

Are You Living Your Eulogy or Your Resume?

By **Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson**

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When I was younger I had an inspiration: I would call my grandmother every Friday, wherever I was in the world, every Friday afternoon, to wish her Shabbat shalom. When I would think, “Oh I need to call my grandmother, it’s Friday afternoon and she’s expecting it,” the call became utilitarian, a chore to cross off a list. But when, in the middle of our conversation, I would tell a joke and she would laugh and her laughter would make me laugh, and we would delight in each other’s joy, well then, we both forgot this was a chore, a task, an obligation. In those instances, the encounter became its own justification.

The philosopher Martin Buber had a famous idea to explain the two modes by which people interact with the world. Most of the time we interact with the world—which includes other people—pragmatically, for what we can get out of the relationship. That practical kind of relationship he calls “I-It.” An I-It relationship is one in which we treat what we are relating to as an

object for utilitarian benefit. Now, Buber says there is nothing wrong with I-It relationships. In fact, most of the time that is the level on which we must live our daily lives.

But, says Buber, the one thing that is never found in an I-It-relationship is holiness or God. God is found exclusively in what he calls, I-Thou relationships, where both partners are fully present in the moment, fully present as human beings, not as a means to an end, but with relationship and encounter as itself the goal. When I told jokes to my grandmother and we delighted in the happiness of the moment, we were both fully present, we were both experiencing a classic I-Thou moment.

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But we can't become aware that an I-Thou moment is happening. The second we try too hard to create an I-Thou, it starts to become an I-It.

I-Thou, encounter for its own sake, is where true holiness abides. Buber reminds us that our job as people and as Jews is to remain open to the eruption of I-Thou all the time. We cannot plan for it; we cannot make it happen. We cannot force it. We just remain open at that instant, to be totally present to the one in whose presence we are. Buber insists that this open presence is the only way for holiness to enter our lives.

We have all slogged through an unprecedented year and a half—emerging coronavirus, sheltering at home, partisan upheaval, global disruption of travel and local disruption of our normal social connections. Many of us went almost a year without getting to hug parents or children, without the comfort of synagogue or gym, without the rhythm of work and weekend. Opportunities for I-Thou were swept away, and we were trapped in a world of I-It. Our practical needs were addressed, but at the cost of isolation, illness, fear and contagion.

This year's isolation forced me to reflect on what the isolation taught us: just how life-giving our time together is. And isn't that also the message of this holy season? In the words of the ancient rabbis, in order for God to be crowned as Monarch, there has to be a community. We, and God, come alive when we are together. And that gathering asks us to focus on open encounter and deep connection, rather than using each other for our own benefit.

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In that vein, I heard a remarkable talk—a Ted Talk by David Brooks, a columnist for The New York Times. The title of his talk was: “Are you living your resume, or are you living your eulogy?”

Resumes are composed of the title that we have held, the institutions with which we have been affiliated, the projects we have participated in or supervised. And much of our waking hours are spent building up our resumes. But I tell you as a rabbi who has performed hundreds of funerals, nobody wants their eulogy to be about how often they missed dinner at home so they could put in extra time at work. Nobody has ever asked me to say during the eulogy: He was in flights so often for business that he made Lifetime Platinum! Because what matters when you give a eulogy is not I-It. What matters at the end is I-Thou: What kind of a friend was this person? What kind of a mother and spouse was this person? What was the quality of their parenting, or their grandparenting? What kind of a mentor were they to people who turned to them? What kind of a presence were they in the community? Did they extend themselves charitably for others? Could we count on them for a smile? Were they there to help make the minyan? Were they there to volunteer for a good cause?

Those beautiful human things are, interestingly, the things people want to recall at the funeral of a loved one. But if we spend our time focusing only on the resume aspects of our life, that comes at the price of the eulogy part. (I am not saying to disregard our careers. I am all in favor of people earning large sums of money. I am a fundraiser, after all, and I'll be happy to help you disperse those extra funds!) If all we do is amass money and things, and we don't reserve time to love, to live, and to encounter, then we don't actually live. We just pass time transferring assets from one agency to another. There is no gain for such a life.

And I can tell you what is lost for the people who love us. What they really want from us is to have a meal together. They want a phone call. They want a smile. They want a spontaneous "I thought of you and I got this for you!" What everyone is starving for is, I-Thou, because everyone is starving for real connection, real relationship. Build our resume, do great things in the world. Make a difference professionally. That's also a core part of human life. And in this regard, I think that Brooks was pushing too hard, for he seemed to suggest that one mode is better than the other. I disagree, and Judaism does too. Let's be explicit: Judaism commands us—work six days a week and you rest on one day. Work is a mitzvah, but it's not the same thing as life. And rest is also a commandment.

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Even our language perpetuates the focus on resume activities rather than eulogy encounters. In English, what is the expression we use for when we are not at work? That's "a day off." Isn't that nuts? That we are "off" when we are not working? And if you are like most of us, we make ourselves

smell and look attractive and put on our good clothing to be with people who are not really part of our lives, and when we come home to hang out with the people we actually care about, we look shlubby.

I want us to use these Holy Days—and to begin to emerge from our social distancing—by living not only our resume, but our eulogy. Because here's the thing: none of us will be around to decide what goes into the eulogy. And so if we have a good heart, a caring heart, a loving heart, the only way for those things to make it into the eulogy is to make sure that the people who are going to be there to tell the rabbi what's in our eulogy, have personally experienced that big heart. They won't know about it by the words that we instruct them to say. They will know it by our countless little acts of caring; they'll know it by the way we prioritized the people we love; they'll know it by the way we contained our work so that we could be present for those I-Thou moments that are so fleeting and go by so quickly.

Now, while we breathe, while we live, while we have the capacity to make choices, let us not forget about the fact that someone is taking notes for our eulogy, and let us be sure to act in such a way that the eulogy will help others to say we truly lived, and to then go and do the same. n

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