



## **YIZKOR 5780**

A sign found in France read: It is possible that on entering this place of worship, you may hear the Call of God. On the other hand, it is not likely that God will contact you by mobile, so thank you for turning off your phone.

If you would like to talk to God, choose a quiet place in the service, and let your heart or your head speak. God will hear.

But if you would like an immediate appointment with God, send a text while driving!

Of course we all need to find friendly and humorous ways to remind congregants to turn off their phones, but this message culminates by reminding us that life is precious – and fragile, and we all need to be sensible and responsible. We do not want to bring about sudden catastrophe and tragedy, which could affect us, our families and loved ones, and also completely innocent third parties, through an act of impatience and foolishness. A horrendous car accident is not a good way to bring a life to a close for anyone involved.

Not only do we have a new book since last Yom Kippur, but something else new and significant that has been introduced since last Yizkor is the assisted dying bill for the terminally ill. I will say again and immediately that of course there must be multiple and robust safeguards, and there are. I believe – and various people I have visited in hospitals believe, that this legislation is truly a blessing – and a sign of spiritual and psychological care catching up with the amazing medical services here in Victoria. Victorians should be proud that we have led the way, and other states, such as Western Australia and New South

Wales, will hopefully not be far behind. The writer Terry Pratchett, who was diagnosed with a form of Early Alzheimers in his fifties, writes powerfully and cogently about his strong feelings of being allowed to die in his own time, with his family and with dignity, and about his visit to Dignitas in Switzerland, where, he recalls, even a priest went to die when his time came.

Those who want to deny the choice should hear intelligent people they have known for many years, still in full control of their mental faculties, saying 'why am I still here – I've had enough – I'm in pain, the painkillers don't really work, can't you do anything? Why can't they just give me something?'. The deniers can choose for themselves, but they are not God and they should not claim to know God's will better than the next person. By all means let them suffer a painful and drawn out death if they wish, but let them not demand that others must also do so.

Anyway, at least for the terminally ill, this is now a fait accompli, and I hope that when people come to Yizkor over the coming years, they will be able increasingly to remember their loved ones having a good, peaceful and dignified death. Certainly, I think I've made it pretty clear that I would like the option, if the time came. And having said that, we know that being given the option does not mean people will always take it – it means they know they can if they choose to – it gives them back control of their life – and its ending.

Terry Pratchett also suggests that there has been a certain reserve or control in our times that was not there before, when doctors, nurses and others would be much more ready to help people out of their misery than more recently.

At any rate, there are two major phases in life – the time with the physical presence of our loved ones or friends – and the time after they have died, when we have to adjust to the world without them, when we have our

memories, our shared love and experiences, perhaps our children, to keep them alive in our hearts and minds. The transition from life to death, is, we hope, a short one and as comfortable as it can be, with the opportunity to say our tearful farewells. Such deaths are recorded in Torah, as when Sarah dies: Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old and died at Kiriath Arba (Hebron), in the land of Canaan, and Abraham mourned for Sarah and wept over her. Later, having taken a second wife and had a new family with six more sons, Abraham also dies: We are told that Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then he breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah. When Jacob finished summarising to his sons their strengths and weaknesses, and giving instructions about his burial, he drew his feet up on the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

Several of our much loved and respected founder or long-standing members have died in this past year, and it was certainly not God's punishment. In retrospect we might even consider it God's reward for lives well lived, sometimes despite the evils such as Hitler and Mengele tried to do to them. To see the warm, loving, supportive and appreciative families gathering round truly demonstrates what we talk about in each T'filah prayer - m'chayei metim – life beyond death. Death – as they knew and as we all know rationally if not emotionally, comes to us all. As we have just read: "if the existing generation were given the chance to live for ever, on the clear understanding that never again would there be a new baby or youth or first love, could our answer be in doubt?"

I think that Yizkor will prove to be one of the most powerful and appreciated services in our new books. The contemplative double page spread 394 and 5

are the most visually attractive pages in the book, and I hope that the prayers that follow them, tailored for the loved companion I have lost, for an infant or child, for suicide, for one who died by violence, and for one who died a sudden death, whilst they will undoubtedly reach places and touch wounds that other prayers cannot, will also help a little to slowly heal those deep wounds. One particular prayer, 'In memory of a parent who was hurtful' addresses a challenging situation where people are often conflicted in their feelings.

We know that sadly some people die too young. But we also know that most people live a pretty full and active lifespan, and regularly surpass the threescore years and ten and even the four score of the Psalm. We know that what matters is the content of our days, even though, if we are healthy in body and spirit, we yearn for many more of them as well. When we acknowledge the Aboriginal custodians of our land, we mention their elders, past, present and emerging, but perhaps we do not recognise our own elders sufficiently. A remarkable number of the elders of our own Leo Baeck Community have been awarded and acknowledged, or worked quietly behind the scenes over the years, but do we remember that – do we ask for help and guidance, hear their stories and use their experience? It seems to me we often only hear someone's life story when they die whereas we could celebrate it with them whilst they are alive. A lot of the work of our care group is inevitably with those who are older. As we age, we may gradually lose our hearing, our sight, our mobility, our independence. Our friends may move away or die. Often we become lonely. Indeed, we are an aging society and an aging community. So let's each ask ourselves if we do enough visiting and support to our aging relatives, or congregants? Even a short email or call can be appreciated.

One aspect of the journey from life to life everlasting which is very private is the Tahara – the loving and respectful washing and preparation of the body after death. Within our Progressive Jewish community in Melbourne we are blessed with a close-knit team of people who volunteer for the mitzvah of performing Tahara throughout the year. This group of volunteers is the Progressive Chevra Kadisha Victoria. Chevra Kadisha means holy group and indeed tending to the dead is considered to be the highest mitzvah, because no one can suggest you can expect anything from those you look after.

Those who have died are dressed in special white garments – indeed I am wearing mine through this powerful period as a reminder of how close each of us is to our own mortality. Women attend to women, and men to men.

Every team performing Tahara has highly experienced team leaders and all volunteers receive a comprehensive preparation, and on-going support is built into the program.

Tahara is an act of kindness which provides our volunteers with a deeper sense of belonging within our community and enables us to continue to carry out our meaningful traditions. Blessings and Psalms are read during the Tahara as the deceased are prepared for their last journey. People are often surprised at the sense of serenity and meditative peace even in this encounter with death.

The group is always looking for new volunteers, people like them, people like you and me, and if you might be interested, there are upcoming information and training sessions, or you can contact me over the coming days.

So, as we bring to the forefront of our minds and hearts our loved ones who have died, and contemplate our own life, and ultimately its end, let us

remember the various things we can do to help others around us - as we age,  
and pass from this life to whatever may be after it.