

*Yizkor Derash 5778* by Rabbi Leora Frankel

When we lose someone close to us, a part of *us* dies with them. I know this now, because a part of me died with my father, Jules, nearly two years ago. Those first months of mourning were so intense that I could hardly look at a photo of my dad without devolving into tears. I couldn't bring myself to play any of the dozens of Jewish music CDs he had meticulously recorded over the years at various Shabbat services, Passover Seders and concerts. I longed to hear his voice again but feared it would hurt too much to listen. My mom described periodic experiences of sensing his presence, but for so long I only felt his palpable absence. So I'd speak to him—often during my car rides home late at night—and sob in the silence that would have been his nurturing response.

With the birth of his namesake, Judith, last Rosh Hashanah morning, a part of that broken heart was healed and life literally renewed. But as you know, we are never the same. The waves of grief continue to wash over us, sometimes exactly when we'd expect them, and other times, catching us completely by surprise as they pull us under. Finally, over these past few months, I've started to hear his voice again echoing in my head and even reverberating in the world around me. Sometimes the calls are soft, subtle. Like Moses at the burning bush, I have to be paying very close attention to notice it. Other times, there is simply no missing the message.

A few weeks ago my mom asked me if I would join her for a visit to my father's grave on the Sunday before Rosh Hashanah. With the start of the school year and the *shul* year though, I just could not imagine squeezing it in and I was honestly reluctant to try, not feeling especially connected to that physical place where he is buried. I told myself that it was only his body at the cemetery, not his spirit, and felt secure in the knowledge that I carry my dad with me every single day, wrap myself in his tallit,

*this* tallit, each Shabbat. So despite feeling a little guilty, I apologized and encouraged my mother to go on her own this year.

Well, the very next morning I got a call from a local funeral director that we regularly work with. He was in need of a rabbi to officiate at a funeral on Sunday morning. The deceased woman, Flora Pollack, was 103, and had been a resident at the Bristol. He was having a really hard time finding available clergy during that busy Selichot weekend. “Could you possibly do it?” he asked me. My first thought: “I need a funeral this weekend like I need a hole in my head!” But he persisted: “The service will be close by in Mamaroneck, and I’m guessing not too long.” “And the interment?” I asked. “In Queens.” “Where in Queens?” I pressed. “Linden Hill Cemetery in Ridgewood. It’s on Metropolitan Avenue, not too far from Fresh Pond R—.” I stopped him mid-sentence, nearly falling out of my chair. “Yes, I know exactly where it is. My father is buried just a few blocks away.”

Needless to say, I immediately agreed to do the funeral for Flora. I hung up the phone and sat stunned for a minute; my dad had clearly summoned me. I could hear him saying, “*Mameleh*, I know you’re up to your eyeballs in High Holiday preparations but it’s nearly Rosh Hashanah, and I need you to visit me.” From the universe beyond, my dad called to me, and just as when he was alive, adjusted my moral compass.

As it turned out, the serendipity didn’t stop there: The woman whose funeral I presided over had two adult sons. I discovered one lives right around the corner from my new home in Larchmont. The other, it turned out, lives 4 floors above my mom in her Manhattan apartment and had interviewed my parents for the Co-Op when they first bought the unit 15 years ago. He had even been trying to recruit my dad to join the board before he got sick, as they were eager for his accounting expertise. Flora’s

family just could not get over all the incredible coincidences and connections. Neither could I. But I shouldn't have been surprised; my dad was always a connector, and apparently he's still at it.

Being called upon to do this woman's funeral was *beshdert*, and after her burial, I drove down the road to meet my own mom—exactly where I should have been all along that Sunday afternoon. Sitting beside my father's grave we recited the traditional prayers and sang psalms through our tears, including one of his own melody. I marveled at the permanence of his name etched in the footstone. Even after two years it still took my breath away. Before leaving, we put small rocks on the footstone that I had brought from the front yard of my new house that he helped me buy but never lived to see.

And on the drive home, inexplicably, something shifted in me. Halfway home, I suddenly felt compelled to pull over into highway shoulder and found his album in my iTunes library. I took a deep breath, hit play on my iPhone, and heard his voice literally sing to me for the first time in two years. I mouthed along to the familiar notes and his unique cadence that I knew so well. I cried, of course, but also swelled with gratitude. How incredibly lucky am I, are my girls, that for all those years he obsessively recorded every musical occasion and kept them for posterity.

How lucky are we all that we have our own internal reels of tape, transcripts in our head from exchanges with our loved ones whom we miss dearly. If we really stop, close our eyes and listen, we can hear the same old jokes they used to tell, the special ways they said "I love you," or their perennial words of advice. Our parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, children may no longer be physically with us, but their souls still call to us; we just need to be open to hearing their voices.

As we pray today to be sealed in the Book of Life for another year, these next few minutes of reflection are a chance to pull the volumes of *their* Books of Life off the shelf and lovingly thumb

through the pages. To dig a little deeper into our well of memories and go beyond the fuzzy or vague recollections we carry daily into the finer details of their face, their scent, the sound of their voice and how it made us feel. Or to return to that music metaphor, it is a chance to replay some of the most cherished tracks of our shared time, and perhaps to even record a new one. I invite you to listen, really listen for their laughter, their wisdom. And imagine: *What would they be telling you right now, at the start of the New Year, that you need to hear?*

May the memories of all those we hold dear continue to be a blessing and may we always hear our loved ones calling to us, as we now continue with our individual *Yizkor*.