

A Seven Days Journey from Death to Life

Yom Kippur, 5779

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The last day of my father's life, the last full day of his time in this world, was Father's Day. I had not brought a gift with which to honor him this year. I had not brought one of my trade-mark handmade, primitive art, stick-figure cards this year. In truth, for the last several years my cards were the primary gift on Father's Day and other special days. Inscribed with words of love and nostalgia, with words of appreciation for all that he had taught me, words of amazement expressed for his age and way of aging, the words that flowed from heart to page were drawn from the wellspring of my mother's fountain pen, of which mention was always made. As I read the card to my dad, the real gift was in our crying together in that moment when he drew my hand to his cheek and held it there, tightly snuggled between his face and shoulder, and then in our laughing together in the fading sunshine of long ago memories. That my father died on Father's Day was its own gift for him, and so it became for me.

We had quietly celebrated my dad's one hundred and first birthday just two weeks earlier with a small family gathering in a room at Hebrew Senior Life. Dad delighted in the attention, asking for a moment in which to speak after blowing out a symbolic number of candles. Acknowledging that it was not his way to "invoke the Almighty," so he did and he blessed us. As I began as a young father to bless my own children on Shabbos evenings, I yearned for my father's blessing, to feel his hands upon my head, not with awkward invocation, but with his hopes and dreams for me, carried on wings of ancient words, to hear the simple words, "I love you." At one hundred and one years, my siblings and I received his blessing, saying "amen" with tears to his hope that his children, his grandchildren, his great grandchildren should have such fullness of years as were given to him. It was not the seventh day, but so it would infuse all the cycles of seven to come, even sooner than we might have thought.

On a Friday two weeks later, we received a call that dad wasn't well. My sister and I spent much of the afternoon by his bedside, taking in the nurses' gentle caution that this was probably his dying. Dad didn't respond at all as I kissed his brow and said good Shabbos before leaving, my hand upon his head, child blessing parent. On Shabbos afternoon the next day, Mieke and I went to see him. Dad seemed deeper in his dying sleep now. Holding his left hand in my right hand, waiting for him, as though willing him, to lift my hand to his cheek, I held a siddur in my other hand. I began to softly chant the *Vidui/the Acknowledgement* with which we acknowledge,

very much in the way of Yom Kippur, the shortcomings and moments of brokenness in our lives, all drawn together as part of the imperfect wholeness of a life.

On Sunday, my siblings and I spread our visits out through the day, honoring each other in allowing each of us to have our own time with dad on Father's Day. Having received phone calls and Face-Timed Father's Day greetings and anxious questions from the ones who honor me on that day as *abba* and him as *zaydie*, Mieke and I went to visit dad in the later afternoon. He was unresponsive as we sang *nigunim* and old folk songs, stroking his face, holding his hand. In the dark and light of life shadows that danced in the room, at some point I bent toward dad's ear and fairly shouted, "Today is Father's Day, Dad. I want to thank you for being my father." Barely having spoken for two days, he opened his bright blue eyes and said with a look of amazement, "that is beautiful." A little while later, I leaned in again and said, "dad, I have learned so much from you." Opening his eyes, he said in kind, "I have learned so much from you." Of words spoken in kind and in kindness, I cried and held his hand and his words. I stroked his brow and kissed his face, and spoke words that tell only of essence, "I love you dad." He woke then for the last time and said to me, his son who is a father and grandfather, myself a *zayde*, words spoken with such tenderness to last a lifetime and more, "you're a good boy."

My father, Aharon ben Avigdor v'Soreh, died early the next morning, only a few miles from where he spent most of his early years in the three neighborhoods of Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan, gathered to his people as the sun was rising on a new day. It was Monday morning in the week of Torah portion *Chukat*. Two words will now forever stand out in my reading of that portion, *va'ya'mot Aharon/and Aharon died* (Num. 20:28). There had been something surreal in the three days of my father's gentle transition, something powerfully beautiful in the opportunity to accompany him as he prepared to journey from this world to the next. Holding the profound gift of his Father's Day words of blessing as the coda to my father's time on earth, so we prepared to make our way on "A Seven Day's Journey from Death to Life."

Standing at that inevitable boundary in time that all who travel through life will reach, a voice echoes, unsure whose, but the word becomes clear, addressed personally, and we hear it, "mourner." Whether consciously articulated or subtly drawn to consciousness from the churning within, the realization emerges that "I am a mourner." In that place of death's moment we feel alone, even when we know there are others waiting to take our hand, when signs are pointing the way but we cannot see through tears. A moment with its own peace, its own wholeness, we hold the hand of the one whom death has taken, squeezing it for the last time, wishing that it would squeeze back, that it would raise up our own to snuggle it between cheek and shoulder, even as its own warmth ebbs into the cool of a new dawn's night.

