

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Life and Light

I am as happy as I can be. I just got married. I'm in love with my wife, and she is in love with me.

Less than 36 hours after our wedding, a friend died. Not just a friend, but someone whose whole family has been in my life in very special ways for over 18 years.

This is life. We talk about "joys and sorrows" in our liturgy, but until we ride the emotional roller-coaster ourselves, we can't possibly know what someone else is feeling.

Scott Kaufman's death at the age of 39 affects our whole community, whether you knew him or not. Other community members have lost children. Many have lost parents, spouses and siblings. Each special soul who touches our lives does so in completely unique ways. We can all relate to having an unexpected tragedy that shakes up the world.

I was lucky enough to have my parents, who have been married for 60 years, attend my wedding. Both of my wife's parents and one of her two brothers died long before our wedding.

This is life. A mysterious journey that challenges us to keep our emotions in check. We're challenged when we ask "why" to surprisingly sad events while accepting joyous occasions as if they are expected.

When the question "why" comes up, I often refer to the Book of Job. Job has a blessed life, until he doesn't. He has everything he could want, and then is hit with one tragedy after another. He tries to hold it all together, and then is consumed by frustration. He finally realizes that he can never understand why bad things happen any more than he can understand why good things happen. He says, "God gives, God takes away. Blessed be the Name of God."

There was a time in my life when, consciously or unconsciously, I did not get too happy or too sad about anything. I guess I didn't want to hurt. But I learned that by avoiding hurt, I was also avoiding joy. Allowing ourselves to truly feel – whether it is joy, sadness, or the multitude of other emotions – comes with a risk. And that risk is worth it.

Philosopher, author and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl stated in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "There is nothing in the world that would effectively help one to survive the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life." How do we make sure our lives have meaning? By cherishing each day, each person and each experience. By embracing the gifts of friendship and family, learning and loving; the blessings we give and the blessings we receive.

We will soon be lighting the Hanukkah lights, one at a time. At the darkest time of the year, each night, our light increases with another candle. Lighting candles in the darkness of winter reminds us of the spark that shines even if we are feeling dark. The unexpected power comes from the *shamas* – the helper candle that ignites the others. Each of us have the power to be a *shamas* – the one who helps ignite the spark in those who are close to us. And at those times when we feel as if our own light is a little depleted, we pray to be able to feel the warmth nearby to help our light shine once again.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Dan Gordon