just be too embarrassed to face you.

The point is: People don't know what we don't tell them, but they will definitely fill the void with speculation and assumptions.

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Think about someone you've lost: a parent, a grandparent, a brother or sister, an aunt or uncle, a friend, a child.

• If you could hear from them after they died, in their own words, what you meant to them, how would that affect you?

• If you could hear them say they were content with the choices they'd made, would it ease your grief?

• If you could hear them tell you what really mattered to them, and how they wanted to be remembered, and what they thought was important about their time on this earth…

• If you could hear them say: "I'm proud of you." "You taught me this about life." "You touched my life in this special way." "I regret what I did to you that time." "I'm sorry I never said I'm sorry."

Would it change the way you remember them? Would it help you cope with the pain of loss?

Now think about it *this* way: If *you* died tomorrow, God forbid, what would your family and friends wish they knew about *your* life? What have you not told them that you want them to know?

When they sit with the rabbi to tell your story, what voids would they have to fill with speculation?

Let's not make them carry that burden.

When the holiday is over, I want to encourage you to take some time and try writing your own eulogy.

Write in in the first person. Speak directly to the people you love.

Tell them what your life means to you and what you're proud of. Tell them what you admire about them. Say you're sorry for the things you've done wrong.

I understand it might feel awkward. But I think it's a beautiful gift we can give to the people we will leave behind.

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My suggestion is inspired by the story of IDF Sergeant Shawn Mondshein.

On July 20, 2014, Shawn and six others in his battalion were killed in Gaza when their armored vehicle was hit by a missile.

He was 19½ years old when he died.

A week before he went into Gaza, Shawn wrote letters to his family and friends. He never sent them, but the letters were discovered on his cell phone after his death.

They are beautiful expressions of love and admiration for people he loved.

The letters are not long or poetic. They're the heartfelt words of a 19-year-old boy, tapped out on his cell phone in the midst of God knows what, aware that he could die in battle, and he might never have the chance again to tell them what they meant to him.

He wanted them to know how he felt about his life. He didn't want them to have to wonder after he was gone.

Shawn probably had so much more to say than what he wrote in these short messages.

And yet, words can't begin to express what it must mean to his parents and his brother and sister and his friends to hear his voice from beyond the grave.

Shawn's letters prove that you don't have to write a lot; you just have to be honest. And, most importantly, you just have to do it.

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The Israeli songwriter Hanan ben Ari took Shawn's letters and set them to music. The song is called, "Layla Tov, Shon"—meaning: "Good Night, Shawn."

Stephanie's going to sing it for us, and I'll translate as we go.

May Shawn's memory be a blessing and an inspiration to us, just as it is to his family and to the people of Israel.

Listen here to "Layla Tov, Shon" with English subtitles.