

This afternoon's Torah portion included the mitzvah to

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ (Lev 19:18 WTT)

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” I reflected on this teaching after reading an article¹ by Dr. VJ Periyakoil, a geriatrics and palliative care doctor, who founded the Stanford Letter Project. She described a dying patient – a Marine combat veteran who was very stoic and very silent. His wife would visit him every day in the hospital and he would sit there and watch television. This patient shared with Dr. Periyakoil how much he regretted not spending more time with his wife and how proud he was of his son who had also become a Marine.

So the good doctor tries to share this information with the wife and son. They don't believe her. They said that she was very nice to say such things, but the man that they knew as husband and father was simply incapable of expressing such emotion. Dr. Periyakoil would not be deterred... the next day, she brought her family camcorder to the hospital room and with the patient's consent, had him record an open letter to his family expressing his feelings. It's something he never would have done himself. And it meant everything to his wife and son.

That encounter gave rise to the Stanford Letter Project². Whether seriously ill or not, Dr. Periyakoil, with the help of others, created a template for people to share their feelings with their loved ones. The process encourages anyone to acknowledge the important people in your life, remember treasured moments, apologize to those you love, forgive those who love you, express your gratitude for all the love and care you have received, tell your friends and family how much you love them, and for those nearing death, take a moment to say “goodbye.” For those who have a hard time expressing their love or their gratitude in person, this is an incredible blessing.

My father did something like this for me. He prepared a recording, understanding that his children were very young and may not fully comprehend his death. He included a special message for my mom and each of his children – sharing his appreciation and hopes for each one of us. I still have that tape as I was writing this, I was realizing that my daughters are probably old enough to appreciate it. I'll be sharing it with them soon. And it is a real blessing.

Jewish tradition has been doing something similar since Biblical times. Jacob gathers his family together to impart some final words. Moses gives a farewell address and King David makes sure that Solomon receives political, religious, and ethical instruction before he dies. This Biblical tradition gave rise to what has become known as ethical wills. Rabbi Jack Reimer explains that, “Parents would write a letter to their children in which they would try to sum up all that they had learned in life, and in which they would try to express what they wanted most for and from their children. They would leave these letters behind because they believed that the wisdom

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/well/family/writing-a-last-letter-before-you-get-sick.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&_r=0

² <http://med.stanford.edu/letter/friendsandfamily.html>

they had acquired was just as much a part of the legacy they wanted to leave their children as were all the material possessions.”³

Jews did this throughout the millennia – it’s a long standing tradition, but not often practiced as much anymore. As we are about to enter Yizkor, it seemed fitting to reintroduce this beautiful, meaningful custom and to add to this tradition by learning from the Stanford Letter Project. To put into words our values, the moments that mattered, the guidance we hope to impart, the appreciation we feel... What a gift to ourselves to sit down and write it and what a gift to our loved ones. And where appropriate, we honor our loved ones who have died in the process, explaining all that we learned from them, giving new life to the words, “Zichronam Livracha - may their memory be for a blessing.”

So when I came across the mitzvah “to love your neighbor as yourself” – I thought, wouldn’t we want to hear those words from our loved ones? And if that’s the case, they might want to hear it from us as well. Some things might be better left as a true ethical will, to be left for our loved ones after we’re gone, but the idea of sharing our values and our love and our appreciation with the people who mean the most to us – it really is a blessing and it’s a blessing that we can probably bestow upon our loved ones a little more often.

Gut Yuntiv.

³ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/writing-and-reading-ethical-wills/>