My father's death was in so many ways an ideal death, like that of the other Aharon and his exalted siblings, Miriam and Moses. At one hundred and one years, he had lived a full life, the struggles that come as a certainty of living interwoven with accomplishments never promised. The last few years were their own special time of closeness and it is hard to leave them behind. For loss and sorrow deeply felt, I could not ask for more. He died without suffering, his children's love surrounding, indeed going "gently into that good night." His way in earlier years was to rage in the way of Dylan Thomas' poem: "And you, my father, there on the sad height; Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. Do not go gently into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." There is a time for the poet's passionate embrace of life, and indeed a time to rage against the dying of the light. In grief's rage, though, we dare not miss life's essence distilled in the gentle presence of the dead. The light was rising as my father died, and I was touched by its warmth. It was not the light of the early morning sun that touched me then, but the light of his fluttering soul, the calm upon his face. My father had taught me how to die, going gently into that good night, a legacy unexpected in the turning of his years.

Of rage that melts into tears, when our knees buckle beneath the burden of sudden and untimely death, when sunlight is snuffed out in a tragic instant, I want to acknowledge with all of my heart the raw grief carried by many in this room, by so many in the world around us. The way of my father's dying represents an ideal, a gentle harvest of days in the fullness of years, as we hope will be the way for our loved ones and ourselves. My mother's death was sudden and untimely. I could not have written then what I write and share now. And yet, I struggled then, in part by way of honoring her, to understand the teaching she had often shared with me from my earliest years, that death is a part of life. In the way of my father's dying it is easy to understand, that life and death are part of one organic whole, seamless in sacred unfolding. But what about when they are not seamless, when the fabric of life is torn asunder, the sound of ripping cloth that echoes forever, as of the garment torn in grief?

Death is, nevertheless, I hear my mother say, a part of life, if we could have continued the conversation, and so we do. It is the vulnerability of life that we face, the grandeur and fragility of being human. The gift of life is fierce in the consequence of accepting it. In celebrating life we come to know the truth of the romantic author of Song of Songs that love is as strong as death. These are the poles of human grandeur and fragility as held in one breath, the breath of life. Death is a part of life in all the ways and times that it comes. Words spoken to give strength and comfort in times of loss, sung and softly chanted, the heart-ingrained words of Psalm 23, are meant as more than that. *Yeah, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death* speaks to all the journeys and times of our lives, offering its awareness of nevertheless as a consciousness and intention for living. All of life is lived in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Her favorite flower and mine, my mother might have reminded us to take note of the Lilly of the Valley that grows all along the way, dotting the valley floor

with its simple beauty. I often look up from my desk to see the beautiful photograph made by my father for my mother, Lilly of the Valley in their moment of blooming. Held in a crystal tear drop, as the morning dew upon the little flower's broad green leaf, the essence of my mother's teaching, yes, to lament the shortness of their season, but then to smile upon their beauty and breath their fragrance, thankful for their time among us.

I think of that simple, fleeting beauty, each of us as the Lilly of the Valley, as we make our way through Yom Kippur. Held in the span of one day, Yom Kippur is the valley, calling us to look as we go, to see both the beauty and the pain and to walk together. In the powerful, prayerful sweep of *U'n'saneh Tokef*, we acknowledge together in haunting melody that we are of the earth and so shall be our return. As my mother would, though perhaps more gently and with her own tears joining ours, the poet reminds us that we are like the withering grass and a fading flower. Our very fragility becomes our grandeur, as the prayer rises in triumphant chorus, singing out in its end to God, *for you have called our name through your name / ושמיינו קראת בשמיר / u'sh'menu karata vish'mecha*. Similarly did Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel title his first book, a small book of Yiddish poems, *מענש -- דער שם המפורש / Der Shem Ha'm'forash -- Mensch/God's Most Holy/Ineffable Name -- Human!*

Diminished by death and yet uplifted, torn apart and stitched back together, it is the sacred challenge and gift of being human, of carrying God's image on earth even when we stumble and grasp for the hand of another. We hardly need reminding of life's fragility, only to know that we do not walk alone. It is the way of Yom Kippur, a journey in reverse from death to birth, life renewed as the long day merges into the far shore of night. Prayers that tell of brokenness are all in the plural, each one's voice part of a collective chorus of a community standing together. Abstaining from ways of the body, we approximate death as we celebrate life. We wear the *kittel*, not as a garment of death, but as a garment of life. It is the garment in which the dead are robed for the final journey, but worn first beneath the *chuppah* and at the Pesach seder, tear-stained and wine-stained to remind of life's fullness when the body is returned to the earth, soul winging home on the morning light.

The day was coming to life all around us as Mieke and I left my dad, having closed his eyes and accompanied him to the car that would take him to the funeral home. I had felt almost embarrassed in my father's presence, as though needing to tell him that he was dead, that even he would die, when that day seemed it would never come, as though we would just keep bringing him the simple pleasures he so enjoyed, fresh fruit and Dunkin' donuts and coffee. Sitting at the kitchen table, calls to siblings, who would do what and when, acknowledging what a great team we had been for all the years of dad's decline, calling children, tears across the line, who would come and who could not for little ones at home, emerging from a daze, as though a dream, then to list-making and tasks, the holy details that begin the mourner's journey.

The call from the Community *Hevra Kaddisha* brought tears, this truly holy society of which I have been blessed to be so much a part along with other members of the Ne-har Shalom community, assured that dad would not be left alone, watched over by guardian angels as well as washed and garbed. Each of our dead is treated as the *Kohen Gadol*, addressed and dressed with all the deference due the High Priest, dressed in simple white as the High Priest was dressed on this day, on Yom Kippur, upon entering the Holy of Holies, as recounted in the *Avodah* of *Musaf*. The stages of mourning are like bridges across the river of life, joining islands in time. It can be hard to move on from one stage to the next, often wishing to remain right where we are, the present one closer to the time when our dear one was still alive. We are carried along by the current below, bridge and river becoming as one, all part of life. The first stage is *anninut*, a time of raw grief, of confusion, of taking care of details, at times in a fog, needing others, always needing others, of finding our footing for the the journey ahead. We covered mirrors, stepping back from needs of the body, as on Yom Kippur, details of doing giving focus to feelings. We met with the rabbi who would guide us, Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, who as the rabbi of Hebrew Senior Life had known dad in his last years. We shared stories of dad with laughter and tears, children of an amazing man, a true renaissance "man," gifted in ways of hand and mind, facile with languages, knowledgeable in art and music and all realms of science, a clinical chemist, director of a laboratory, all without benefit of a college degree until he retired. He taught me to see worlds through a microscope, to create great things with hammer and saw, to delight in the alchemy of the photographic dark room. Tentatively, I also shared memories that might have seemed dissonant at first, but were really not, love's way of seeking wholeness. That love shine clearly in the uncovered mirror of time, I also needed to speak of the rough edges that had hurt and taken years to smooth and overcome.

I stroked dad's coffin with my hands, feeling the rough wood as though to smooth, taking in its simple dignity that tells of human equality. As I had done for my mom, in the same spot many years before, I had written a letter to dad in order to share with him directly, placing it on the coffin as my turn came to speak. I steadied myself as memories swirled, there in the old synagogue where I had grown up, where we had all become Bar and Bas Mitzvah, where the twinkling eye of my beloved Rabbi Finkelstein was a *ner tamid* that shined with love for Torah and people, welcoming all, the old shul where dad had remained a member even until now. In the way of Yom Kippur, I shared with dad that as much as I had always loved him, there had been a barrier to my love. We had spoken about it only once, only once for about five minutes when I was already a father myself. It was too much for dad to talk about, beyond acknowledging deep sorrow and shame for that part of him he knew had hurt me. I had been afraid of him as a child. I was afraid of the temper that flared unexpected. I was never able to ask him if it came from the war years, as with other men of his generation, or from the pain of being poor and the struggles of his own childhood, losing his own father so young. Over time, the barrier faded and allowed me to embrace him fully, holding all of the gifts that he had given me, treasuring them and sharing them with my own children as his legacy. I sometimes mused

with a tear and a smile that I needed the long years with which he was blessed to transcend the barrier. And so we did, him and me. He became the gentle man, the utterly loving soul that came to define who he really was, vulnerable, easily able to cry, reflective and tender, that part of my father that was missing in my early years, a way of being a father that I tried to be to my own children from the beginning, however imperfectly. So too, acknowledging in the way of this day, I learned to forgive, learning the hard lesson in becoming a parent that we all do the best we can. As we brought dad home to rest in the earth from which all life comes, filling the grave as *nigunim* filled the air, there was nothing buried away forever in my heart. For all that I would still like to have said, for all the heart's yearning to share in the passing of days, there was nothing then or now that needed to be said. I was ready to begin A Seven Day's Journey from Death to Life.

Shiva is a gift, a time apart in which the mourner is allowed simply to be. It is a time to be with all the churnings of the heart that the death of a loved one brings. Memories and their moments come unbidden, placed as though on the microscope stage to be examined, then to laugh and cry for the details that emerge, an invitation for you to share, as you wish and are so moved. Without prescription for what should be and when in the world within, not of what to feel and think, but only to be present to receive the winds that blow through the open windows of the soul. Gathered in one room may be people from across the span of your life, people who would never otherwise meet, except that they have known the one you mourn, and whether or not, and even more, they know you. Sustenance provided for body and soul, it is the kindness that makes community real, the *chesed* of those who will say Amen and praise God's name as you haltingly rise to the realization that you are the one saying Kaddish. When death has come cruelly and untimely, to rage against the dying of the light and then to melt into the arms of others, carried on a flood of tears, questions without form or answer, the journey carried on a torrent without sail or rudder, yet toward life.

Whether in the span of Yom Kippur or through the seven days and onward, it takes courage to make the journey from death to life, needing to know most of all that we do not walk alone. In the way of our tradition to give *tzedakah* in memory of the dead as a way of moving from death to life, we asked people to honor my father's memory by giving to a fund to help immigrants on the southern border. I have come to feel that the song of accompaniment often sung for those so mistreated, originally a South African freedom song, is a song for all of us on the journey of life:

Courage, my friend, you do not walk alone; we will walk with you and sing your spirit home.

I am grateful to be in your presence as we make our way together to Yizkor, the first one in which I remember my father, Aharon ben Avigdor v'Soreh, holding close his Father's Day gifts. May the memories of all those whom we remember be a blessing among us, singing their spirits home on the journey from death to life.