

Family and the holidays

Making the most of it



THE DOCTOR IS IN
DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

What a month it has been. After years of COVID wreaking havoc with our plans, some tears and far too much paperwork, all of our children and their children were finally able to be reunited under the same roof.

If we have learned nothing else in these crazy times, it should be to take nothing for granted and to work hard to find a way to deeply appreciate each silver lining in our lives.

As we head into the High Holy Days, with the message of the “*Unetaneh Tokef*” prayer as a stark reminder of what has been and what may be, it behooves each of us to sit up, once again, taking notice for ourselves and for those we love.

So, between family meals and trips to the beach and park, we asked our children to meet with us and our lawyer to go over the enduring-power-of-attorney paperwork, so that they might act on our behalf and manage our affairs, should one or both of us become incompetent to make decisions regarding our future. We wanted our children to be involved and formally know what our wishes were.

We had started this process before COVID, but were only now finally able to formalize the document in the presence of the entire family.

Children, regardless of age, don't necessarily want to hear this or acknowledge that there may be a time when their parents may not “be with them” as they are now.

Brought up in a “plan for the worst and hope for the best” environment, our kids were, however, very much on board, and it was helpful for us to hear their thoughts on how they envisioned us living, see how they think situations through, and observe how our values have been transmitted to the next generation.

Far from being morbid, it felt liberating to put various scenarios out there for discussion, and then acknowledge that we were putting these documents away with our wills and lists of important contact information that will lighten their load hopefully many years from now. Life can feel even more burdensome when, after a tremendous illness or loss, you are also faced with many legal issues that you hadn't anticipated.

TODAY, VIEWING some of the physical clutter in our apartment, I am reminded that I would be doing them a great favor also if I also “thinned out the stuff.”

While I personally have fond memories of certain things, few other family members want what we love. They have enough “stuff” of their own.

So, it was with a gleam in my eye that I explored our dreidel collection with our three-year-old granddaughter, watching her enjoy giving each a spin, and laughed with her as her great-grandmother's miniature Limoges chairs, tables and other props became incorporated into her dad's 35-year-old Fisher-Price dollhouse. I wondered if I played that way with my own children, or, sadly, at the time was I too busy with other things that I thought were more important?

Sometimes, too, it takes the precious questions of a tot to remind you of what's really important in your life and how you want to be spending your time.



WE WANTED our children to be involved and formally know what our wishes were. (Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash)

Since these activities were just some of the wonderful memories I had hoped to help create for her and her little cousins, I recognized that some of the things I have kept serve an educative function for that generation, and this in itself is important. Our grandchildren are delighted to see their little art projects displayed on our refrigerator, simultaneously relieving their parents of the need to dispose of them.

We do the 10-minute clean up together at the end of the day so even the youngest grandchild gets to help out.

For some reason, with all 12 of us finally together, with four children under the age of five, we seemed to think it was a perfect idea to do a family photo shoot at 7:30 in the morning in the forest. By the end of it, when the only person still smiling was the photographer, it was a poignant reminder to enjoy each and every minute as it is happening now, because none of us really knows what our future holds.

Our real gift was not the physical photographs to put on the wall, but, rather, the snippets of life and the creation of family memories we got to enjoy just being all together across the generations for the first time in far too long: seeing our children as adults enjoying their siblings and watching how each parents, seeing the cousins meeting for the first time that they remember and finding a way to play together as they develop a common language.

Here are just some of the takeaways that I'd like to pass on, as we move into this contemplative time of year.

- Put your life in order. Decide what you think is important, imagine the life that you want, and create whatever plan is necessary in order to make it happen.
- Find the beauty in everyday simplicity and the happiness in the small things. You don't have to go far to find them, but you do have to notice them.
- Find your own source of strength and nurture it as you face life's challenges.
- Know who are the people who love you and give you comfort. Remind yourself that you have chosen to have these people in your life. Let them know just how and why they are so important to you, how they've helped you grow and why you love and appreciate them as much as you do.
- If there are people whom you would like to have on

this list but are missing, find a way to create a safe space and bring them back. Even if it's not ideal, it may be the only opportunity you'll have. Let them know how important they are to you. Life is short, time is passing, and you may not have another chance.

- Write down your wish list of what you would like to see in place as you age, and discuss it with those who may have a role to play in your care.

- Ask yourself what values you hope to transmit to your children and what you want them to know, in order to help prepare them for their future. If your children are present-focused, struggling to get through their day, what messages of hope can you offer? Ask them how you can help and be there for them.

- If we are indeed locked down again, what can you do to help provide others with stability and a calm and supportive routine? What life lessons can you offer to let them know they'll be okay, and what strength can you show them when you, too, may feel depleted of energy or unmotivated by challenges that feel as if they have gone on far too long?

- Count each of your blessings and then count them all over again with gratitude for each one.

- Look at how you spend your time and with whom, and, as difficult as it may be, what positive messages can you relate to, which will be helpful today. What do you value as you head into the New Year? Can you revisit your relationships with others, note the changes you have made for yourself, and see this time as an opportunity for growth and a chance to do things differently?

THE MESSAGES of the holiday are perhaps more poignant than ever before, and it is up to each one of us to make them what we want them to be for ourselves, our family and our community.

We can only hope that the lessons we have learned from the pandemic have enhanced our self-awareness and enabled us each to begin to make life changes that will give us greater clarity in helping us grow and honor the person we would like to be.

While it is so easy to blame what was for what now is, it is time, too, to focus on the tremendous outpouring of caring, compassion and help that we each have received.

We have been given the opportunity to work on relationships with those we deeply care about, judge people more favorably, find meaning in the small things around us that may have gone unnoticed, learn what it is that we actually value, offer forgiveness to those we have struggled with in order to let go of past issues that we cannot change and now perhaps hold less significance, explore our own mortality, and begin to heal after so many deaths and non-death losses.

As you reflect on the upcoming holidays, perhaps now is the right time not to reemphasize what you “must” or “have to” do, but, rather, to celebrate all that you “can” do or “have the opportunity to do” together.

By taking the initiative and accepting this challenge, by being more aware of, reaching out toward, and taking care of, those around you, hopefully you will grow and be strengthened.

I wish you and your family a holiday filled with tremendous meaning, all that you would like it to be, and a year ahead of much good health. ■

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana, and author of Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts. She has written about psychology in The Jerusalem Post since 2000. ludman@netvision.net.il, www.drbatyaludman.com