

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“It’s a Blessing”

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“It’s a blessing,” her friend told her.

“I know... I know,” she quickly countered. She knew it was true. She just wasn’t ready to hear it, having witnessed only minutes earlier her mother’s final breath.

We have all been on the receiving end – and likely also on the giving end – of some very well-intentioned, but ultimately ill-conceived words designed to provide comfort at a time of mourning. We have felt the awkward energy that dominates the encounter between the one who is bereaved and the one offering the consolation. Both stand uncomfortably close to death, gazing upon the part of life that we choose to ignore as much as we possibly can. Forced to stare mortality directly in the eye like that, the consoler squirms and lurches, seeking a quick escape from a dialogue that triggers both sadness and fear.

“It’s a blessing,” we say – usually meaning, “His suffering is over. The quality of his living had been so diminished. He wasn’t going to get better. Given all of that, his death is a blessing.”

Really? No matter how much we may accept that premise intellectually when we lose a long-suffering loved one, we are rarely ready to accept the implication of the statement... that in my moment of crushing separation from someone I deeply loved and will miss more than even I know, my agony over letting go is somehow a demonstration of selfishness on my part. Am I selfish because my loved one’s presence meant so much to me that I was willing on some level to look away from his suffering, to look away from his diminished life, just so I could cling to what faint echo remained of a once-magnificent existence?

Selfish or not, most of us do not see much blessing in surrendering the comfort that comes with knowing that our loved ones’ hearts are still beating. Author Nessa Rapoport describes the rawness of our reluctance to let go: “Undo it,” she writes, “take it back, make every day the previous one until I am returned to the day before the one that made you gone. Or set me on an airplane traveling west, crossing the date line again and again, losing this day, then that, until the day of loss still lies ahead, and you are here instead of sorrow.”

A blessing? No. Surviving a dear one's passage from this life is profound enough to generate that kind of visceral response in us. No matter how well we may understand that our loved one's death will soon be real, it still carries a touch of unreality when it actually happens. It is literally incredible. She was a giant in my life – how can she be gone? He was *just there*... where did he go? How did that happen? And why?

The journey to that moment is entirely unlike the moment itself, for losing someone we love to illness is a gradual thing. Each day, only a small portion of what we had the day before disappears. But when they die, they take the vitality of the narrative with them. They cease, for the first time, to change. And while the moment of parting is often filled with a mysterious beauty, it also ushers in a cold and sudden truth for which there is no preparation.

Polish-American novelist, Anzia Yeziarska, walks us into that truth in her moving work, The Bread Givers. She writes: “She’s dying. Mother is dying! I tried to think, to make myself realize that Mother, with all this dumb sorrow gazing at me, was passing, passing away, forever. But above the dull pain that pressed on my heart, thinking was impossible. I felt I was in the clutch of some unreal dream from which I was trying to waken. Tiny fragments of memory rushed through my mind. I remembered with what wild abandon Mother had danced the *kozatzkeh* at a neighbor’s wedding. With what passion she had bargained at the pushcart over a penny... How her face lit up whenever company came! How her eyes sparkled with friendliness as she served the glasses of tea, spread everything we had on the table, to show her hospitality. A new pair of stockings, a clean apron, a mere car ride, was an event in her life that filled her with sunshine for the whole day... Is there a God over us and sees her suffer so? ...

“Suddenly the sorrowful eyes became transfigured with light. Her lips moved. I could not get the words, but the love-light of Mother’s eyes flowed into mine. I felt literally Mother’s soul enter my soul like a miracle. Then all became dark.”

This swelling of light into dark is the mystifying experience of loss – the experience that unites us all in this hour of Yizkor. We are the ones who have felt that odd rush of light – of overwhelming, piercing awareness – as someone who matters deeply to us moves out of this life that we know. And we are the ones who have felt that light dissolve into the dark of aloneness. Awesome. Disorienting. Perhaps even beautiful, in some ways. But a blessing? No.

Still, they come to comfort us: “It’s a blessing,” they say. “I know... I know,” we reply. And we want to believe, but we’re not ready to hear it.

Yizkor arrives to help us become ready. Time has passed since we were overwrought in the immediacy of our grief. The intensity of that strange, unwelcome light of farewell faded into dark, but we are not meant to dwell there forever. The time has come to emerge from the dark and return to light – the light we created with our loved ones, now gone – so that their gifts can

continue to bless us, and bless those who depend upon our sharing the memories... and our reliving the stories... and our teaching the values... in order to protect the legacies of our cherished dead beyond our days on this earth. Without our returning to light, the blessing of our departed ones cannot reach into the generations. It will die in the dark.

The Chasidic master, Rabbi Aharon of Apt, taught that “light is known to exist by virtue of darkness... One is the chair upon which the other sits.” Is it possible – just possible – that this pain of mourning is itself the inspiration that ultimately leads us back to the light? That the darkness of their absence is the very chair upon which their light sits?

We have learned that we cannot expel the darkness. We will always miss them. The holes in our hearts will never be filled. But on the day we lost them, we understood the moment of farewell to be unique. The days before were nothing like it... and the days to follow should be nothing like it. We are through losing them. Now is the time for keeping them.

“It’s a blessing,” they tell us. And now, perhaps we are ready to hear. For we know they are right. We will never again be tormented with the agony of watching our departed loved ones die. Nothing more of them can be taken from us. What is left now is only for saving.

There is light seated upon this darkness – their light. Let us be brave enough and resolute enough to claim it, delight in it, and pass it on.