

Ride On, Michael, Ride On

It was a little yellow bus or maybe it was just a large van; my memory has faded over the decades. Having just moved to Teaneck, NJ, from Long Island, I was the new kid on the bus to the Ramah Day Camp in Nyack, NY and desperately wanted to fit in.



When some of the other fourth grade boys started playing with another boy's Yankees cap, I joined in.

Then suddenly there was an errant throw and the hat went sailing out an open window. I still remember that moment, the Yankees' hat flying out of the bus in slow motion. The terrible feeling in my stomach: guilt and shame.



The other boys and I all felt terrible and our parents connected by phone as we made our apologies, expressed our *Teshuvah* to the boy whose hat was tossed.

Out of that experience, two things emerged for me: a life-long antipathy towards the Yankees and a life-long friendship with one of those other fourth graders: Michael Ross who died just before *Rosh Hashanah* at the far-too-young age of 48.

In the years that followed, the Rosses joined my father's *shul* in the next town and Michael and I would often walk to *shul* together. Since it was two and a half miles each way, we had plenty of time to talk.

He was an only child and, although we had different interests, we developed a closeness, becoming the brothers that neither of us ever had.

Michael loved to make people laugh – he would say something and then smile widely. That continued throughout his life. His wide grin that almost broke into laughter expressed an exuberance that anyone around him could relate to.

If I close my eyes, I can still see Michael, telling me a joke, most probably an inappropriate one, his smile – waiting for me to share in his joy.

Havei mekabeil et kol adam b'seveir panim yafot – greet each person with a pleasant countenance, a smile, Shammai teaches in *Pirkei Avot*.

And Michael did that.

Michael loved to take the feeling he was having and share it. He wanted to bring everyone into that very moment.

Michael was involved in many things from music to magic. I'll never forget when he told me the story of how he performed a card trick for the comedian Eddie Murphy at a restaurant and Eddie gave him a \$100 bill as a tip.

He was beaming.

As we got older, we shared many special times including our *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations, which were a couple of weeks apart and then, as teens, we both got into cycling.

We would take long rides on Sundays at first with Michael's dad, Bob, may his memory be for a blessing. We would ride up from Teaneck, up Route 9W, to Piermont, right on the Hudson.

Then once we were old enough to ride on our own, we felt like grown-ups, loving the freedom. We would enjoy the scenic views, eat our lunches, and then ride home.

In college, Michael really got into cycling. I'll always remember him: encouraging me to race with him at West Point; his consoling me since I could not finish the race as the leaders were about to pass me around the course! His excitement when he told me about his fiancée, Wendy; standing up for each other's weddings where my dad officiated; the look of happiness on his face as Wendy walked down the aisle.

We were lucky to spend two years overlapping in Boston – our children were little and Sharon, Wendy and our kids all shared sweet moments together and he and I got in a number of fun rides.

Five years ago, Michael called me from the hospital. Even though he was sick, he sounded excited.

"I have good news and bad news."

"OK, start with the bad news."

“Well, I am in the hospital with GI problems and probably cannot ride the Israel Ride with you.”

“That stinks. What’s the good news?”

“Well, I think I have Crohn’s like you.”

“That’s the good news?!?”

At first, Michael was misdiagnosed with Crohn’s and he thought that we would get to share in something else.

How I wish it had been only Crohn’s....

The real diagnosis was much, much worse.

Stage 4 Colon Cancer with a five year survival rate in the low single digits.

But Michael did not give up.

He rallied. His family rallied. His synagogue community rallied. His colleagues rallied. His semicolon supporters rallied.



Get it – he had his colon removed so he liked the humor of the semicolon.

He pushed and made it just past five years. Over these years, he seized each day, made it to his sons' *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations. We got in some amazing rides on the Schuylkill Bike Path. He competed in an awesome triathlon in



Hawaii. He bought a motorcycle and learned to ride it; he bought a sewing machine and learned to sew hats; he learned to play the ukelele – there was no challenge he was afraid to take on.

[He saw Wendy become a CNN hero](#) – an incredible honor for an incredible person.

And three years ago, the two of us spent the most amazing [10 days in Israel](#) riding from Jerusalem to Eilat with 18



Emunah-ites. While he was battling cancer at that time, he was undeterred, riding harder and faster than everyone in our entire ride including the hired cyclist guides who kept asking him to slow down.

