

## Writing Ourselves into the Books of Life and Love

She called me at the end of winter. She was beginning the long process of shedding her material possessions. It's that thing so many people seem to do in later years. We spend so much time acquiring material possessions to help make our life more comfortable. Pots and pans, blankets and books, artwork and furniture. At a certain point—at 60, or 70 or 80 years of age, we come to see those same objects as encumbrances. The journey at the end of life has different needs than our middle years.

She wanted to bequeath to me her record collection, as she knew I was into vinyl. I had written about it in one of my Oasis Songs, how the physicality, the analog-ness of a record helped me to tune more fully into the music. I don't know whether it's this way for you, but listening deeply into music restores my soul. There are messages in music, the best of an artist's life preserved and given to us. Music contains the wisdom of beauty, and the beauty of a musician's soul.

Her offer was too good to refuse. When I was finally able to carve out some time, and was sitting in a room off the kitchen, she shared parts of her story that I had not known. She was an accomplished pianist in her youth. Several of her

school friends would go on to become professional musicians. One of her music teachers, without even asking her, had submitted her name for a scholarship at a prestigious conservatory. And that school awarded her a full ride. So she had some chops.

She also had a critical family. Her mother was from the old world. A European of culture and breeding, her mother had been exposed to the very best musicians that the continent could produce. In her educated assessment, her daughter didn't have what it took, didn't possess first rate talent. And so she refused to let her daughter pursue music, forbade her to follow her passion. The scholarship was turned down.

This congregant is nothing if not dutiful. She fulfills her responsibilities, which in this case meant listening to her mother. I can't really wrap my head around this story, but my heart understands it and is devastated. What would it be like to have a dream, and be refused permission to chase after it? How do you maintain a relationship with a parent who couldn't see you? Who didn't believe in you? Where do you let the pieces lie?

If recollection serves, she severed her relationships with her musician friends for quite some time. It must have been too painful to see them pursue the path she wanted, the path that was closed to her.

But life goes on. It must. She got married. She had children. She believed in her children, and labored so that they would feel the support and belief from a mother that she was denied as a child. She changed the dynamic. She refused to visit the sins of the grandmother on her children. She wrote a different story.

And she collected records. Not just any albums, but the best classical musicians of the day, the world's finest. These recordings were her friends. They linked her to the music she so loved. They were, they had to be, a life line to an alternate universe, the one she might have existed in if only...

Now, when I listen to Walter Gieseking play Claude Debussy, I hear her story. In the silence between the notes, questions arise, a series of whys.

Why was her mother so critical?

Why couldn't she show or express love to her daughter?

What did her mother imagine she was protecting daughter from? A greater disappointment later on?

This story resonates with us, because in some ways, it is a burden we all carry. None of us get all we need out of life.

None of us are fully seen by our parents. Our friends. Our spouses. Our colleagues. Nor do we fully see those around us.

**Al Heyt SheHatanu b'aynayim s'gurot-for our sin of a blind eye to those we love.**

And therefore, on a day like this, we are forced to confront other questions:

What have we left unsaid to our loved ones?

What have we said that we regretted, that we wish was left unsaid?

Who have we done a disservice to, maybe even with the best of intentions?

To those who are alive...and to those who are no longer here.

**And if we could do it all over again, would we live any differently?**

**Al Heyt SheHatanu b'kalut rosh—for the sin of our superficiality**

That is the central question we are being asked today. Isn't that what *teshuvah* is all about? It's one thing to apologize and seek forgiveness. It's another thing to live differently. To love differently. Better.

This summer we went on pilgrimage to visit our family in DC, NY and Maine. In NY, we all went for the first time to the completed memorial at Ground Zero... Where the Twin Towers had stood. It took my breath away. They really did it right, conveying the scale of loss by portraying each life.

On one wall, Brooklyn artist Spenser Finch hand painted 2,983 individual squares of Fabriano Italian paper. Each square was tinted a slightly different shade of blue, to represent the unique way each person killed in the Sept. 11 attacks witnessed the sky. In the middle of that wall of blue, a solitary quote by the ancient poet Virgil: *No day shall erase you from the memory of time.*

In a separate chamber of concrete, pictures of the deceased were projected, along with a short biography of the individual. That image would fade to darkness, followed by a short video about who the person was and what they meant. The videos were by the person's family. Or a fiancée. A best friend from childhood. Every story was different. And every story was the same. Amitai and I sat a long time on those

hard stone benches in semi-darkness absorbing the immensity of what was lost. It was sobering. Enthralling. Life affirming. Humbling.

There's a way that mortality clarifies what matters to us. It's the relationships, stupid! Imagine if a politician had used *that* for a campaign slogan. It's the relationships.

Yet we don't seem built or designed to hold on to those ephemeral insights that seem so clear when a loved one dies...or when we get an unexpected and frightening diagnosis. Why can't we hold on to such wisdom in our daily activities? Wouldn't we feel more fulfilled? Wouldn't we better experience the significance of our lives and cherish the people we sometimes take for granted?

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, "WHEN ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED ISN'T ENOUGH."

In it, he argues that it is not really death that frightens us.

Listen to his words:

"I believe that it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else. Something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days, with the sense, that we

were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for.”

We are blessed, my friends. We have a tradition that encourages us to tune in and take note. More importantly, the Jewish people seem to get it. Jewish professionals like to joke that if we were only going to go to shul three days a year, it would be on Purim, Simchat Torah and Chanukkah. Costumes, booze, dancing and fried things.

