

Seeing Angels in the Shadow of Death

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A Rabbi's Journey Through Illness and Health

AHUD SELA

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SEEING ANGELS IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH
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To all the angels who have guided me along my journey,
in particular, the one in whom my soul delights, Alisha.

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Prologue

FOR ANYONE WHO HAS suffered loss, or is facing a personal trial, the pain can be overwhelming, and you might feel at a loss as to where to look for healing. I hope that through reading my story and understanding how I came to deal with death and my own personal struggles you can also find your way to a place of wholeness. It may be through writing down your experiences, finally sharing your pain with someone, finding a teaching or piece of wisdom that helps you persevere, or a prayer or mantra that re-frames and strengthens you. I have included references to Jewish teachings that either helped me along my journey at that moment in my life or that I learned later that helped me clarify a particular experience in hindsight. They are by no means exhaustive of Jewish wisdom in this area or of the many teachings that religion can provide, but they were the teachings that helped me, and I hope that they can at least serve as a jumping off point for your own search for religious wisdom.

Growing up, people often told me that I had an old soul. I wonder if it is because I think about death a lot. At least it seems like a lot to me. Everyone thinks about their death at some point in time. From a young age I have wondered about the day that I will die and what my life will have meant. I never discussed my thoughts of death with anyone before writing this book, and putting those thoughts into words for anyone to read was almost an unbearable exposing of my most innermost self. A few years ago I felt compelled to articulate for myself what my life's journey has meant. Many things have happened in my life that I cannot disregard as chance or coincidence. As my memories unfolded before me, I realized that while my experience was certainly not unique, my way of dealing with death and adversity might be a balm to others facing the same struggles. My faith could inspire others to find the healing they are seeking.

PROLOGUE

This book is the story of some of the most significant moments in my life and my attempt to understand them so that I can live a life of purpose and meaning. My experiences are not unique, and I hope that you see yourself and your stories in mine. I also hope that after reading my story you will have a new perspective, especially of the dark and painful moments we all face, and that you start to see angels, even in the shadow of death.

1

Facing Death

MY EARLIEST MEMORY OF pondering the meaning of my life and my eventual death was in 1990 when I was watching a television program about the life of Ryan White, a young boy who contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. During the program, people spoke about how brave and courageous he was, even though he was so young. It resonated deeply with me since he was only a few years older than me at the time, and I wondered what I should do with my life and how I would be remembered after I died. I thought about how I could make a positive impact on the world. Ryan's short life seemed like such a senseless loss that I began thinking in earnest about a career in scientific research. If I could find a cure for a disease, I could eliminate premature death and senseless suffering and then, surely, my life would have meant something. While Ryan White's life and premature death sparked something inside of me, he was still a distant character in my mind. It was not until the first time I was confronted with the death of a peer that my life truly began to change.

Typically, high school and adolescence is a time to learn who you are, what you like, and what you are good at. It is a time of self-discovery, and many teenagers begin to think about their lives in grand terms, such as finding an answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life and my life?" Confronting death sharpens that question, and while some may run and hide from the pain that death inflicts, others use it as a source of wisdom. It was during my sophomore year in high school that I first confronted the death of a peer. I started Hopkins High School, a small New

England prep school, as a ninth grader in 1991. I knew a few kids at the high school, but it was a big transition from my Jewish day school, Ezra Academy. My eighth grade graduating class had sixteen students, the largest graduating class in the school's history. Although Hopkins was also a small private school, going from sixteen students in a grade to one hundred was a difficult transition. But that paled in comparison to the transition of going from an all-Jewish school to a secular school where I would now be attending classes with non-Jews. I had a few non-Jewish friends from my neighborhood, but they were more like acquaintances. My life, up until that time, was mostly lived in a Jewish bubble. There were still plenty of Jews at Hopkins, but Judaism or being Jewish was not part of the ethos of the school. The transition took time, and most of my classmates were nice; it was all about finding the clique to which you belonged.

There was a pretty girl in my grade, actually there were a lot of pretty girls in my grade, but there was a particular pretty blond girl I noticed named Aracy Belcher. She was not only pretty but also smart and a good athlete. Her wide smile was infectious. I did not have the courage to talk to her outside of asking for help with homework, but even if I would have had the courage, it probably would not have mattered much. She already had a lot of friends and even an upperclassmen boyfriend. Aracy and I had a few classes together, and she was friendly and unpretentious, not snobby like some other kids. And she was definitely gentile; her mother was a minister.

In the middle of freshman year, Aracy got sick with cancer. She would be in and out of school. I didn't think about it too much at first. I was not a close friend of hers. While we had some classes together, we did not run in the same circles. But as sophomore year began, and she just couldn't get well, it started to linger more in my mind.

