

Yom Kippur 5776

September 23, 2015

“Today is the end of sheloshim for my beloved husband.” That is the way Sheryl Sandberg began her facebook post a few months ago. As I’m sure many of you know, Sheryl Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. She is also the author of *Lean In*, a book on balancing a high powered career and family obligations that has inspired women around the world. Until May, she was also one half of a Silicon Valley power couple. Her husband Dave Goldberg was the CEO of SurveyMonkey. Then the unthinkable happened. During a family vacation in Mexico, her 47 year old husband died after hitting his head while exercising in a hotel gym. This made headlines around the world. Then Sandberg continued to teach all of us. She wrote an extended facebook post about her loss at the end of the 30 days of ritual mourning. Her words are powerful, and I want to share them somewhat

extensively as I speak this morning, though I urge you to read it in its entirety.

After explaining – accurately – about shiva and sheloshim, Sandberg says:

A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I would have never understood that prayer before losing [Dave](#). Now I do.

“Let me not die while I am still alive.” Tragedy and death and difficult situations have such potential to kill us even while we still breathe.

Today’s Torah reading began

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיָּמָתוּ

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the LORD.¹

¹ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Le 16:1). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Its context is the sudden death of Aaron's two older sons Nadav and Avihu, at the joyous occasion on which they are being ordained as kohanim, when they are consumed by the divine fire while making a sacrifice. The Talmud says that the fire consumed their souls but left their bodies intact. The Etz Hayyim Humash suggests that "their fate was to suffer a spiritual death in their lifetime. ...it sees them as no longer feeling reverence or holiness in carrying out their sacred tasks. They were emotionally burned out..."

This could describe any one of us after a devastating event, going through the motions while not really feeling much of anything. How do we avoid doing that forever? What comes after the death, after the tragedy? How do we respond? To a large extent we confront that question about the year ahead when we come to Yizkor on Yom Kippur. Sheryl Sandberg writes:

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to

find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well. But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning.

I don't know whether she realizes it, but her words here echo an important section from the Torah reading 2 weeks ago:

קִעֲדֹתַי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֹת נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה
וּבַחֲרָתְךָ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּבְחַרְךָ אֶתְּךָ וְזָרַעְךָ:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

I always thought this was a fairly simple statement about choosing good over evil. But now I see it as saying: choose life even when in the midst of death and curse. It is not life or death, blessing or curse, but seeing life and blessing after the curse and death which is so often the lot of humanity.

One way Sandberg tries to choose life in her post is by finding meaning in her husband's death by reflecting on all the friends and family who have been so supportive, and who have helped pull her through by recounting their own experiences with grief, and she wants to pay that forward. She writes:

I have lived thirty years in these thirty days. I am thirty years sadder. I feel like I am thirty years wiser.... I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need. I think I got this all wrong before; I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer. A friend of mine with late-stage cancer told me that the worst thing people could say to him was "It is going to be okay." That voice in his head would scream, How do you know it is going to be okay? Do you not understand that I might die? I learned this past month what he was trying to teach me. Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not. When people say to me, "You and your children will find happiness

again,” my heart tells me, Yes, I believe that, but I know I will never feel pure joy again. Those who have said, “You will find a new normal, but it will never be as good” comfort me more because they know and speak the truth. Even a simple “How are you?”—almost always asked with the best of intentions—is better replaced with “How are you today?” When I am asked “How are you?” I stop myself from shouting, My husband died a month ago, how do you think I am? When I hear “How are you today?” I realize the person knows that the best I can do right now is to get through each day.

And she - known for being the epitome of balancing high-powered career and family -- emphasizes that no one has to be superman. In her words:

I have learned to ask for help—and I have learned how much help I need. Until now, I have been the older sister, the COO, the doer and the planner. I did not plan this, and when it happened, I was not capable of doing much of anything. Those closest to me took

over. They planned. They arranged. They told me where to sit and reminded me to eat. They are still doing so much to support me and my children.

And she talks about the importance of being thankful:

I have learned gratitude. Real gratitude for the things I took for granted before—like life. As heartbroken as I am, I look at my children each day and rejoice that they are alive. I appreciate every smile, every hug. I no longer take each day for granted. When a friend told me that he hates birthdays and so he was not celebrating his, I looked at him and said through tears, “Celebrate your birthday, goddammit. You are lucky to have each one.” My next birthday will be depressing as hell, but I am determined to celebrate it in my heart more than I have ever celebrated a birthday before.

It strikes me that a perfectly natural reaction to tremendous grief is to do exactly the opposite. To rail at God and at the unfairness of it all. And certainly I would tell anyone I am counseling they have the right to do

that, to say, “Why me?” But there is also the truth that when we understand, as Sandberg says, “that the rug can be pulled out from under us at any moment,” that we can begin to really live.

At the end of her post, Sandberg says:

I was talking to [a friend] about a father-child activity that Dave is not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in for Dave. I cried to him, “But I want Dave. I want option A.” He put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let’s just kick the... out of option B.”

Dave, to honor your memory and raise your children as they deserve to be raised, I promise to do all I can to kick the... out of option B. And even though sheloshim has ended, I still mourn for option A. I will always mourn for option A... I love you, Dave.

God forbid any of us should go through what Sandberg did, and I say that knowing how many of us have. But even so, let us not die while we are still alive.

As we say Yizkor now, we know that life is often a series of options. Let us be willing to lean on friends and family, teach others about empathy by sharing our experiences, and always, always kick the ... out of option b. May the memory of Dave Goldberg, and all of our loved ones, be a blessing.