He was only 47 years old. He was in the full bloom of his life, with everything to look forward to. He had not just a great career, but a historically great career. He was at the epicenter of Silicon Valley in the age of hi tech, the CEO of Survey Monkey. He was not only happily married but by all accounts deeply in love with his wife, herself a charismatic and preeminent business executive and thought leader. They were raising two young children. He was beloved as funny, easy going, humble, informal, and a huge supporter of women and women’s rights.

He was on vacation with his family. At a luxury resort, a Four Seasons near Puerto Vallarta. It’s Friday afternoon, 4:00. He’ll go to the gym, run on the treadmill, get some cardio, take a shower, get dressed, and have a nice dinner with his family. What could be better than that?

The sudden and tragic death of Dave Goldberg is perplexing at so many levels.

Did he really die as a result of falling off the treadmill? In the wake of his tragic death, it has come out that while it is not uncommon to be injured as a result of a treadmill—there were 24,400 treadmill injuries in 2014 alone—it is exceedingly uncommon to die as a result of a treadmill injury. The Times pointed out that only three people a year die as a result of a treadmill injury. It is literally more likely to be struck by lightning. How can we possibly understand something so freaky and so fatal happening to a person who was so young and so good?

No answer of course is commensurate to the question. But I want to share with you one answer that comes from the year 1190, the year that Maimonides completed Moreh Nevuchim,
Guide for the Perplexed. If Maimonides were here right now, what would he say to Sheryl Sandberg and their family?

Maimonides wrote his book about life’s perplexity precisely when he was the most perplexed, when he was in the greatest personal pain. As Micah Goodman noted in his book about the Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides’ beloved brother David, died suddenly and tragically when the vessel he was in—he traded precious stones—drowned in the Indian Ocean. Not only did Maimonides lose his brother and best friend, he also lost his source of financial support. David had supported Maimonides while he wrote. Without his brother’s support, Maimonides had to work as a physician in the sultan’s court, a crushing grind of more than 12 hour days. Maimonides writes that he was depressed, unable to get out of bed, for a full year after his brother died. That’s just when he wrote his book about the pain of life.

Micah Goodman provides a metaphor for Maimonides’ thinking. Imagine that one fine spring day, you decide to go to the playground. There are slides. And swings. Happy children jumping and running and swinging. Happy parents schmoozing and laughing. You come to the playground on this fine day with a serious book, with Nietzsche. You are trying to read Nietzsche, but you can’t concentrate because there is too much noise in the playground. You say: this is a horrible playground. It’s so noisy. I can’t even read Nietzsche in this playground.

Maimonides would say that that is what we do when the pain of life assaults us. We need to attune our expectations to the sounds of this playground called life. The problem happens when our expectations are out of whack with reality. If we expect that we will all live until 120, and be perfectly healthy and happy and hale and undiminished, and then at 120 God takes our soul, if that is our expectation, then we are reading Nietzsche in the playground, and we’ll curse
the playground for being too noisy. But if we attune our expectations to the actual sounds in our
playground, then we won’t be discomfited when harder things happen.

The first sound in our playground is the sound of mortality.

As I shared last week, the opening line in Atul Gawande’s book *Being Mortal* is just
so perfect. Atul Gawande is a surgeon at Brigham and Women’s, and a professor of medicine at
Harvard Medical School. This is his opening: “I learned about a lot of things in medical school,
but mortality wasn’t one of them.” This is Mother’s Day weekend. I think about my own
mother who at 90 is not what she was at 70. If I want my Mom at 90 to be what she was 20
years ago, I am reading Nietzsche in the playground. But if I know that mortality is in this
playground, then the frailties of aging do not shock me. I expect them. And instead of panting
after what was 20 years ago, I can focus more helpfully on savoring our best day now.

In the face of our mortality, what can we expect from God? Is God going to come down
to our playground and save us?

This is where Maimonides really gets interesting. God does not come down. God does
not intervene. Maimonides has this central image that God sits during the flood. If people are
being saved, or drowning, God sits through the flood, a King on the divine throne, unchanged,
unruffled, not coming down to save us.

This image of divine disconnection can be alienating. Who wants to believe in a God
who sits unruffled while we are drowning?

There is just one thing to say in Maimonides’ defense. He seems to be right. The
earthquake happens in Nepal. God does not stop it.

But if God does not come down, that means we must step up. That is the crucial sound
we must hear in our playground, the sound of human agency. The sound of *people* coming to the
rescue in Nepal.

So far this does not sound like such a happy playground. Mortality. No God swooping in to save us. I think I want to go back to that child’s playground, with the slides and the swings. Does Maimonides do happy?

Here is happiness for Maimonides. Physical things break down. But spiritual values are forever. Maimonides quotes the prophet Amos who says: “Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, God when I will send a hunger in the land, not a hunger for bread, not a thirst for water, but to hear the word of God.” The physical is ephemeral. Here today gone tomorrow. But the spiritual endures. If we can put an enduring spiritual legacy in our playground, that is happiness in the deepest sense.

This is true not only for a prophet like Amos, and a medieval philosopher like Maimonides. This was true, this week, for Sheryl Sandberg, Dave Goldberg’s bereaved wife. This was her Facebook post:

*I met Dave nearly 20 years ago when I first moved to LA. He became my best friend. He showed me the internet for the first time, planned fun outings, took me to temple for the Jewish holidays, introduced me to much cooler music than I had ever heard.*

*We had 11 truly joyful years of the deepest love, happiest marriage, and truest partnership that I could imagine....He gave me the experience of being deeply understood, truly supported and completely and utterly loved—and I will carry that with me always. Most importantly, he gave me the two most amazing children in the world.*

*Dave was my rock. When I got upset, he stayed calm. When I was worried, he said it would be ok. When I wasn’t sure what to do, he figured it out. He was completely dedicated to his children in every way—and their strength these past few days is the best sign I could have that Dave is still here with us in spirit.*

*Dave and I did not get nearly enough time together. But as heartbroken as I am today, I am equally grateful. Even in these last few days of completely unexpected hell—the darkest and saddest moments of my life—I know how lucky I have been. If the day I walked down that aisle with Dave someone had told me that this would happen—that he*
would be taken from us all in just 11 years—I would still have walked down that aisle. Because 11 years of being Dave Goldberg’s wife, and 10 years of being a parent with him is perhaps more luck and more happiness that I could have ever imagined. I am grateful for every minute we had.

As we put the love of my life to rest today, we buried only his body. His spirit, his soul, his amazing ability to give is still with us.

Our playground is beautiful, but it has some hard truths. Our mortality. Our vulnerability. But the fact that God does not come down means we must step up. And the reality that life is fragile and finite means we need to live and transmit truths that will outlast us. It is a beautiful playground with some hard truths. And it is the only playground we’ve got. May we live and play and work and redeem our playground every day we are lucky enough to be alive. Shabbat shalom.