

My friends, many of you know that I started a Twitter account this year. Some scoff at Twitter. I did at first. But Twitter, like almost everything else, is neither good nor bad. It is a tool. It can be used for *narischkeit*, or it can be used for substantive content. I have put some effort into building my following, which is approaching two hundred people. With building my following in mind, a recent Tweet caught my eye: *The Six Magic Words That Always Get Clicks*. One of them was “how,” which should generally be followed by “to.” “How to...” I immediately decided that at least one of my sermons for the High Holidays should be a “How to...” topic. The topic I chose is “How To Write Your Own Eulogy.”

Why not? We’re thinking about ultimate issues such as life and death on these solemn days, are we not? The day will come when everyone here today will be in the World to Come. Why leave your eulogy in the hands of others? Why not write your own?

Speaking of passing away and eulogies, did you notice that Stephen R. Covey died this year? He passed away in July at the age of 79. He became famous when he published his first book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. The obituary I read listed the seven habits, and one of them, the second one, jumped out at me. “Begin with the end in mind.” That’s the first step to writing your own eulogy. Begin with the end in mind.

Let’s do exactly that as a first step to writing our eulogies. Let’s do it by listening to a eulogy that I did not write, but that I heard delivered. For obvious reasons, I won’t mention any names.

*Anyone who ever saw him pull into the synagogue parking lot on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur recognized his car right away, no matter which one he had chosen that day. Remember how the Porsche maneuvered around the islands in the parking lot? Don't be impressed by the way he drove 60 mph in the parking lot—that car could hit 150 on the open road. And the Mercedes—not just any Mercedes, but an SL class—that midnight blue finish looked as deep as the Pacific Ocean. You never needed a mirror to comb your hair as you entered the synagogue for the holidays. As long as you arrived during the forty-five minutes he spent here each year, you could see your reflection in the hood. And those leather seats—he let me sit in them once, and it was like sitting on warm butter.*

*His home theatre was beyond compare—200 DBs quad matrix with no audible distortion.*

*I spoke to his business partner just after he died, and with a smile and a wink, she said that he had figured out more ways to generate billable hours than anyone she knew, and he always managed to stay one step ahead of the IRS.*

*Almost anytime the synagogue was in need, if we went to his office and asked, a thirty-six dollar check was always promised. Many of those promised checks were actually sent. And as I sat by his hospital bed the night before he died, he took my hand and whispered to me, “Rabbi, I never should have left the office at seven or eight o'clock. Think how much more I could have made if I had only stayed until 10:30. And I still could have made it home in time for Nightline.” And of course, it goes without saying that he really, really, liked his family. Not just a little. A lot.*

I hope you figured out before now that this eulogy was fictional. I also hope you have begun to catch on as to how to write your own eulogy. If that has not happened yet, just stay with me. As I share my next two stories with you, I believe it will become clear. The following two stories are true.

Most of us never get to hear our own eulogies while we are alive. Famously, however, Alfred Nobel got to read his own obituary. Nobel had hundreds of inventions to his credit, most of which had to do with weapons and explosives. His most famous invention was dynamite. When his brother Ludvig died, a French newspaper mistakenly printed the obituary that had been prepared in advance for Alfred. The title was *The Merchant of Death is Dead*. And the obituary opened with, "Dr Alfred Nobel, who made his fortune by finding a way to kill the most people as ever before in the shortest time possible, died yesterday."

You probably know the rest of the story. Alfred Nobel did not want to be known as "the merchant of death." He did not want his legacy to be that he had made a fortune "by finding a way to kill the most people as ever before in the shortest time possible." So he set aside almost his entire fortune to create the Nobel Prizes that are still awarded to this day. Even though many know how it came to be, many others know of the Nobel Prizes without knowing their genesis. There is no doubt but that the establishment of the prizes drastically changed Nobel's legacy.

This next story is as true as the first, but I know you've not heard this one before. This one happened to me when I was a rabbinical student. A family called the rabbinical school and asked for a student to conduct the funeral of their husband and father. I went to meet with the family, got the basic information like the man's

Hebrew name, and then I asked, “What would you like for me to know about your father?”

There was silence. A long, uncomfortable silence. A very long, very comfortable silence. The longest, most uncomfortable silence I have ever experienced in my life. His wife and two sons looked at one another. Finally, one of the sons spoke.

“Rabbi, if you’re waiting for one of us to say something nice about that son of a b\*tch, we’re going to sit here all night.” And that was it. They thanked me for coming, said we would see each other at the grave, and I left. Needless to say, I did not deliver much of a eulogy the next day.

My friends, Alfred Nobel and the anonymous man in the story wrote their own eulogies long before they died. We all do. Nobel had the rare good fortune to see what his was going to look like. He didn’t like what he saw, and took action to change it. He took action—that is the key phrase.

The theme of this talk is how to write your own eulogy. It won’t have anything to say about sitting down at a computer or in front of a piece of blank paper and writing words for your loved ones to say when you are gone. That is not how you write your own eulogy.

Instead, I call your attention to a phrase the High Holiday Musaf service: [God] *opens the Book of Remembrance and the record speaks for itself, for each of us has signed it with deeds.*

That's the key, my friends. Deeds. That is how you write your own eulogy. Whether you realize it or never thought of it this way, you have already begun writing your eulogy. Eulogies are written in deeds, not in words.

Over the years, I've thought about that family who had nothing good to say about their husband and father. My heart breaks for that family. Who can imagine how that man must have treated them? I had gone for help with that eulogy to a Practical Rabbinics teacher of mine, and she suggested that the man himself must have had a difficult life and I should say that, and say that he did the best he could. I told her I couldn't do it. Judaism teaches that we should not mistreat others because we know the pain of being slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. I absolutely reject the idea that being a victim is an excuse for victimizing others. It is fundamentally un-Jewish.

Just as we cherish the memories, not the possessions of our childhoods, so do we remember the experiences we shared with those we love. We do not remember our loved ones for their possessions. We may well remember the use they made of them, that they may have been generous and charitable, but again, it's the deeds, the actions, that speak to the quality of the individual.

And now, my friends, we welcome a new Jewish year. As 5772 comes to a close, we close another chapter of our lives, a chapter written not by our words but by our deeds. Doubtless there are sections of this chapter that we wish we could rewrite. I have good news. Tonight begins a ten day period during which we can edit what has come before, even if it goes further back than one year. If you have to rewrite something that took place between you and another person, edit it with the words, "I'm sorry. Forgive me." And if you have to rewrite something between you and

God, the words are the same. Say them for the next ten days, and conclude the process fasting and praying in a sacred space with a sacred community.

That's what I have to say about how to write your own eulogy, my friends. In actual fact, you've already been doing it. My task has been only to make you aware that you are writing your own eulogy, and you are writing it every day of your life with your deeds. Begin with the end in mind, said Steven Covey. How would you want to be remembered at the end of your life? Behave that way during your life, and make it a little better than it was last year. *Shanah tovah*.