



Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Becoming Them”

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Yizkor Yom Kippur 5772

It was a short flight to Santa Fe, just two Mays ago. I had been invited as a consultant by local civic leaders, who wanted to learn how to combat family homelessness citywide the way we do here with Imagine LA. We had just landed, and I turned on my BlackBerry to see the messages that had come in while I was in the air.

The very first message to come down was from Rabbis for Human Rights. Its title: “Rabbi David Forman Needs Your Prayers.” The text was brief: “Rabbi David Forman, the founder of Rabbis for Human Rights, is fighting for his life at this second, as he waits for a liver transplant in Dallas. Please offer a prayer on his behalf....”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. One of my most important mentors – a true hero to me and to many – was very suddenly hanging between life and death. And as I stared at my phone, watching the stream of messages continuing to flow in, trying to grasp what I had just read, a second message arrived from Rabbis for Human Rights: “With great sorrow, we announce the death of Rabbi David Forman.”

Late that night, I walked and walked alone through the deserted town square in Santa Fe. And it took some time, but finally I realized that I was feeling something well beyond the sadness of separation or loss. I was feeling an almost crippling weight of responsibility. I felt this gnawing, daunting demand to *become* David in some small but significant way. It wasn’t some creepy inclination to imitate him or to attempt to fill the gaping hole that his death had created. I knew that I could never do that and that it would be foolish even to try. Only David could be David. But I became intensely aware that night that he wouldn’t be here to advise me anymore on what to say on matters of justice and conscience and humanity, as he had done so often before. So I would not only have to figure out what to say without him... I’d have to help others figure out what to say, as he always did. They needed him, too – and he wouldn’t be here for them, either. Maybe I needed to nurture that seed of his soul that he had implanted within me – and somehow become a little bit of what he had been. And the thought of bearing that new responsibility, when all I really wanted to do was attend to my own feeling of being cheated – it was an awful lot to endure.

Indeed, our greatest losses – the deaths of those who truly matter in our lives – their enormity surpasses the pain of absence. Missing them is really only the beginning of the agony. At first, missing them takes up all the room there is in our hearts. But with the passage of time, a deepening fear often sets in – that we will somehow not be up to the challenge of becoming them, of embodying those seeds of their souls – and if we fail to become them in these small but enduring ways, won't their preciousness... their one-of-a-kind ways of giving and being love in this life... be lost to the world forever?

Our earliest sages certainly knew what it was to walk withering from that weight. They were the ones who witnessed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and with it, the murders of so many giants of Torah right before their eyes... the great scholars whose teachings still fill synagogues today. And they were devastated. The Mishnah records their sense of unworthiness before the intimidating task of becoming that part of their mentors that was their magic... that part that was the way they created love. They wrote: "When Rabbi Meir died, there were no more storytellers. Once Ben Azzai died, there were no more true students of Torah. When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa died, there were no more men of action. With the death of Rabbi Yosef Ketanta, there were no more men of piety. When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai died, there was no more wisdom. And when Rabbi Judah the Prince died... it was the end of humility and fear of sin. One by one," they concluded, "all of the important qualities of the world seemed to pass away."

We know too well what the rabbis were feeling – we, who share this hour of Yizkor. For the loved ones who bring us here today departed this world and left us to fear that they had taken all of their important qualities, all of their love, with them.

How do we rebound from that paralyzing thought? Fortunately, the rabbis' lament in the Talmud is not the last word. For the story continues with Rabbi Yosef, who stands up, after hearing his colleagues' despair, and declares: "Do not teach that humility has ceased with the death of Judah the Prince, for *I am here.*"

Was he being immodest? I think, more likely, he was being brave. Brave as we who mourn must be. For he surely missed the great Rabbi every bit as much as the others. But he could hear that awesome call of responsibility – that call to become the Rabbi in a very specific way, for his teacher's humility could not cease. And it need not cease. For he was there. He could make it a forever part of himself. He could gather up those remnants of how he loved the Rabbi, and how the Rabbi had loved him, and then become those remnants of him.