Thank God I had received a good Jewish education at my Jewish day school, because I got it in my head that I needed to be doing a *mitzvah* for her; I needed to be doing *bikkur cholim*, the religious obligation to visit the sick. She was getting treatment at Yale New Haven Hospital, which was not too far from my house, so I asked my parents to drive me to see her. My dad took me on a Sunday. We got to the waiting room and met her parents, Bob and Sandy. Aracy wasn't feeling well that day, so she was not taking visitors. Instead my father and I chatted with her parents for a little while and went home. I felt incomplete. *Bikkur cholim* does not count if you just tried to see the person—you have to actually visit them.

In the Talmud (Tractate Nedarim 39b) Rabbi Abba teaches that if you visit the sick, you actually take away a sixtieth of their illness or pain. While he may have been speaking metaphorically or spiritually, some of his Rabbinic colleagues take him at his word and challenge him by saying that if he is correct, then if sixty people visit someone, that person will be healed. Rising to his own defense Rabbi Abba explains that the healing is real, but that each person removes a sixtieth of the remaining illness, so while the person may never be completely healed, each visitor does bring about some amount of healing. Whether as reality or as metaphor, at the end of the day, Rabbi Abba's point still holds true. Visiting the sick makes them better, either by bringing them physical healing or by making them feel better emotionally. And while it is not proven by science, we know anecdotally, that people who feel better, who have a better and more optimistic outlook on life, recover better and heal faster than those who are depressed and pessimistic.

I asked my dad to take me to visit Aracy again the following Saturday, which he did. Again, Aracy was not feeling well, so she was not taking visitors aside from family and a few close friends, and besides, she was on a ventilator and could not talk. When her parents saw me again, they felt bad that I had come twice now and that I could not see her, so they suggested that I write her a note, which they would take to her.

God bless sixteen-year-old boys; they think they are invincible. At that moment, I was feeling not only invincible but also like I was on cloud nine. There was another girl at school, a senior, on whom I had a huge crush, and I had finally gotten up the courage to talk to her. We went on a "date" where we attended a school performance together, we talked and simply had a pleasant evening together. It made me feel like I could do anything. So, in an act of sheer *chutzpah*, I wrote to Aracy that I felt so sorry that she has been suffering and that if I could trade places with her, I would. I was so blissfully ignorant of what she was going through that I had no idea what I was writing. I just figured this poor girl had been fighting so hard for over a year that she must be exhausted. While I, on the other hand, was in great shape physically, and I had just gone on a date with my dream girl, so nothing could ever hurt me. I figured, give me that cancer, I would destroy it. Thank God for ignorance. I handed the note over to her parents to deliver. Her parents told me that it moved her deeply. She wrote to them on her notepad, "I want to see him, but tomorrow." Aracy's mother explained to

me that she was just too exhausted right now for a visit, but if I came back the next day, no matter how bad she was feeling, Aracy would see me.

The following day was busy, and I did not get my homework done in a timely manner. Sunday afternoon rolled around, and I thought about seeing Aracy again, but I needed to get my homework done. I would see her the next weekend, I figured.

On Monday morning, the teacher's face was ashen when I got to homeroom. She had sad news to tell us: Aracy died the day before.

My heart broke into so many pieces it still has not been put back together completely. I felt that I had killed her. I imagined her lying there all day, waiting for me to come, waiting for me to take away her cancer, waiting for me to trade places with her. And Sunday came and went, and I wasn't there. I imagined she was so disappointed, so tired of fighting, that she just could not do it anymore. I have never felt guiltier in my life.

The rest of the day I walked around in a fog. The one thing I remember was taking my shoes off. I knew that Jews do not wear shoes when they are in mourning, and I was definitely in mourning. The school had a problem with students not wearing their shoes the previous months, and teachers were cracking down on this issue. Many teachers told me to put my shoes on, but I refused. I explained that this is how a Jew mourns. I must have sounded crazy, but I imagine that the pain in my eyes let them know that I was serious, and they left me alone. I spent the whole day walking around campus without shoes. That afternoon the girls' softball team had an away game. I was the manager of the team, so I accompanied them. I spent the entire game on the bench, sitting there without my shoes. Wearing shoes is such a normal thing that we rarely think about it, but when we go through our normal activities barefoot, we pay attention to every step that we take. We feel every pebble and unevenness in the ground.

The Rabbis in the Talmud derived the tradition of a mourner not wearing shoes from a verse in the Book of Ezekiel. God tells Ezekiel that something bad will happen to him in the near future, but he does not want Ezekiel to react in the typical fashion, that is, to mourn. And since God specifically mentions that Ezekiel must wear shoes so as not to mourn, we can deduce, as the Rabbis in the Talmud do, that a Jew in mourning does not wear shoes. This is clearly an ancient tradition, at least two thousand years old, but why is there such a practice? It is unclear, but there are at least two possibilities. The first is that by removing our shoes we are disconnecting from our typical physical needs, similar to Yom Kippur, in order to focus