We roomed together and shared an amazing Shabbat in Mitzpe Ramon, and a fabulous finish right into the Red Sea. We were like two kids in an Israeli cycling candy store. Every day a feast of fun!



I am so grateful that our group got to know him better, although they enjoyed Michael telling embarrassing stories about me maybe a little bit too much!

The climbs were intense and the descents serious – and the double pace-line through the desert was really fun. Michael loved it.



I was recovering from surgery at the time so Michael was always encouraging me – telling me that I could complete the 70-, 80- or 90-mile ride each day.

He kept telling me, “Ride on, David. Ride on.”

* * *

Over the years, I have been with many people at the end of their lives. I have sat in hospitals, homes and hospices with them and their families. I have cried tears of loss, shared stories and memories and sung the *Shema* as life waned, but even with all those experiences, I was not prepared to lose someone that I loved so much.

There really is nothing that can prepare you for that.

In the words of the American poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay:
“childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.”

Watching Michael suffer and endure pain after pain, has been excruciating. I have seen others in pain, but visiting with him and watching his daily ordeal as the cancer shut down his body was quite challenging. I have a new-found appreciation for doctors, nurses, and care-givers who care for others daily in the most difficult circumstances with love and compassion and respect for the one who is ill.

When I went to visit over the last month, I mostly just sat with Michael. A reminder that when we visit the sick – perform the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* or comforting the bereaved – the *mitzvah* of *nihum aveilim*, we

are invited to be a supportive presence. Words are often extraneous – as the love we wish to transmit can often be felt with our embrace, our expressions, our body language – mostly just our presence.

Over these last few years, Michael and I grew closer. Our awareness of the impermanence of life created the space for our friendship to deepen; there was more intimacy and connection.

* * *

His death and funeral on the day before *Rosh Hashanah* in Philadelphia has left me reeling, feeling unsettled and confused – a bit lost during this most intense time of the year.

The tradition calls the time after death until the burial: *aninut*. The word *aninut* is related to the notion of being under pressure. And you can feel it – suddenly, everything has been turned on its head.

You are disoriented and unsettled.

On top of that, you must focus on details – plan a funeral and burial. Our tradition was aware of how challenging this was and amazingly, they

exempted people from some positive commandments like prayer and putting on *tefillin*.

I could feel that shock the moment Wendy called me. I knew it was coming, but when it was here, I was bereft, filled with fresh tears.

Losing a close friend who was like a brother, but not actually one has been confusing.

What does one do?

I have taken on the *mitzvah* of helping his family say *Kaddish* for him for the next eleven months. And I have appreciated all the love and support I have received from this amazing community. Your notes and messages have been so helpful.

Thank you. Our *shul* is such a supportive community and I am so grateful to be a part of it.

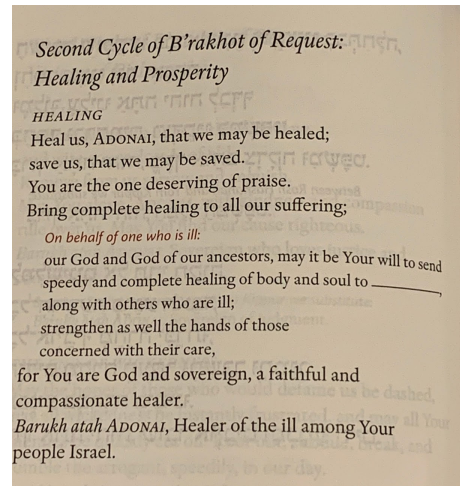
Over the last week, I have stood in our *minyan* and at home, staring at the words of the *Amidah* where we pray for healing. For five years, I have recited and inserted Michael's name in the blank space, desperately lifting him up, as he needed the help so badly. Now, the blank space where

his name used to go just stares back at me – a feeling of emptiness and absence washing over me.

His death has left a gaping hole – as death often does. We used to speak on many Mondays (my day off) and I found myself instinctively calling him on Monday.

I went on a bike ride with Matan last week and put on arm warmers Michael had given me – the tears returned.

I have looked through pictures and spoken to Wendy. The absurdity of death – of speaking and being with someone in one moment and then, the shocking reality that they are gone



forever – hangs around us. The shell of the deceased's body reminding us that it is not their essence.

