

KOL NIDRE 2025**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley****Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein**

I never knew my great-uncle David all that well.//

He lived in Dallas, & I grew up in Chicago,

so our paths crossed only a couple of times

at family gatherings when I was a child.//

But I had heard that he'd been in combat

as a tank commander during the D-Day invasion

in France, & I always had an almost *mythic* image

of him as a fighter.//

When I was older, we finally had a few real conversations,

mainly about his wartime experiences,

but also about Judaism—

he & my great-aunt Charlotte

had strong religious & cultural identities

and were active in the Dallas Jewish community.//

To me, David was one of those archetypal figures

from what has been called “the greatest generation.”//

We had our last real conversation while I was in Dallas

for a conference.//

By that point, David was an old man;

he had a serious heart condition & was very ill.//

The condition had been with him for a long time,

and my parents had said for several years

that he could succumb to it at any moment,

but he somehow kept hanging on.//

As usual, David was humble & stoic;

he was far more interested

in talking about Middle East politics & Jewish beliefs

than discussing his heart problems.//

After the conference, I returned to New York City

and began my career as a young rabbi.//

David watched my rabbinate unfold

with genuine interest, always asking my parents

what new position I had taken up

and what new book I was working on.//

Some years passed;

David's health deteriorated.//

My parents gave me updates on his condition,
and I spoke on occasion with Charlotte
over the phone to find out how David was doing.//

When I got the chance to travel again to Dallas
to follow & write a magazine article
about a professional storm chaser,
I went first to visit my great-uncle.//

Charlotte welcomed me into their modest home
and led me to the bedroom.//

David was there, along with a nurse.//
He was lying on a cot,

and there were tubes attached to his body.//

He was near death.//

I said hello, but David didn't seem to recognize me

and couldn't speak in any case.//

He slipped in & out of consciousness,

and he was in great pain.//

At times David would be curled in a fetal position.//

When he moved,

he let out a moan that chilled me to the bone.//

I sat with Charlotte in the kitchen.//

She told me that David's death

was no longer a matter of weeks or even days away

but of hours or minutes.//

She didn't cry.//

"I've been getting myself ready for this for years,"

she said in her southern drawl.//

It was clear how much she loved him,

but it was also clear

that she knew there was nothing more she—

or anyone—could do for David now.//

"He's in so much pain," she said.

"I just want him to let go & let it end."//

It suddenly struck me that,

though I was David's great-nephew,

I was also an ordained member of the clergy.//

Rabbis, ministers, & priests often lose sight

of our clerical roles

when we're in the presence of our families;

it is easier for us to fall back into more familiar roles

as nephews, nieces, siblings, sons, & daughters.//

But I felt that, at this point, Niles the Rabbi

might be of more help to David

than Niles the great-nephew.//

So, I suggested to Charlotte that I pray with him.//

I walked back into the bedroom & stood over David.//

This figure who, in so many ways,

had seemed larger than life to me

now looked so small.//

His limbs were thin & frail, & he was moaning.//

His right leg hung off the side of the cot,

and he appeared as if he already had one foot

in the grave.//

David had always come across as so grounded,

so rooted in reality.//

Yet now his appearance was ethereal.//

The roots that had held him down over the years

were now being extracted from the world, one by one,

before my eyes.//

I put my hand on David's leg.//

He gazed up at me with a kind of vague recognition,
then looked away toward my great-aunt.//

I decided to recite the *Sh'ma*,
one of Judaism's most important prayers,
with him, & for him.//

It is a statement of religious belief
that is traditionally recited every day,
but also, if possible, on one's deathbed:

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad,

"Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one."//

David again gazed at me.//

I'm not certain that he knew who I was,

or that he really understood the words I uttered,
but in his glance I felt that something
very powerful was being exchanged between us.//

Less than an hour later, I received a telephone call
from Charlotte at the place I was staying.//

She informed me that David had died.//

I told her how sorry I was,
how great a man I thought David had been.//

Charlotte said she was convinced that on some level

David grasped the words I had recited,
that saying the *Sh'ma* had helped him to let go,
to give up his long fight.//

To me, however, David was still a warrior.//

But what I witnessed was a different kind of heroism:

the heroism of *surrender*.//

David hadn't truly given up;

he had instead chosen to give *over* his soul to God—

on his own terms, & in his own way.//

I am a theist, I believe in a higher power,

but I'm not a believer in supernatural phenomena.//

And yet, I couldn't help feeling that, somehow,

there was a deep, mysterious link between that prayer

and my great-uncle's relinquishment of his life.//

One of the things that most struck me
about David's death
was that it seemed more an affirmation
than a negation of his life.//

David didn't take his life; he *gave* it.//

Surrender at its deeper, more spiritual level,
involves no negativity.//

It is, instead, a loving attempt to unite with God
and, when death is imminent,
to do it in an absolute & purely non-material way.//

That last exertion requires a detachment
from the world of the living,
freedom from all the anxieties, sorrows, & trials

that are part & parcel of the human journey.//

It is the final act of our drama,

but it can be a profound, & a very beautiful one.//

There is a lesson about self-surrender for *all* of us

through David's example.//

In fact, several figures from the Jewish tradition

embody & exemplify the same idea,

and serve as models for those of us living today.//

Let's look at the great prophet Ezekiel, for instance.//

Ezekiel, along with most of his fellow Israelites,

was taken into exile by the Babylonians in 598 BCE.//

He lived in relative anonymity with the other refugees
until, several years later, the heavens opened up
and the prophet received a vision of the Divine.//

