

## What's Next?

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Rabbi Barry Block

A mourner turns to me and says, “I just don’t see how I can go on living” without the loved one who has died: The love of a lifetime. A husband or wife of many decades. A parent whose presence and advice remained critical, even as the child became an adult. A friend whose companionship brought joy and meaning to life. Less often, but most painfully, a child, the future’s promise, now horribly cut off for the grieving parents and grandparents.

How do we go on living, without a loved one who has been so central to every day of our lives? After the unbearable loss, what’s next?

Rabbi Avi Weiss compares the adjustment to walking into a “darkened room for the first time. Unaware of the layout, [we] trip over the furniture. But each time [we] enter the room, [we] learn more and more where the furniture stands. In time, [we] become familiar with the room, and learn how to get around, despite the darkness.”

The valley of the shadow of death is indeed a darkened room. After a marriage of a half century or more, perhaps much more – yes, even after an intense union of a few years – we have no idea who we are without the other half who made us whole. We cannot imagine getting around without that partner. We grope in the darkness.

By definition, our parents have been at our side throughout our lives. Even if we are entering older adulthood ourselves by the time they die, life has offered us no compass for finding our true north without our lifelong guides. We grope in darkness.

Some friendships are so intense that no day ends or begins without a phone call, no significant undertaking is even considered without companionship and consultation. Our hands fumble for the phone before we realize that we can no longer dial up our loving friend. We grope in darkness.

And when one unspeakably loses a child, life can seem to lose its meaning altogether. Our very purpose in living is wrapped up in our children, along with our daily lives. We stumble, merely trying to put one foot in front of the other. We grope in darkness.

Rabbi Weiss recalls Rabbi Harold Kushner’s teaching that, “when [grief] befalls us, rather than ask ‘Why?’ we should ask, ‘What now?’” “Why,” Weiss

continues, “[is] a philosophical question for which we have no answer [and] over which we have no control. ‘What’ is a pragmatic question, one that is future factored, over which we have some control.”

Weiss shares a particularly dramatic story, of a bride named Sarah Techiya, whose father and brother were murdered by terrorists only days before her planned wedding. Weiss writes, “As she sat in mourning, Sarah Techiya said: ‘This evening, instead of wearing a bridal dress, I will sit [*shiva*]. But we will not be crushed.” Sarah went on to reschedule her wedding for a humongous venue, and to invite the entire population of Israel to “get up from the dust and rejoice with us.” Some 10,000 came. Rabbi Weiss emphasizes: “They were teaching a powerful lesson: never allow what you *cannot* do to control what you *can* do.”

We mere mortals exert precious little power over life and death. Notwithstanding the prescriptions for healthy living that statistically contribute to longevity, all who live must die. Even those who take outstanding care of themselves may be stricken too soon. And when isn’t too soon? Over the years, I have been with many families who have to let go of a loved one well over the age of 90. It’s never easy, even when we may objectively agree that the person has enjoyed a long and productive life.

No, we can’t ultimately control life and death. But we can decide how we are going to live after a loved one dies. Thankfully, most of us aren’t faced with rescheduling a wedding. Fewer still would turn the event into a massive public demonstration that life goes on. For most of us, smaller steps in the darkness are more appropriate, as we grope to find the new “furniture” in our lives, becoming increasingly if imperceptibly more comfortable with our difficult new reality on each passing day.

We may not invite the entire nation to a wedding, but we can accept an invitation to dinner. We may not go dancing, but we can open ourselves to friendship. We may not be eager to party, but we can return to that weekly mahjonn game or tennis match.

One more thing, and perhaps most important: We can find a way to live in ways that pay tribute to our departed love one. We can continue our spouse’s gentle kindness. We may emulate our parent’s generosity. We can perpetuate our friend’s loyalty, by extending the same to others. We may look out at the world with the wonder of the child who has been taken from our arms.

Each of us, if we live long enough, will find ourselves walking in the valley of the shadow of death, likely more than once, and repeatedly as we age. We have been bereaved and we will be grief-stricken again. Each time, we will find new ways to ask ourselves, "What's next?" What's next for me, now living without that cherished spouse, that beloved parent, that valued friend, that adored child? No, it's not easy, but like that Israeli bride, each of us can find our own way not to let death control us. We can keep living; putting one foot in front of the other, even in the darkness. Then, slowly and even imperceptibly, may we move toward the light.

Amen.