I am pulled to the text from the *Zohar*, the great mystical text of the 13th century, that imagines our lives like a garment.

“Come and see: When those days draw near the Holy King, if the person departing from the world is virtuous, he ascends and enters those days which become garments of glory in which his soul is arrayed.”

I imagine Michael wrapped in biking jerseys filled with photos of his life and his deeds....



* * *

Over the last month when I came down to visit, we mostly watched TV – standup comedy, cooking shows, which was ironic because he could not eat due to a GI blockage, and home improvement shows. It was during an episode of “Love It or List It,” that he suddenly turned to me and said that he needed to write letters to his family, to leave them with a legacy.



That tradition is a strong one in our tradition. Think back to the end of the book of *B'reisheet*/Genesis, as Jacob approaches the end of his life.

“And when the time came for Israel [Jacob] to die, he summoned his son, Joseph and said to him, ‘Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place.’

He replied ‘I will do as you have spoken.’”

At the end of life, it is helpful to discuss funeral and burial plans. Michael said to us that he wanted a procession of special Ural motorcycles with sidecars (the kind that he rode) at his funeral so they were there to bring him a fairly unique personal tribute.



Sometimes it is difficult to talk about one's death and their wishes, but I have found it helpful both for the one who is dying and for the survivors.

One of the most valuable practices is to write an ethical will or a forever letter. This practice originates in the Torah where we see both Jacob and Moshe offer guidance at the end of their lives. In the middle ages, these became letters with explicit instructions and advice about how to live one's life.

One of the first ones that exists today was written by Eleazar of Worms in the middle of the 11th century. He writes: "Think not of evil, for evil thinking leads to evil doing.... Purify thy body, the dwelling-place of thy

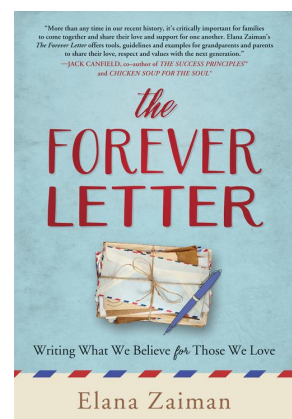
soul.... Give of all thy food a portion to God. Let God's portion be the best, and give it to the poor.”

A century later, Judah the son of Saul ibn Tibbon, the translator, writes an ethical will focused on books and learning: “Avoid bad society, make thy books thy companions, let thy book-cases and shelves be thy gardens and pleasure-grounds. Pluck the fruit that grows therein, gather the roses, the spices, and the myrrh. If thy soul be satiate[d] and weary, change from garden to garden, from furrow to furrow, from sight to sight. Then will thy desire renew itself, and thy soul be satisfied with delight.”

Nahmanides called his ethical will “Ways of Life,” with some 132 instructions including: “Do not obey the Law for reward, nor avoid sin from fear of punishment, but serve God from love.”

These letters are not legal wills that distribute assets, but are spiritual documents that contain one’s life lessons.

As Rabbi Elana Zaiman writes in her book on this topic, *The Forever Letter*, writing these letters can help us “communicate our ultimate truth, the truth that resides



deep within us, and that we are able to more fully comprehend toward the end of our lives as we begin to reflect on the whole of our lives.” (p. 46)

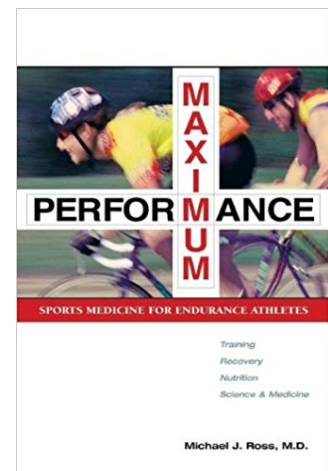
I asked Michael what he wanted to say – what did he want his legacy to be.

Here are some of his ideas:

First, how important it is to do what you love for work and in your free time; to pursue your passions in life. He certainly modeled that in his work as a Sports Medicine Doctor and his multiple hobbies that he pursued with unbridled enthusiasm.

Second, how we should live with integrity and caring – Michael brought that to others and they reciprocated to him.

Third, carpe diem – Michael seized each day. He focused on the present – on what he could deal with in the moment.





