

## HOW TO PREPARE A EULOGY

By Everett A. Chasen

A eulogy is a difficult thing to write—and to deliver. This is particularly difficult for those of us who are Jews, because Jewish tradition calls for prompt burial of the deceased, and equally prompt memorial services. This means that not only must we write and speak while we are grieving, but we also have a very short time to prepare.

But, as Jews, we are also called upon to comfort the afflicted, and delivering a good eulogy is one of the ways in which that Mitzvah is accomplished. A good eulogy can also be thought of as a final gift to your loved one who has passed away, and it can help to begin your own healing process. (I can personally attest to this.)

So what is a “good” eulogy, and how do you write and deliver one? Well, let’s start with a couple of things a good eulogy is not: it is not a biography of the deceased, nor is it an obituary. And it’s not about you—it’s about the person you are honoring with your words.

What you want to do is to paint the best picture you can of your loved one: who they were, why you loved them, and why they will be missed. Before I began writing a eulogy for my mother-in-law, Rabbi Perlin gave me some good advice. “Remember,” she said, “most of the people at the service know about only parts of her life. Try to help them get the total picture.”

I began the writing process by writing down a few key points about my mother-in-law, things I knew about her others might not; things that were unique about her; memories I wanted to share. Since I was speaking for the family, I asked my wife and my son what they wanted me to say: I ended up using far more of my wife’s thoughts than my own (not too surprising, as she is her mother’s daughter.)

Because my mother-in-law lived a long, full, life, there was no need for me to talk about unfulfilled promise, or words left unsaid. Nor did I need to be overly somber or tragic: I was able to be appropriately funny in several parts of the speech. The stories I chose, I thought, reflected a woman in full—because many in the audience knew her only as an older, grandmotherly, person, I chose to remind them that she once was an exceptionally competent professional; a Depression survivor with the inner strength and toughness that implied; and a loving wife to a man who had died before most of those in attendance had met her.

Life details, favorite memories, and important achievements are the components of a successful eulogy. Be brief: introduce yourself quickly, even if most people know who you are. Be factual: if your loved one had major struggles during his or her lifetime, don’t ignore them, but place them into the overall context of his or her life. And be respectful: this is not the place to “settle scores” with anyone, or to call out others for their treatment of the deceased.

Get into your subject matter as quickly as you can: don't start with how honored you are to be speaking (although it is an honor), or by acknowledging others who are in attendance. Even if you are an experienced public speaker, you will never have a more attentive audience when you begin to talk: no one will be having a side conversation, or fiddling with their cell phones, or sending text messages. Keep their attention by providing a compelling opening. Provide the stories you've assembled in the body of the speech (three major examples are plenty), and close with a call to remember the deceased, through words, thoughts, and deeds.

Eulogies should be brief—about five minutes (500-600 words); the Rabbi gave me special dispensation to be longer because I was the only speaker (besides her) at our service. If you feel the need for similar dispensation, ask her. Once you're done writing, read your work to a few people who were also close to your loved one, assuming you have time to do so, and incorporate their thoughts.

When delivering the eulogy, try to relax. Everyone wants you to do well, and a few displays of emotion will only increase the audience's sympathy. While I normally speak with only an outline, I took the full text with me to the bima and spoke from it—as a way to keep my emotions from running away from me and blanking out on my thoughts. (I had rehearsed in advance, so I could lift my eyes away from the text most of the time and make eye contact with as many people as possible.)

And if you do lose control of your emotions, and simply cannot continue, just say, "I'm sorry. I can't go on," and the Rabbi will handle it from there. As I said at the beginning of this article, eulogies are indeed difficult, but if you are brief, thoughtful and, above all, if you speak from the heart, you will do just fine.

*(Ev Chasen is a member of Temple B'nai Shalom, a former speechwriter for two cabinet secretaries, and the author of "The Manager's Communication Toolbox," published in 2012 by the American Society for Training and Development.)*