

In my late twenties, as I considered what career to devote myself to, I asked myself what I was most passionate about. The answer was easy: Israel. Zionism became a part of my life in my senior year of college and with each successive year, I grew more and more in love with the state of Israel.

So when I applied to rabbinical school at 29, my main motivation for becoming a rabbi was to support, promote, and defend Israel. Now that I am a pulpit rabbi, I look for opportunities to do that, and I always feel particularly close to congregants who share my passion for Zionism.

Nevertheless, what's become clear to be in my four years in the pulpit is that the rabbinate is much larger than Israel. Sure, Israel is still the centerpiece of my connection to the Jewish people, but if that were my sole connection, then I wouldn't be able to serve as a pulpit rabbi.

The piece that has become most pronounced in my rabbinate is my role as the gatekeeper between life and death. This is a role that I admit I didn't give enough attention to as I trained in rabbinical school. Yet what is abundantly clear is that overseeing the transition from life to death and managing the feelings of mourners when their loved ones cross this threshold is perhaps the most important thing I do.

As you may have noticed, since COVID began in mid-March, we've had a lot of funerals in the congregation. Most of these funerals have not been for congregants but for the relatives – usually parents – of congregants. Very few of these deaths have been directly caused by COVID, but given how much COVID alters our lives, I would argue that they are a kind of collateral damage caused by this vicious virus.

I have called congregants and when they pick up, they say to me, "I was expecting a recording" since so many dialers have gone out notifying the congregation of sad news.

This week's parsha matches up with its Haftorah in an interesting way that is related to death. Parshat Chayei Sarah opens with the death of Sarah, and Abraham, too, passes away during the parsha. The Haftorah details King David's end of life. The differences between the two are notable. The Eitz Chayim points out that the Torah states that Abraham died "old and contented" (25:8). In contrast, David "entered old age in the atmosphere of catastrophe" (142). A succession crisis was underway. David's commitment to Bathsheba that her son Solomon would succeed him was under assault as one of David's other sons, Adonijah, mounted a campaign to succeed his father.

The difference between how Abraham and David entered their final period before death got me thinking about how we prepare for death. Admittedly, this is not a pleasant topic. Those of us who think about death regularly probably do so because we're haunted by it, its inevitability, its unknowability. But think about death we must, at least occasionally, and this week's parsha and Haftorah present such an opportunity. What will the end of our life look like? Will it be more like Abraham's or more like David's. In other words, will our life approach a kind of closure, consummation, resolution; or will death's approach be like a storm – wild, uncontrollable, unresolved.

Abraham and David share many similarities. They were both charismatic leaders who enjoyed a close confidence with God. They both prepared the ground for a descendant who would play an equally significant role. They were also both warriors, though war played a much more central role in David's life than in Abraham's, and David's behavior in war was one of the reasons why the close of his life occurred in an atmosphere of catastrophe.

What we're really talking about, of course, when we discuss our deaths is our lives and how we live them. Very few things focus the mind quite like the day of death, which is one of the reasons most of us try not to think about it too often. One day, we will cease to exist. We will no longer be. What will become of us, we cannot be certain. That life has an end is precisely what makes the stakes of life so high. We have a finite time on this earth. We must act conscientiously because we're not going to be here forever.

How do we prepare for the day of death? How do we ensure that we die old and contented as Abraham did, rather than weary and frazzled as David did? So many factors play a role in which outcome arises. One key similarity between Abraham and David's ends of life stands out to me. At Abraham's burial, Isaac and Ishmael are both present. As David nears his death, Solomon and Adonijah must vie for the throne. In short, the relationships their children have to one another is a significant factor in making the difference in the experience of these two great Jewish figures.

The Torah instructs us to honor our mother and father, but it says nothing about how we should relate to our siblings. Anyone who is familiar with the book of Genesis will note that its preeminent theme is sibling relationships: Abel and Cain, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The book begins with an act of fratricide and Cain kills Abel, and it concludes with an act of reconciliation as Judah appeases Joseph and the sons of Jacob are reconciled to one another. Not incidentally is Israel led by a sibling trio – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

What we can learn from this is that the relations between siblings can be one of the most significant factors determining the atmosphere in which one dies. Will it be like Abraham's, in which Isaac and Ishmael are reconciled, or will it be like David's, in which Solomon and Adonijah vie for succession.

To make sure that the end of our lives is a period of contentedness, we have to do the work earlier on before time runs out. While we cannot force our children to get along with each other, we can reflect on our behavior, asking ourselves how it may estrange or connect our children from one another. As children, we can also do our part to make sure that our parents pass in a contented state, by taking seriously the relationships we have with our siblings and seeking peace always.

Death may be unknowable, but our actions can make the life that continues after our passing one that promotes our legacy rather than diminishes it.