

Shabbat Shalom

(I thank Rabbi Jack Reimer for pointing me to the dialogue between Dr. Nuland and Mrs. Chaterjee and inspiring these words)

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Sherman Nuland last year. When you meet someone whose name is famous, whose works have contributed mightily, one often feels tongue tied not knowing what one could possibly say. It was at a family Bat Mitzvah in New Haven not too long ago. I was the Ba'al Korei and he came up for the aliyah. I had a "million" questions and comments, but could only say "Good Shabbes!"

Dr. Nuland is a well-known surgeon from Yale who has done a great deal of work on Death and Dying. He also recently published a book about Maimonides.

Rabbi Reimer recently pointed out this exchange between Dr. Nuland and Mrs. Chaterjee.

Dear Dr. Nuland,

There is a matter in which I need to seek your opinion. No more than that, your guidance. I am 73 years old. I spend a few months a year in India and the rest of the time in Singapore with my only son who lives there with his wife. I have two granddaughters. One is studying in the U.K.; the other is at the University of Wisconsin.

The woman continued in the letter. She wrote the following: It is about dying when one lives a full life and feels that the capacity to enjoy life is slowly ebbing away due to old age that I wish to write to you. At such a point, should one not end one's life? My vision is impaired, my hearing is failing also, and I cannot move at a fast pace. This is all degeneration due to old age. There is nothing wrong with my health otherwise. I feel it is time that I should die. That is, I should end my life myself. I don't want anyone to know about it. It needs to be done discreetly, so as not to cause pain to anyone else. Can you please tell me what is the easiest way to do it secretly by one's own hands?

Dear Dr. Nuland, I know it is foolish of me to write this way to a stranger, and it is likely that you are going to ignore this letter. If so, I will understand. But, I have a faint hope that you will show me a way out of the future that I don't have to face.

Yours sincerely,
Ruby Chatterjee

It was postmarked from Calcutta, India.

I believe all of us know the person who could write this letter. Living in this culture where longevity has been increased and at the same time everything is so fast,

communication is done by a technology that the elderly cannot keep up with, and families are split by large distances and the elderly are isolated in neighborhoods and apartment building and assisted living facilities and magazines and the popular press and television constantly send messages that beauty is in youth can create, understandably a sense of hopeless and bitterness towards life. Losing the vim and vigor for life and connections with other people can bring one to ask a question, WHY? What is it worth? The loss of mobility, the loss of a driver's license, the diminution of strength all contribute to this notion.

What would you write to Mrs. Chatterjee? There are countries and cultures where the messages of hemlocks societies and physician assisted suicides are fully acceptable and death is entered willing and often quickly. In those places it is justified. It is justified by virtue of living a full life and accepting a time for it to end. But something in me, perhaps the Jewish me, believes there are certain issues of life and death that we, as mortals, can not judge or attempt to control.

I have spent much time in hospice, visiting people, with you, and I understand that there are times when we say "enough"... there are times when all hope is gone, when a full life reaches its end, there is no more to experience, no more to give and no more to receive.

Yet, the problems of aging, the advancements in medicine, changes in demographics and community call for a radical transformation in our society to help people age. To allow people to understand their value and contribution long after they can be active.

Dr. Nuland responded to Mrs. Chatterjee in the following way:
He wrote:

Dear Mrs. Chatterjee,

Your very eloquent and moving letter has touched me in many ways. I hope that I can respond to it properly, and that I can help you to understand the importance of your life as it is at the present time.

Sometimes, Mrs. Chatterjee, it is necessary for us to live for others. It is true that the various incapacities that are taking hold of your body are due to the gradual changes that come inevitably with age. However, it is also clear that you do not have any major disease process of the kind that are likely to cause you a great deal of suffering, at least not in the foreseeable future. As you describe, your son and your granddaughters, and as I have seen in the Indian families that I know, I recognize the enormous importance that you, without doubt, fulfill in their lives. I cannot, with a conscience, suggest that as basically healthy a person as you, whose mind is clear enough to write such a thoughtful letter, should even consider taking her own life.

You must live for the sake of those who love you, because they need you. (I want to repeat that sentence. You must live for the sake of those who love you, because they

need you.) They may not need you to help them around the house. They may not need you to help them with their studies or to help them with their jobs or their cars. But they need the reassurance of your physical presence on this earth. They need your wisdom as well, in ways that you may not appreciate. I would have been devastated if my grandmother had taken her own life, and it would have had a profound effect on the way I view the future. What can I do to encourage you to think optimistically, with the assurance of how important you are to those few people who really matter in your life, those who surround you and constitute the loving circle of your family and close friends?

Please remember that your humanity and your life are a gift that you are given. You must believe me and you must also believe in yourself.

Sincerely yours,
Sherwin Nuland

That was the beginning of the correspondence that went on between Mrs. Chatterjee and Dr. Nuland for twelve more years. From Calcutta, where she lives, from Delhi, where she went to visit, from the jungles of Africa where she went on safari and reported on what she saw and learned, from Singapore, and from Wisconsin, where she went to visit her grandchild, Ruth Chatterjee carried on a twelve year correspondence with Sherwin Nuland. They met one night when she went to visit her son, who was on sabbatical in Connecticut. In those twelve years, this woman, who had almost decided to end her life before it got much worse, lived a worthwhile, a busy and a productive life. She had wisdom to impart into her grandchildren and she taught them. It is the only way that anyone teaches anything, which is by example.

