

WHAT DO you treasure in life?
(Nir Elias/Reuters)



Shrouds don't have pockets

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

For many years I was part of the *hevra kadisha* (ritual burial society) in a small community, where I helped prepare the deceased for burial.

Jewish burial, from beginning to end, is characterized by giving respect and dignity to the deceased. Asking forgiveness from the deceased, for anything that may have been done in the preparation process or in our relationship with them in general, is both life affirming and changing.

Leaving the funeral home late at night, I would return to my family and sit by my children's beds, filled with deep love for each of them and tremendous appreciation for what I had. Watching them sleep, breathing so peacefully, was such a contrast to what I'd just witnessed and I became aware of what the dying and deceased can teach us in life.

The amazing *hevra kadisha* members who washed and prepared their community members for burial were not women you'd necessarily assume would take on this role. While some were medical professionals, most weren't. Each provided such a lesson in humility. Some arrived dressed to the nines, others were high-profile judges and businesswomen, but in the room together, in our white aprons, we were all the same.

We were equally humbled by those before us, all dressed the same in their final hours before burial, yet each very much an individual. I learned that the inner being of who we really are can at times be lost or hidden by outward appearances, but it is important to bear in mind that who we are and how we are perceived and remembered by others is evident through what is eternal: our actions.

Shrouds have no pockets. We pass through this world as mere visitors, leaving behind our material wealth, and taking nothing with us as we exit. Nonetheless, we have the ability to leave behind so much more. Who we are, and all that we are, is reflected in the deeds and values we leave behind for our loved ones.

A shroud is a simple garment and one size fits all, even though there are giants among us. What distinguishes one person from another in death is who they were in life. The way in which you live will influence the way in which you live on after you die. In my work in the area of bereavement and loss, I have worked with so many who do not fear death. Living is much

more difficult, and most of us have work to do on ourselves, before we move on.

What values do you consider important enough to pass on to your children and grandchildren and how do you ensure that those values get transmitted? If you were posting your final selfie and writing your own eulogy, how would you choose to be remembered, and are you indeed that person? Would your loved ones ascribe these same attributes to you?

As you reflect upon your life and do your personal soul-searching, here are some questions to ponder:

- Do you celebrate life, appreciate all that you have and live each day to the fullest and as if it were your last day? If not, what gets in the way? How you use your time offers a valuable lesson to others. Do you make the time to do what you really want to be doing or is time spent doing the things you feel you must do?

- Do you treasure the uniqueness of each of your children and let them know just how and why they are so special in your eyes? I know many busy grandparents who let their grandchildren know that the time they spend together is precious. One couple takes each grandchild out for his own birthday celebration, enabling them to be king or queen for the day. Are you happy with the amount of time and energy you invest in each of your children? Are you there for them – truly present – and do you provide them with a safe place for them to question, learn, and grow? If not, what would you choose to change?

- A happy life has meaning. What has enriched your life and given you meaning and purpose? Do your loved ones know? What values help define who you are and how you are fulfilled? In what ways have you preserved the past and built for the future? What impact will you have on the next generation? How have you made the world a better place?

- What challenges have you faced? How have you dealt with them? How do you work on improving yourself? What has helped you to grow? Have you taught your family that one simple act could change the world? Have you taught them the importance of kindness, or forgiveness?

- In what ways do they see you respect your body and nourish your soul? Do you exercise, eat right, sleep, pray, meditate, and strive to achieve balance in your life? How do you continue to develop your mind? Do you study, read, take classes?

- Children learn from your behavior. If they were to emulate your actions, would you be proud of all that

they do? How have you treated your own parents? In what ways are you compassionate, generous and giving with your time or financially? Would you change anything about yourself? Are you always a nice person? Do you for instance, open your heart, hand and house to the stranger, speak with respect to others, and apologize when you're wrong? Have you taught them that you are human and it is okay to make mistakes?

- Do you provide consistent and loving parenting and grandparenting? Have you taught your children how to behave, set appropriate limits and made sure to praise them frequently for things both big and small? Do they have your full attention or must they share you and your time with your love for your smartphone?

- Do your actions reflect your values? Do you focus on what is important or on the small things that don't really matter? Will they remember the good times you had together or merely your yelling at them to clean their room? Do they accompany you to visit the sick or just to the mall? Do you make time to laugh at silly things or take life too seriously?

- Life is full of miracles both large and small. What miracles have you experienced in your everyday life and have you passed on to others the wonderment and excitement these hold?

- How do you handle anger? Are you aggressive or patient and calm? Are you passionate about life or bitter and resentful? What tools have you provided your loved ones to cope with life's challenges when the unexpected happens and things don't go their way?

- Is your home a refuge and welcoming safe haven from the outside world? Is it warm, loving and free of criticism? What memories, rituals and aromas are cherished and have filled your house with joy? How have sad memories been handled?

- What messages have you passed on through the generations? Are they sufficient?

I've addressed a mere sampling of what you leave behind for others. If you were to go back and eulogize yourself again, what might you now want to work on? I encourage you to take on these challenges so that you can be the person you want to be.

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