* * *

It's really hard to face one's own death – especially if you are only 48 and you, and your wife, and two teenage sons are being short-changed so terribly.

It is hard to die.

It is scary and painful, but when we talk about it, when we plan for it, that journey can be a little easier and, sometimes, more meaningful.

Often, I receive phone calls from members of our community to talk about planning for one's death.

Sometimes, they are concerned: "will it really be alright to talk about my mother's death before she has actually died?"

"Yes, it is OK. If it is helpful to you, then it is more than OK. It's what we should do."

It can be extraordinarily helpful to the one who is dying, to the family. It can relieve stress and free up more space to talk about the feelings and the deeper issues.

Judaism understood that.

And had us plan for death.

Today on *Yom Kippur*, we delve deep into the awareness of our own mortality. We think about what is our ultimate truth and how we can live more closely to the vision of ourselves that we aspire to. This allows us to be more deliberate in our actions and reactions and create more space for each moment.

There is nothing we can do to change the fate of our loved ones and dear friends. Those that have left us, have left us. Their earthly existence has drawn to a close, but in the words of the poem we will recite during *Yizkor*, we remember them.

We remember them.



* * *

At the end of Moses' life at the end of the Torah, Moses knows that he will not enter the Promised Land and that the Israelites will have to go on without him. After so many years together – 40 years of journeying through the wilderness, the Israelites are faced with this terrible reality, that Moses will no longer be there for them. This is a new and painful realization: a future that does not include Moses.

Moses asks the people to take his teaching – his ethical will – his Torah and carry it forward. He charges Joshua, who will take the helm from him: *Hazak Ve'ematz* – be strong and resolute.

We say to those who survive us: “carry our wisdom into the future. Although we will not be with you, our physical presence will not be there, our soul and teaching will go forth with you.”

We must take them and they will sustain us into the future.

Just before the funeral, Wendy told me she had something to give me, it was a letter, a letter Michael had written to me.

I will treasure this letter forever.

* * *

On the morning before Michael died, Wendy called me to tell me that Michael had a better night's sleep. During that call, I suddenly remembered that I had not recited the *Viddui* – the final confession or prayer that one recites before death. This is one of our most intense practices – that we ask for forgiveness for all the times we did not act well, for all the times we could have acted better.

As we do on this day of Atonement, we experience a final atonement before death. The connection to this day of *Yom HaKippurim* is strong – today truly is both a reminder and a rehearsal for our own deaths.

If the one who is dying is able to recite the words, she or he should; but if that is no longer possible, another person recites it for them. I have recited this prayer with individuals and families numerous times and I realized I had not recited it for Michael over the last few weeks.

Wendy said, “Why don't you say it now?” And, I was about to, but then I realized that I had an appointment so I told her I would call her back.

An hour later, she called me, Michael had died.

While I tried to console Wendy, I lost it and broke down with loud sobs. And suddenly, I was overwhelmed with grief and guilt – I had not recited the *Viddui*! I could not believe it.

I told her that I had not said the prayer.

She understood that I needed this moment of closure. She said he had just stopped breathing and had not even been pronounced yet. Could we say it now?

She held his hand – from which life had just ebbed and I cried through the prayer. The ritual closes with the *Shema* and then the final lines of the *Adon Olam* – *b'yado afkid ruhi, b'eit ishan v'a'ira; v'im ruhi kivat, Adonai li v'lo ira* – into your hands, God, I place my soul. Soon, I will sleep and hopefully awaken, but if my life-force, my *ruah*, gives out, I will be with God, with Eternity and not be afraid.

My parents recited these words to me each night after the *Shema* as they put me to sleep when I was a child and I have said them with my children as I put them to bed.

They are the last words I recite every night.

They bring with them a deep sense of calm. Whatever happens to me, I know that I, on some cosmic level, am connected to past, present and future – to the spiritual essence of this universe. While I hope that I can still

enjoy more life in this wondrous world, if that is not the case, I know that my soul will be reunited with that Oneness, that sense of peace.

Wendy gave me that gift with Michael – to recite the *Viddui* for him.
She knew I needed that and for that, I will be forever grateful to her....

Leikh B'shalom, Michael – Go to God in peace, Michael.

Ride on, Michael, ride on.

