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Yizkor - Yom Kippur 5774 September 14, 2013

"Going"

It is that time of day when our hearts and minds are brimming with those who were dear to us, who gave our lives meaning. Parents, siblings, spouses – children. So, too, are we pausing to remember cherished friends and colleagues and mentors – and teachers.

This year, at this hour of Yizkor, I can feel myself joined in a circle, connected to rabbis situated in varied corners of this world, who are holding close at heart our teacher, Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, who died just this past February. The truth is that Rabbi Hartman is known to all of you, whether you ever met him or not, for his Torah – the bold vision he sculpted in articulating a Judaism that was unbound to convention, that resisted closed-mindedness, that lifted Israel, the people and the state, into aspirations beyond mere survival – his Torah infuses the Torah I bring to you. I enjoyed the gift of studying with him personally only during the past five years, but his influence upon me is much greater than that, for in addition to his rich published legacy, he is the rabbi who shaped the rabbis who shaped me – and the Reform Judaism that we all treasure would have been very, very different without him.

Rabbi Hartman loved teaching, but he especially loved teaching rabbis. Though he was ailing profoundly during the final years of his life, he still forced himself into the classroom whenever he could, just to be with us. Today, I am remembering the last true class my colleagues and I had with him, almost exactly one year before his death. Rabbi Hartman's subject was the relationship between the individual experience and the communal experience of mourning. He was teaching us a passage from the Mishnah about the communal responsibilities from which a mourner is to be exempt, in order to attend to his or her personal healing. Somewhere along the line, though, his comments drifted from the text toward the experience of dying itself. He had come to us fresh from another lengthy stay in the hospital, and slowly, we could see that what he really wanted to do was seek counsel and comfort from a roomful of rabbis who loved him, as he himself struggled to prepare to die.

Said one of my colleagues, "Abraham Joshua Heschel would suggest that death can be seen as coming home."

Said Rabbi Hartman, "I looked at my room this last month in the hospital... I didn't feel like I was coming home."

Another rabbi gave it a try: "There is something deeply honest even amid helplessness. And even when we die. What could be more real than death?"

"Life!" roared Rabbi Hartman in response. "Life is more real than death! You fight to stay alive... to have the opportunity to change."

This wasn't going well, I thought. And that's when the teacher of the rabbis started asking the questions of his students: "Is there an experience of death? Is death an orienting moment? Have you meditated on death?"

The rabbis tried their best.

"Death can be that moment when one knows that what he gave to others now is a part of them."

"Death is the experience of being ready to let go when the body becomes the enemy."

"Death is when our responsibilities in the world continue to be fulfilled through those we have influenced."

But none of it was comforting the rabbis' rabbi. He responded in a manner almost as though he was speaking to us from the grave: "To love, to act, to dream, to laugh... laughter was for me the moment." And then plaintively, he added: "I want to live."

A colleague who was especially close with Rabbi Hartman then said, "Even while you were suffering in the hospital, thinking about your death... we were here in the *beit midrash*, thinking about your life... your continuing impact upon our lives."

At this, Rabbi Hartman finally endeavored to answer his own question: "I know that I am getting older. And I think that we can't imagine what death is. You just slog through it. But life is like a melody – it's 'going,' like a train. I used to like those cowboy movies," he said. "They were 'going.' I think the message we have to bring to our congregants," the rabbi said, "is: You *are*. You *have* the opportunity – to be 'going,' to move, to change." He took a couple of deep, heavy breaths: "I feel sorry for those who are trying to struggle their way through."

I remember leaving the classroom that day profoundly saddened for our teacher. What, I wondered, might enable him to be ready?

I wouldn't learn the answer to that question until after he had died. In a tender and stirring eulogy, his son, Rabbi Donniel Hartman – now head of the groundbreaking institute his father had founded, and the teacher with whom I now study most frequently in Jerusalem – related a story that had occurred within days of our classroom counseling session with his father. Speaking directly to his departed Abba, he said: “During a particularly hard time – it was the third time that month that I had to rush you to the emergency ward... I was helping you down the stairs into the car, and you turned to me and said: ‘Donniel, I am sorry that I am such a burden on you.’...”

“But as we walked together hand in hand, I had a moment of deep understanding that guided our relationship and love throughout the last year of your life. I replied to you: ‘Abba, it’s okay. You carried me throughout my life. You were always there for me whenever I needed you. Everything I have, I have because of you. The meaning of a family is that we get to take turns. Now it’s my turn to carry you. It’s my turn to give back to you a little of what you gave to me.’ You smiled and said: ‘It’s true. I really was there for you. Wasn’t I?’

“‘Yes Abba,’ Donniel confirmed. ‘You were really there for me, at my side, on my side, every day of my life. Abba, I miss you so much. I want my Abba back, but it is not to be. I do, however, have your dreams. They and you will be with me and live within me forever.’”

It was the one answer from the one rabbi who could help him to be ready – and being a rabbi had nothing to do with what made it the right answer. For we all know what Donniel was talking about. We are here at Yizkor because it’s our turn... to carry them and their dreams. We want our loved ones back, for they really were there for us, and the holes they have left behind in our lives can never truly be filled. Yes, we want them back, but it is not to be. However, we can still carry them – we must – by heeding the father’s lesson to his students... by returning to the melody that is life, still going and going, and bringing them and their dreams with us. For as the dying sage said to his classroom full of rabbis that day, “*You are. You have the opportunity – to be ‘going,’ to move, to change.*” And we can add the coda to the sage’s lesson – the part he couldn’t see on that day: When we *seize the opportunity, when we keep going... and going... even amid the deep darkness that is our loss, we grant our departed loved ones a renewed refrain in life’s melody. They, too, get to go again.*

The hour of Yizkor is upon us. It’s our turn. With heavy but resilient hearts, feeling their hands somehow still pressed within our own, together, let us go.

