

The Hasidic master Simhah Bunim lived in Poland in the early nineteenth century. He preferred philosophy to mysticism, the rational to the magical. (He was a pharmacist.) In reference to the mourner's kaddish, he once taught the following: In the ordinary world, when a small unit of a large army is lost, the loss is not felt, and it is not until an entire division is missing that the depletion must be corrected and the army must be reinforced.

It is otherwise, however, in the army of God. If only a single Jew is missing (and I would amend it to read, "if only a single soul is missing), then there is already a lack

in the greatness and the holiness of God. Therefore, we pray Yitgadal v'Yitkadash, that God's Name may be `magnified and sanctified,' that is, that God's blessed Name may be made complete for what it has lost with the disappearance of the deceased."<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Times published brief tributes to the 2,977 victims of that heinous attack. I recall Tamara sitting at our kitchen table each morning reading each and every one, a few brief paragraphs given to each victim. It was her personal Yizkor, her way to re-member, to put the pieces back together. Who ever thought we would have to go through that process again. This May 24th

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<sup>1</sup> (as quoted in Kaddish by Leon Weiselthier)

the Times greeted us with the longest Kaddish list we'd ever seen. 1000 names, a mere 1% of the 100,000 Americans lost at that point in time.

Each name in bold followed by an age, a city and a phrase, to depict the uniqueness of each life. “Alan Lund, 81, Washington, conductor with ‘the most amazing ear’ ... “Theresa Elloie, 63, New Orleans, renowned for her business making detailed pins and corsages” “Florencio Almazo Morán, 65, New York City, one-man army” “Coby Adolph, 44, Chicago, entrepreneur and adventurer ...” 1000 names. Each one diminishing a little the greatness and holiness of God. Today that number in our country hovers around 200,000. World wide it is in excess of 1,000,000. Tragic. How might we remember each one? How might we give but one line to depict each person's uniqueness?

When the pandemic raged here in New York, a dozen individuals died in our congregation. Not necessarily of COVID but all those who mourned were affected by it: funeral services with limited attendees, Shiva observed on Zoom, no opportunity to receive a physical embrace, to break bread with those who would come to console.

I eulogized many of your loved ones: Noel Seicol, Richard Glazer, Lila Gross, Philip Rabin, Hilda Hubert, Ken Allen, Barbara Peshkin Ruderman, Eric Loeb, Ken Foege, Joel Reidenberg, Sandra Mager. But there was one I never got to eulogize, one whom our beloved cantor escorted into the Yeshiva Shel Ma'alah,

into the seminary in the sky with song, one whose absence truly diminishes the greatness and holiness of God: our own Rabbi Robert A. Rothman.

This then is the eulogy I never got to give, the farewell to the rabbi of this congregation for 31 years, our friend for over 50. Perhaps through these words, God's blessed Name may be made complete once again and perhaps, with these words, we will all be reminded of what is good and right and just in our world.

When I arrived at Community Synagogue 18 years ago, Bob Rothman was a larger-than-life rabbi emeritus whose shoes were still groaning to be filled even though he'd retired six years prior. People spoke about his erudition, his superb intellect, his work in interfaith relations and racial justice, how he taught and lectured at local colleges and neighboring synagogues, how he was ever present here, how he came with the building.

People spoke of the influence he had on their lives - of just how present he was during a challenging time: a death, a divorce, lending a car providing a bed to sleep in when you found yourself without one. Others spoke of how he would walk the halls of this building in his navy whites, how he would stand at the point of the Bima to preach, like on the prow of a ship, how he saw himself as the captain of this sacred vessel, this congregation. Bob may have been short in

stature but his shoes were very large. So large in fact, that I was told not to allow him to preach on my first High holidays.

“Listen,” he said, in his recognizable “how you doin’?” voice, “if you want me to do anything on the chagim, let me know.” I was stuck. So I asked, “would you like to read the Haftarah on Yom Kippur?” “Sure... Is that all?”

He never read the Haftarah that morning. But he sure preached about it, peppering his noteless talk with words previously unknown to me. I think it took him 20 minutes just to warm up. And I learned. He loved being a rabbi. If rabbi means teacher, it suited him. It flowed through every fiber. He was like a hurricane whose course I could not control. Rabbi Rothman did what he wanted. As he often said, “I’m retired, you can’t fire me.”