Yet Amcha, the Jewish people, are *not* frivolous. This chamber is full because somewhere in the Jewish soul is this essential knowledge. “We may not be always be capable of remembering what matters, so let us return on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” On the most challenging day of the Jewish calendar, the pintele yid, that spark of Jewish soul wants to be reminded.

What if I told you that it *can* be different all year long? That you can transform your relationships. And not just the relationships with those who are alive, but even with your loved ones who are no longer? What if I told you that in one month, thanks to the generosity of the Suher Family Foundation, we were going to provide you the tools and the opportunities to make your life better by allowing you to deepen and improve your central relationships?

In just under a month, we are going to have a remarkable author and a deeply kind soul come visit us. Rabbi Elana Zaiman is a sixth generation rabbi and the author of an important book entitled, “The Forever Letter.” The work builds on a very noble Jewish tradition of the ethical will. Ethical wills were traditionally written by parents to their children. They contained a parent’s wisdom and advice. Usually, the child would only receive the will *after* their parent’s death.

Rabbi Zaiman’s chief insight was to develop a way that we could compose relationship-affirming forever letters to our living relatives or friends. Secondly, she understood that children can write to their parents, brothers to sisters and so on. Finally, she enumerates the parts that make for a successful forever letter. By developing on an ancient custom and teaching regular people how to compose these life giving letters, Rabbi Elana has helped restore countless relationships and aid people to feel deeply connected to the people they love most. Even those of us who feel we can’t write. She will be with us starting on November 6th to help teens and parents connect, and then remain throughout the weekend so that we all can learn from her.

As Neveh Shalom begins to wind down 150 years, this was the gift Brian Suher and I wanted to give to our community— a time to learn about forever letters and to recommit to the



people we love most, in a more open and loving manner than we sometimes can muster on our own. We want to offer you a life changing gift as we embark on the next 150 years of joyous Jewish living.

Would you take advantage of it? Ponder that for a few moments. Let it percolate while I share a final story. This one is from a movie I watched while on the treadmill a couple of months back. It came out in the year 2000 and was called “A Rumor of Angels”

Here’s the thrust of the movie:

James is a twelve year old boy whose mother died in a car accident two years before. He was with her, and watched her die. His father refuses to discuss the death, and distances himself from his son by constantly traveling for work. As a result, James has never has an opportunity to process his grief. He struggles with paralyzing anxiety attacks, and lives a somewhat solitary life with his step-mother and absent father. In the hopes that it will help him recover, he spends the summer with his eccentric Uncle Charlie in a small seaside Maine Village.

With nothing to do and no friends his own age, he takes to riding his bicycle and engaging in make believe games as a spy or soldier. One night while thus engaged, he creeps into

the yard of a screw ball neighbor, Crazy Maddy, who is something of a recluse. Disturbed by the intruder, she pulls out a rifle loaded with salt shot and proceeds to aim it at the boy who narrowly makes his escape, blundering and breaking her fence in his mad dash back to his bicycle. As he pedals madly away from her, however, he passes by the bridge where the fateful crash occurred; he freezes, as he relives the terrible crash. Time passes there until his uncle comes hollering and drags him into his truck. As the scene fades, we see Maddy step out of the shadows. She has witnessed his paralysis.

The next day, Maddy shows up at his door and demands that he fix the fence he has broken. Out of this unlikely beginning, a strange friendship is born between the aged recluse and the suffering boy. With her keen eye, Maddy senses James's unexpressed grief. She also forces him to speak up and share his inner life.

The essential link of their unusual bond is that they have each lost someone very close to them. James, his mother, of course. In a poignant scene, Maddy tells James how her son died in the war. He then confides that his mother died as well. Maddy pauses and looks at him, then asks, "Have you ever talked to her?" "No, she's dead."

## **Al Heyt SheHatanu b'shtika—for the sin of our silence when speech is required.**

Maddy then tells him that her son and she discovered a way to communicate with each other using Morse code. James learns morse code, and the two pass messages to one another with flashlights. In those bursts of light, she shares messages with James that she claims her son sent to her by morse code after he was already dead.

One such message reads:

The soul leaves the body  
as a school boy jumps from a school door  
suddenly and with joy  
There is no horror in death.

Sensing that James hasn't had a chance to express his feelings about his mother's death, Maddy takes him to the bridge where the accident occurred and listens as he pours out his fears and guilt. She reassures him that his mother does indeed know of his love.

Eventually, we learn that she wrote the letters. That her dead son did not communicate to her from beyond the grave. Rather, she talks to her son in her mind, and then recorded the conversations in a book. When James asks her why she

wants him to read the book to her if it's not true, she replies, because it is beautiful.

Because it is beautiful.

I think we can all understand that. There's a little bit of Maddy in all of us.

As we approach Yizkor, isn't that what we all are doing? Writing, and speaking and opening our hearts to those who are not here anymore. Crafting beauty from loss?

The genius of Yizkor is that it is the Jewish morse code. It allows us to reach past the veil that separates the living and the dead. Yizkor allows us to stretch a hand out to a parent or grandparent, even one who didn't believe in our dreams of being a musician. It allows us to send our love to those who returned it, and to those who didn't know how.

None of us can say with certainty if we will be here next year. Without a shadow of doubt, not all of us will be here. And they will be terribly missed.

But at this holy hour, we are granted an opportunity to write ourselves into the books of life and love.

Will you take it? Please?