This is how we preserve the greatness of the cherished loved ones, the treasured companions, the indelible role models whose deaths leave us feeling much more than sad. They are the ones who leave us feeling obligated. But we are up to the task – more than we tend to think we are. And when we become them, as well as we know how – that's when we refuse to let them die... and when we ourselves refuse to die. "Do not teach that their goodness has ceased," we say, "for we are here."

It's the daughter who became the mother, when the mother passed away – assuming the role of family matriarch... the bearer of the stories, and the recipes, and the compassion, and the counsel.

It's the husband who became the wife, when the wife left him a widower – holding fast to her unique treasures, and sharing them as best as he can with his children, who miss their mom.

It's the friend who became her departed companion – embracing her confidant's unique inspiration, and incorporating it into the riches that she now shares with others.

It's the sister who became the brother, when the brother was no more – carrying forward the lessons of the family legacy, and implanting them in the next generation.

It's the parents who became the child, after they suffered the most unspeakable loss – adopting, in the face of an unrelenting grief, their precious child's hopes and passions and causes and mission.

It's all we can do. But it is everything, isn't it? We love, and then we lose – and then we inherit this overwhelming responsibility to love differently... to become them in some way, by embodying that unique brand of love that was their gift, lest we allow them to vanish forever.

And so, we figure out some way to pick ourselves up, even while feeling cheated, and we love again, as they did. We love again, only now with a deep sense of duty – loving in some profound way *for* them... as they would... as they did. Even when the loss is so great, the departed soul so unique and so irreplaceable. Even when it seems impossible, we set out to become them in this way. “Do not say that their love is gone,” we protest, “for we are here.”

Most of you know about the death this past January of Debbie Friedman, the legendary Jewish composer/healer of our time. She was, for me, that irreplaceable teacher and friend. I remember feeling much like the rabbis of the Talmud when Debbie died – feeling that there would be no more music, no more healing.

But then I reread a letter that she sent to a small group of us – her students who had become her partners – as the Holy Days arrived last year. That letter included these words: “It dawned on me today as I was walking through the airport that we all live our lives to bring joy and song and hope to communities and most especially we bring, we teach and we model love. It is our love of our people, our text, our history. Sometimes it is our personal history that brings us, sometimes it is history that carries us, sometimes it leads us, and sometimes it follows us and kicks us in the tuchus, sometimes so hard we don't know what hit us and at other times it can give us wings to soar into the heavens with our angels, with each other. At times we meet dead ends...no receptors, no one is home, no one to meet us, and at times we are propelled with these great loves we carry with us night and day. And most of the time we walk around inside out,

and we think no one sees who we are at our essence, because we may not want to see it, but most humans think they can't be seen, when, in fact, they are walking around in plastic bags, and their pain and their joy, their apprehension and their fervor, it all shows.

“And why even mention this? Why not...because what is a conversation among us without my saying I love you, and watching some of you squirm out of your seats...but in truth, there is love all around, and we live in a world in which there is a good bit of dissonance and pain. But we, we have a haven of love, we create a world of love so that sometimes for the first time, people understand what it is to love and feel a part of something and to be loved just for their presence. (I guess we could call us lovists.)

“We need not cringe for hearing the words, ‘I love you.’ I believe the converse to be true – we need to start cringing either when we no longer hear those words, or when we no longer have the capacity to feel those words, and we are numb.

“All of this to say... I love you....and now you can cringe....but try to tell someone in your life who is worthy of your love that you love them, and your world and theirs will be different forever.

“Shana Tova and much love, Debbie”

Debbie knew that in the end, our song... our stories... our wisdom... our grace – whatever it is we put into this world that changes another person – that is our love. That’s why it hurts so much to lose a person who has changed us. We are lovists. And that’s why, even when we’d prefer if it didn’t work this way, we are compelled – called – to *become* them in love.

It is a responsibility we would never choose. It chooses us. So do not say that love is gone. For you are here. You are here.