Beneath the strong wind of will that bent trees in his wake, lived a quiet center. It contained kindness, softness, and a generosity of spirit. I saw him light up and delight in the presence of young children. I witnessed him teach with a love of our tradition, for he so wanted all of us to lead lives filled with meaning and with purpose, guided by Jewish teachings and values. And in illuminating a path for others his lamp burned brightly. Bob loved to learn. Books. Books and books and books. Learning was his path out of poverty. You could also escape into a book, escape the insecurity of your past. But perhaps what I remember

most, right now, are those bright blue eyes; eyes that could pierce you, eyes that were alive with a deep sense of curiosity, right to the end.

We honored Rabbi Rothman a lot over the last number of years. His 80th birthday, his 9th quinquennial with the congregation (yep, had to look up that one too), his 50th. Bob viewed these occasions as an opportunity to bring this community together—something he loved doing. He knew how fractured our lives are. He knew that we were stronger together, when the bonds of friendship and fellowship could be felt. He loved being the rabbi of Community Synagogue because he loved the idea of community. He could have pressed for a name change like Beth Am, house of the people. But he didn't. He designed a logo for us that had the letters “*bet*” and “*ayin*” in it. It *stood* for Beth Am, house of the people, Community Synagogue, but he never pushed it.

He didn't I think because he knew how important community was and is, so important that the founders of this synagogue put it right in the name. He wanted what was best for this community and he wanted what was best for you. He wanted this congregation to flourish, as it does. And he wanted you to flourish, as I hope you do.

Towards the end of his life, I asked Rabbi Rothman, “What are your proudest achievements?” “Miriam and Jessica, Kay and Dee.” What about in your

rabbinate? “That I touched people’s lives, at least those who wanted it. I came here to serve,” he said. “I wanted to make Judaism more significant, enriching, meaningful, compassionate, alive. I came here to serve.” He personified service every day of his life .

While Rabbi Rothman was at White Plains Hospital I visited him on a Friday. It was a hard visit. He wanted to make it to his 89th birthday - which he did - but at that moment it seemed like all he wanted to do was die.

“Can I bless you?” I asked. He waved me off. It wasn’t his thing. He wasn’t in the mood. Then I asked him, “Will you bless me?” It was like a burst of energy came to him. He sat up in bed, the radiant blue returning to his eyes. “Bow your head,” he said. He placed his hand atop my head and recited the words, “*Yevarechecha Adonai* - May God bless you and keep you.”

“*Ya’eir Adonai* - May God make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.”

“*Yisah Adonai* - May God lift his countenance unto you, and give you peace.”

It was profound. It was dignified. It was holy. I will long remember it.

I want to end with words that Rabbi Rothman often began and ended his eulogies, the ones he delivered for your mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers,

husbands and wives, and tragically sometimes, for your sons and daughters. He often began, “Death is the price we pay for living.” How true. And how now, in this time of pandemic when “we have all become acquainted with the night.” Death is the price we pay for living. It’s a steep price. But I would say - and I think Bob would say - that the price is worth it. Would you have it any other way?

And he would often end his eulogies with this Hopi prayer, a prayer of the soul’s graduation:

Do not stand at my gave and weep

I am not there,

I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight

On the ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn’s rain.

When you awaken in the morning hush,

I am the swift uplifting rush

of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am not there.

I did not die.

Bob, our teacher, our rabbi, my friend, my colleague, you have not died. All of our loved ones, those whom death has recently taken from us, those who died in past years, those for whom we come this afternoon to re-member, they are not really gone. Their souls have merely graduated. They are in the winds and on the snow. They are felt in the warmth of the sun and the rain that splashes down. They are in a bird flying overhead and in the twinkling stars gracing the heavens. Those whom we loved are never really gone. They are here, in our hearts. They are now a part of us, as we remember them.

So, as you prepare for these moments of yizkor, of sacred memory, bring your loved one to mind - their smile, the twinkle in their eyes, their laugh, the way they greeted us, a lesson they taught. And recall our beloved Rabbi Rothman.

Recall his final lesson to all of us, the one shared at the close of each school year: take a long walk, read a good book, make a new friend.

May the memory of Rabbi Robert A. Rothman, “Bob,” and all those whom we come to remember this day and always be for blessing. By remembering them may we restore the holiness and the greatness of God. Amen.