She had many experiences in those years after she had written Dr. Nuland and she was able to witness those experiences with a different perspective as she reached her later years.

She wrote:

“My life was not for myself alone, but for others around me, especially for those with whom I feel a close connection. These last years taught me that in spite of growing old and infirmed, I am still able to give something. I not only take, and this makes life worthwhile. The mind and the brain still function, you can contribute even a tiny bit for the benefit of those with whom one has a relationship of love and trust.

If anyone would approach me now with the question that I raised with you twelve years ago, I would tell them that they should not do something that will hurt those whom they love from then on. To have a relationship, a loving relationship with those whom you love, this is the essence of life. This is what keeps me going.”

I, obviously, like so many of you, think often of this issue of aging. Sadly, we have built a city where we have created a geographic breakdown where older people live in certain neighborhoods and young people live in other neighborhoods. I consider how terribly unfortunate that is. Something about the whole Florida experiment for many went awry.

It separated generations and contributed to create a new demographic reality. The challenge is a challenge of a community. As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, I believe community should serve as a family. And I understand that this operates in many different ways.

I remember when I worked in Ohio the community built an early childhood program attached to the Nursing Home. It provided life in the hallways of that home, in the meeting rooms, that was so beneficial to all ages. Mothers of the children, the children and the seniors all interacted. There is something powerful, something wonderful that a grandparent has to offer to the life of a grandchild. The rabbis have said that real spirituality is passed on from the aged to the young.

Abby Levine taught me an expression, as we age we need to sage. The wisdom accumulated by years cannot be learned in a textbook and yet, the challenges of aging are mighty and great. There are no periods in life, however, that aren't filled with its challenges. From the moment we are born, life presents difficult challenges. Some people in their older age are more ready to accept those challenges. For other people, the task seems nearly impossible.

Al Tashlichainu l'eit lichna that is the line from Sh'ma Koleinu, the prayer we will say on Yom Kippur, quite a number of times. "Don't send me away when I am old." It is the fear of every individual as they age.

I have come to realize a few things. One is that loneliness and aging can be a curse. The second is that older people don't need to be stimulated as children need to be stimulated. A balance has to be found. We need to create centers for seniors, and not centers that engage in the silly projects of toddlers and little children; rather centers that allow the elderly to express themselves, to contribute in ways that only an experienced person can, to learn, to experience music and culture.

The Torah reading is coming down to its home stretch. Moses is trying to summarize all that he has learned and all that he has taught, and he wants his people to remember and to live by it after he is gone. He says in this week's parsha, *U'vicharta bichayim, limaan tichye, ata vizarecha* – I bid you to choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed. It is an often quoted verse "to choose life." But I don't think it is a verse that we pause often enough to think about and comprehend as it relates to the very old. We want to live as long as we possibly can together with our family and with our decedents. Because, in fact, we need each other. Everyone here knows the word *chayim*. We all know how to say *L'chayim* when we toast over a drink. In a few days we are going to be singing *Zochreynu lichayim, melech chafetz bichoyim*, O King who delights in life, inscribe us in the book of life. It is one of the few words in Hebrew that doesn't have a singular tense. *Chayim*, life, is plural. The reason is that no life is lived alone, as the cliché says, no man is an island. All of our lives are bound up with the lives of others. There is no such thing as a human life unrelated and unconnected to other lives. There is no such thing as a human life disconnected from the source of life. That's why we are told *Chayim* is plural. Additionally, in the center of *Chayim* there are two yuds. The two yuds spell

Adonai. It is God's name. Each one of us, whether we are in the wondrous years of infancy and growth, or the latter years of life, in each one of us there is a piece of that which is Divine.

Studies show that well over twenty percent of the aged community suffer from depression and undoubtedly there are organic reasons for that and there are other reasons. Certainly, some of the reasons are being cut off from community. That's what we are challenged to do. We have a great Hazak group here that brings elderly people together. The older population in this area is going to continue to grow and grow.

If I were building developer (I wouldn't be doing anything right now) but I would think about creating a neighborhood where old and young live together. Where there are smaller apartments and bigger houses and shopping and playgrounds and community centers. Because that's what we need. We grow by learning from each other and about each other.

Moses is reaching the end of his life and he accepts and he is very accepting of his ultimate fate. He is no longer fighting. He is just imparting a few final words. He won't enter the Promised Land. On one hand that represents this great tragedy, his life's work, seeing the unfulfilled. But, that's not the case at all. His life's work is very fulfilled. He will not conclude his tasks. But nobody does. He will, however, impart the knowledge of his experience. He will let us all know to this very day that knowing history is the best way of assuring our identity and understanding our future. Moses goes off someplace into the sunset. And he sings a song!

There certainly must be times when one would feel that death is better than life, but unless we are so gripped where there is no longer hope for any type of recovery, any type of positive contribution or any ability to appreciate even the smallest things in life, then perhaps we have to see what there is to live for.

The number of elderly people in our midst is going to be increasing. Modern medicine has seen to that, but our social responsibility and our inner responsibility has to catch up with that. Certainly, that is true with the work we do here in the synagogue.

So that is the challenge. It is not only the challenge for the community, but it is a challenge on every one of us and every one of you as you continue to age. May you find a spark of the Divine. May the passage of time not evoke fear, but rather deepen your sense of gratitude and may you have the strength to do the little things that you like to do.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tovah