It is an unforgettable vision, both powerful & strange,
a vivid image of a sapphire throne soaring thru the sky,
pulled by winged, four-faced creatures;
wheels made of clouds, ice & fire; & a deafening noise.//

This vision of what became known as the Divine Chariot
is so impenetrable & overwhelming that,
upon seeing it, Ezekiel collapses on the ground—
an expression of humility & submission
as much as of perplexity & terror.//

Ezekiel's behavior is an external reaction
to his internal realization that, ultimately,
even a visionary prophet is constrained
by the limits of the human mind—
some things are simply *unknowable* to us.//

Ezekiel, unable to penetrate the secrets of the Chariot,
jettisons his ego
and transforms himself into a *vessel*
for the divine message he is about to be given.//

Like other prophets before him,
Ezekiel gives himself over to the Transcendent.//
Now he is prepared to receive & transmit

God's holy words to his people;

he chooses self-surrender rather than self-control.//

It is surrender & vulnerability that help us become

more open human beings,

that help us to create the space

thru which new forces can find their way inside us

in ways that enrich, empower & liberate our minds

and souls.//

The image of the Divine Chariot appears once more

in the Bible, in the book of Daniel, a later prophet,

and it is strikingly similar to the image from Ezekiel.//

Yet a fascinating element that is unique
to Daniel's vision of the chariot is the *Nahar Dinur*,
the River of Fire.//

We learn in the prophet's own colorful description
of an "ancient of days. . .whose garment was white
as snow, and the hair of whose head
was like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames,
its wheels burning fire.//

A river of fire issued and came forth before him."//

Some Jewish mystics interpreted this holy fire
as the sweat of the creatures who had to hold up
and carry the Divine Chariot.//

In their view, when our own spiritual practices,
or our attitude of surrender to the Infinite,
rise to a “fever pitch,”
our sweaty bodies are bathed, metaphorically,
in that same fiery, animal-like energy.//

God is sometimes referred to in the Hebrew Bible
as *Aish Ochlah*, a “consuming fire.”//

To be swallowed by God is to reunite the human soul
with its transcendent source.//

Yet that can only occur when we *vacate* ourselves
of ego, of the narrowness of self-concern.//

The Kotsker Rebbe once asked,

“Where is it that God can be found?” His answer:

“Wherever we create the space for God to enter.”//

We become vessels, or “chariots,” for God

only when we make room

for the divine to dwell within us.//

And that can only truly happen when we surrender,

when we make ourselves open & vulnerable.//

I want to share one final example from our tradition,

that of Ruth, a Moabite woman.//

When the book of Ruth opens,

she is already about as vulnerable as a woman

in her time could be—

she's a refugee, a widow & without male protection.//

Despite these personal challenges,

she follows her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi,

to the land of Israel in search of a better life.//

And rather than trying to control her fate,

she surrenders herself to the unknown—

she gives over to the Jewish people and their faith.//

In one of the most compelling of all biblical passages,

Ruth tells Naomi: “Do not ask me to leave you,

or to refrain from following you;

for wherever you go, I will go,

and wherever you lodge, I will lodge.//

Your people shall be my people,

and your God my God.//

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”//

Ruth is a true heroine.//

It is through her vulnerability, through her openness,

through her act of self-surrender,

that Ruth eventually finds the freedom

and the redemption that she so desperately craves.//

What I learned years ago from my great-uncle David,

as well as from these different biblical figures,

is that when we give over, when our goals & desires

mesh with those of the divine harmony,

life takes on a more liberating

and fulfilling dimension.//

Letting go of our preoccupation with self

can feel like experiencing a little death,

yet what we gain in return is a deeper sense of direction

and a new, more meaningful existence.//

On this Kol Nidre, this evening of reflection and renewal,

it is important for us to remember

that Judaism advocates self-transcendence,

not self-absorption;

it promotes social responsibility,

not just personal growth.//

Judaism is focused on the well-being of others,

on justice, on *Tikkun Olam*—

working to try to repair this very broken world.//

To achieve these things, our tradition teaches us

that, at times, we need to get out of our own way,

to give over to a higher purpose, and a higher power.//

And yet, despite this ancient and profound truth,

we live today in a culture of *narcissism*,

a time when so many people, including our leaders—

our presidents & prime ministers—

just can't get past themselves.//

These people simply can't let go—
of their egos, their money, their power,
or their attempts at control.//

Some of our countries, like the United States & Israel,
are in states of damaging upheaval as a result.//

So, may we instead follow the model of our forbears,
may we act in ways that are *countercultural*—
focused less on self, & more on selflessness.//

Let us strive to get beyond ourselves,
to transcend ego, to stand up for others,
to connect with our vulnerability,
with the larger whole, and with our deeper purpose.//

That is the heroism of surrender, if we have the courage
to embrace & embody it.//

The choice is ours to make, as it was
for all those who came before us.//

And if we try hard enough, it is within our reach
to become the next, bravest, and greatest generation.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon