

Holding On & Living On

Yizkor 5780 (2019)

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In 1960, a group of college students visited the Lubavitcher rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson zt”l. They explored various topics with the rebbe, including the Jewish understanding of death. The rebbe explained:

“The term used to describe death in Judaism is *histalkut*, which does not mean death in the sense of coming to an end; rather it is an elevation from one level to another. When one completes his or her mission in life, the departed person is elevated to a higher plane.

Death is not a cessation of life; the word actually describes the process whereby one’s spiritual life takes on a new dimension. This notion is consistent with the scientific principle of conservation of matter, which states that nothing physical can be annihilated. A table or piece of iron can be cut up, burned, etc., but in no instance can the matter of the table or the iron be destroyed. It only takes on a different form.” (R. Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, p. 319)

My paternal grandfather passed away about a year before Frayda and I got married. As many of you know, I was very close with this grandfather. We shared a birthday. We shared a number of essential qualities and we also shared many meaningful experiences together.

Nono Marcel was a very fashionable guy. A few times a year, my grandfather would take me shopping for clothes with him. Often time, we would not even shop for me, though certainly, if I wanted anything, he would get it for me. Many times, he would just let me choose a tie for him, or help him pick a new pair of shoes. It seemed to me like my grandfather had a tie and a pair of shoes, socks, and yes, even a unique shiny watch, to go with every one of his suits.

At our wedding, my father was still a mourner. Unbeknownst to me, he decided to wear one of his father's watches at the wedding. He hoped to honor his father's legacy and memory in this way.

During the wedding dinner, both Frayda and I shared words of gratitude with our guests. I spent a significant portion of my speech remembering my grandfather, whose presence was so sorely missed on this very joyous occasion. At some point during my remarks, I described how I envisioned my grandfather in some heavenly garden, sitting together with Frayda's grandfathers, who were also deceased, *schepping naches* and drawing deep joy at the sight of their grandchildren getting married.

As I spoke those very words, my father, quite instinctively, looked at his watch, or more precisely, he looked at his father's watch that he wore on his wrist. At that very moment, the hand on the watch that moves ever so swiftly marking the passing of each and every second, suddenly stopped, as did the hour on the watch.

Later that night, when my father shared this story with me, he remarked, "It's as though time stood still. It's as though my father came to the wedding and made time stop."

If you hold on to those who passed in your memories, they will live on.

Frayda's mother, Anna, recently shared two moving stories about her father with me.

She said, "When my father had his first heart attack, in the late 70's, he said he had this vision of himself walking down a road, and coming to meet him was his mother. I can't remember if he also saw one of his brothers as well, a brother who died as a child, but he definitely saw his mother. And his mother said to him, 'Molthalech', (his nickname, as his name was Mordechai),

‘Molthalech, what are you doing here, *was tuest du doch?*’ He answered, ‘I came home to be with you.’ Gently, softly, she said to him, ‘No, you can’t come home. Your wife Yente and the girls are in your home, waiting for you.”

Thankfully Frayda’s grandfather survived that very serious heart attack. At the time he was close to age 70 and was blessed to live for at least another decade.

In January 1990 at age 80, Frayda’s grandfather died from a massive heart attack. Frayda’s mother often shares that he died like a *tzadik*, he merited the death of a righteous person. It was Friday evening, he got himself washed up and went downstairs to meet some friends. He walked in, he sat down, he said “*gut Shabbos*” and he died.

His death was devastating to Frayda’s mom. It’s not simply that he died like a *tzadik*, it is clear that in her eyes, and in truth, in the eyes of many, he was a modern-day hero of righteousness. A charismatic, natural leader, whose word was solid and ethics and ideals were firmly set. Anna could not be comforted and his void could not be filled.

A few months after his passing, Anna had a dream. She shared this with me: “I was having a very hard time. I dreamt I was on a street in Paris (where she was born after the Shoah) and there was my father, standing in front of me. I got very angry, just so angry at him. What was he doing here? I told him, “Everyone thinks you died, everyone is so upset, why did you not let us know you were alive?” My father had this wonderful twinkle in his eyes and this wonderful deep laugh. He looked at me with that twinkle and he said, *naaraleh* foolish little girl, I’ll never die.”

After sharing the story, Anna remarked, “He hasn’t died for me, he’s so much part of everything we do. I always said that if anyone was going to come back from the other side to tell me there was another side, it was going to be my father.”

If you hold on to those who passed in your heart, they will live on.

Last year, on Friday night, just a few days before Rosh Hashanah, our dear friend and community member David Spieler passed from this world all of a sudden. News of his unexpected passing caused profound grief, and even trauma, in our community, and certainly for his family and loved ones. The reaction to his passing was not surprising. David was larger than life. A unique *tzadik* who for all time will be remembered as one of the most eccentric individuals to pray and daven in our midst.

I have many fond memories of David Spieler and some memories that still drive me up the wall.

Thirteen years ago, on my first week on the job as rabbi of the shul, David Spieler decided, without asking for any permission, to hang photos of all of CBI's former rabbis on one of the shul's walls. As I said, he drove me up the wall and I mean it quite literally. The house committee, at the time I didn't even know there was a house committee, asked me to address this issue with him.

In time, I learned that David Spieler did lots of things, most of them truly wonderful and righteous-like, without ever asking for permission. He regularly changed the light bulb for the shul's *Ner Tamid* (eternal flame), sometimes with a bright orange lightbulb (which I found to be a strange choice and a distraction), he would routinely shine and, if need be, fix the silverware that adorns our Torah scrolls, and he even hung hooks – without permission – on the gates leading up to the shul's bimah.

About a month after David Spieler passed away, a member of the shul took me over to the chair in the sanctuary that David would most often sit on. On the back of the chair, someone had screwed in a minuscule plaque, that stated "In Memory of David Spieler."

"Did you see this? Did you know about this? Are we doing this now? And if not, then who did it?" The member wanted to know.

I looked at the concerned individual with a twinkle in my eye and I gave the only answer that I knew to be true: "David Spieler hung this plaque and I promise you he doesn't need to ask for permission."

The member immediately smiled and we both laughed. As soon as I said it, it became just as clear to this person as well. David Spieler came back to our midst and hung this very plaque on his sanctuary seat.

The Lubavitcher rebbe once wrote a comforting note to the grieving teenage daughter of Mrs. Rasha Gansbourg, who had passed away suddenly on the second day of Sukkot in 1969. In it, the rebbe explained that by performing good deeds in her mother's merit, especially those modeled by her mother, she and her siblings would channel her presence in this world. The rebbe wrote, "Every good deed they do causes her spiritual pleasure, specifically the accomplishments of those she has educated and raised in the manner that brings about the said good deeds. That is to say, she has a part in the deeds that result from the education she provided her children and those whom she influenced." (R. Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, p. 323)

If you hold on to those who passed through your actions and deeds, they will live on.

I recognize that we each remember different people who made an important impact on our lives. Some were extremely positive. Many were multi-dimensional, mostly good, a bit of bad. And some, hopefully but a few, were problematic, challenging, and sadly sometimes even destructive. Judaism's laws of mourning recognize that at times it is forbidden to grant all

honors of mourning and remembrance to a deceased person. For example, in the extreme case of a truly wicked individual, the community and even close relatives are forbidden from attending this person's burial (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avel 1:9-11). In cases of abuse, *kaddish* could be denied to the deceased (see R. Mark Dratch, "Honoring Abusive Parents", *Hakirah* 12 2011, pp. 117-118; R. Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Mourning Abusive Parents", *Hakirah* 9 2010, pp. 197-198; R. David Cohen, Excerpts from a speech by Harav Dovid Cohen, shlit'a. "Counseling the contemporary Orthodox Jewish family." Young Israel Council of Rabbis Annual Conference, February, 2000; R. Yitzhak Zilberstein, "*Pegi'ah be-kevod horim le-zorekh Hazalah ve-Refu'a*," *Kol Ha-Torah*, Nisan 5763 [2003], p. 173).

Our tradition teaches, in various ways and to various degrees, that sometimes, selective memory is a virtue. It also teaches that on rare occasions, forgetfulness is a necessity.

During these past ten days, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we've been focusing on the theme of holding on and letting go. In remembering those who have passed from this world, we ought to apply this newly gained wisdom as well. Hold on, hold on tightly, and where need be, try to let go.

In June of 2016, Ariel Burger, one of Elie Wiesel's main students, and the recent author of "Witness – Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom", went to visit his teacher for the very last time.

Burger describes the visit as follows:

"I arrive and sit in the lobby of his apartment building until he comes down. He is being pushed in a wheelchair by his nurse. His hair is thin and wispy, and he looks much older. But when he sees me, his face lights up. We sit in the lobby of the building, he in a wheelchair, I in a cushioned sofa, and speak for almost an hour. He makes me laugh out loud; that hasn't changed. At times I am able to make him smile.

We talk about so many things.

[...]

He asks me how I am, and I tell him that I am feeling that I've lost time, that I've wasted it on things that weren't essential and that I am trying to make up for it now in a flurry of creative activity.

He says, "Nothing ever gets lost."

"Nothing?"

I am thinking of how much he's lost. His father, his mother, his little sister; the six million; and so many more across the long years.

"Nothing," he says again. "It can take a hundred years, or two hundred, or five hundred. We may never see it. But in God's eyes, nothing gets lost." He seems to sense that I'm not completely on board. "You want proof?" he says. "*You miss it* – that's a sign that you never lost it."

He says, "Remember that I'm here, I'm always here for you." (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, pp. 244-245)

A number of months after Elie Wiesel's passing from this world, Ariel Burger realized that his beloved teacher was still with him.

Burger shares one last reflection in his book on Wiesel.

"Professor Wiesel once told me: "To this day, if I have to make a decision in my personal life, I close my eyes and see my mother. I think, *What would she do?* If it's something which concerns the public, the community, I close my eyes and see my father."

Now I find myself asking, "What would Professor Wiesel do?" I continue to learn as much from him after his death as I did before it, and his words echo in my mind." (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, p. 251)

If you tune in to those who passed and hold on to them in your heart, they will live on.

In a few moments, we will join together for the Yizkor service. At this time, let's slow down and let's join together to make time stop.

Today, we join together to hold to those who passed in our memories and in our hearts. We join together to hold on to their actions and deeds so that their legacy will live on. We join together to tune in to their voices and their advice.

Today, we join together to hold on so that they can live on.

Tehe nishmatan tzurah bi'tzrur ha'chaim – may their souls be bound in the bundle of the living.