

**Memories of the Future  
Yom Kippur Day 5770  
September 28, 2009  
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Beth Shir Sholom  
Santa Monica, CA**

I know this a day for confessions, and that's NOT why I'm telling you that I was in psychoanalysis for 5 years! There were many things about analysis that I didn't anticipate. I didn't anticipate that I would feel like I was falling off a cliff the first time I lay on the couch with my analyst seated behind me so that I couldn't see him. I didn't anticipate the frequency of sessions, the intensity of the "work" and the power of the concentrated emotions. I didn't anticipate that the simplest of questions would spawn weeks of productive soliloquy. I didn't anticipate that the analytical process would not be so much about finding quick fixes to the immediate issues of my life as it would be a journey that brought meaning and understanding into my present by opening a gateway into memories.

Fairly early on in our meetings, my analyst asked me, "What's your earliest memory?" I had absolutely no trouble retrieving the event. As soon as I was asked the question, I realized that I carried this memory around with me all the time. I was very young, but I don't remember precisely how young. The content of the memory tells me that I was old enough to walk and talk, but not to ride a bike. In the memory, I am riding on the back of a bike with my hands wrapped around the waist of an older child. I remember feeling terror in my heart and stomach, not because I was on the back of a bike, but rather the reason WHY I was on the bike in the first place. I couldn't find my mom and this kind, older kid in front of me was truly doing a *mitzvah*. He was taking me around our apartment complex to help me try to find her – faster, more efficiently and with a better vantage point than I could have mustered on my own. It's amazing what I remember – and what I don't. I don't recall who the *mitzvah* doer was. I'd like to thank him, publicly, now. I don't recall much of the bike ride, either, just what is for me a fear-filled moment gazing from the back of the bike and scanning the grassy area that our building bordered along with several others. I still didn't see my mom. The memory then skips to the end of the event when, off the back of

the bike now, my mother found **me** when she came out of the laundry room in our building's basement.

Of course, I have other memories about my mom and my dad. I remember how my I heard my mom whistling one day as I was leaving our apartment and walking to school. She was a great whistler. For some reason, hearing it made me cry. I recall that when I first spied my parents after I stepped off the bus upon my return from summer camp, I couldn't believe how much they'd aged in two weeks. Looking at that analytically, my reaction probably had something to do with my **own** growth thanks to the camp experience, but I didn't feel that then. I also recall that, when we arrived back home, I saw that my father had refinished all the furniture in my room while I was away. As always when he did projects like this, the end result exuded his attention to detail. My mother was over emotionally expressive. For my dad, doing things like the furniture project was his way of saying "I love you."

Memories of all kinds were made between those early times in my life and my parents' deaths. They died young, late 60's and early 70's. My mom died a year and thirteen days after my dad. Aware that her death was imminent, shortly before she died I went to see her. My mom hadn't even been able to move into the Jewish home in Miami because she became so ill. All of her belongings were in her room, still in boxes, except for her bed, with the same wooden bed frame that she and my dad used as far back as I could remember. I remember a mover met with me so that I could make arrangements for my mother's things when she died. At that moment, her things weren't just "things" for me. They all became symbolic, especially the old wooden bed frame. The mover, admiring the bed frame, said to me, "I know this is awkward but...I really like this bed. I'd like to buy it from you." Even while he spoke I felt as though I was in the past, the present and the future all at the same time. The wooden bed frame had a particular smell. I don't know if the mover smelled it, too. I remembered that smell from my earliest days. I could smell my parents. The bed wasn't merely "a thing". Still, if my mother was going to die and I had no intention of using the bed, shouldn't I sell it? On the other hand, there it was, so present, so pungent. How could I just sell it or even give it away for someone else to use? No one else would ever know that smell like I would. I sold the bed.

Since my mother's death was anticipated, I had time to imagine what it would feel like when she died. I already knew from my

fantasies about my dad's death that these anticipations are NOT like the reality, but there is no stopping that emotional need to prepare. As unpredictable as my feelings turned out to be when my mom died, I never anticipated one *immediate* feeling. As soon as she died, I wanted to turn to someone and ask a question that began, "Do you remember when...?" There was no one who could answer that question. I'm an only child. If there were going to be any memories, I was the only one who could capture them, for me, for my children and today with my community.

As many of you know, my mother-in-law Elaine Comess died almost a year ago. Her Yahrzeit is in a few days. My memories of her are, of course, different than they are for my father-in-law, Lenny, my wife, Toby and even my children, Hart and Eden. I remember when I first met her. I told Toby that her mother was beautiful. At the time, I was thinking about the way she looked physically. However, now, when I think about that moment, I realize that there was so much more. Obviously, I didn't know Elaine Hackel Comess in the instant I had just met her. Yet, I now realize that her many great strengths and kindnesses that I would come to know were all apparent and present in that moment and on some level. I felt them. I could feel her elegance. I could feel her dignity. I could feel that she believed it was her responsibility to enable all who were in her company to feel elegant and dignified as well. I could feel that she would teach me that elegance and dignity were not things that were automatic in life – that I would need to work to attain them and work to maintain them, for myself and for others. I could feel that she had already battled fatal physical threats and won. I could feel that she didn't feel those realities in her life so much as victories as they were gifts and opportunities. I could feel how she would embrace me as a son in a way I had never been embraced before. I could feel that she would respect me and enable me to be more capable than I thought I could be. I could feel that she would be unwavering in her honesty with me. I could feel that she would also be unwavering in her commitment to right the moral and ethical injustices in society and she would demand the same of me and all of her family. I could feel the story I would come to know about her: that she was a volunteer at the first Head Start school in Los Angeles, in Watts, that when the Watts Riots occurred her first impulse was to go take care of the school, that her family feared it might be dangerous for her to go there and that she responded, "I'll take Toby. No one will hurt with a

little girl in my hand!” I could feel that she would be generous and that her generosity would never be conditional. I could feel how she would guide Toby and me as a couple, not only in the ways that I would come to understand were part of reason I love her daughter, but in ways that were new to both of us. I could feel that she would call our home several times a day to ensure that she did all she could every day to help us learn what she had to teach and give us all her love. I could feel that when, supported by familial generosity, we purchased our home, she would tell us not to be in too much of a hurry to change things about the house – that we should live with it for a while and see. I could feel that she would be reluctant about taking the role of matriarch when her mother died. Yet, she would fill that role in a way that was her own. I could feel that she would come to understand that being the matriarch was not about how we would respect her, but rather that it was a deepening of her responsibilities to us. Responsibility was never something from which she shied away. I could feel that she would love my children with a quintessential grandparent’s love. I could feel that anytime she was with them they would create mutual joy and mutual security and she would always be teaching them how to be the very best humans they could be. I could feel that she had a firm sense of her Jewish identity and that she would relish her opportunities to share her pride in being Jewish not only with her family but with the community around her. I could feel that being a docent at the Skirball Cultural Center was an honor for her, as it was to be a recorder of oral histories. I could feel that she never took for granted her opportunities to enjoy life, especially her family.

I realize now that there are two things I could not see about Elaine until she was no longer a physical presence. The first is that she had a talent for making it seem as though others were guiding a situation when it really was her. The other was how much her life was undergirded by a fierce hope. In his acceptance speech for his Nobel Prize, Eli Wiesel spoke about Job, who lost everything and somehow found the strength to begin again. Wiesel said that Job “demonstrated that faith is essential to rebellion, and that hope is possible beyond despair. The source of his hope was memory, as it must be ours.” Elaine’s life was by no means devoid of moments when despair could easily have one out over hope. Elaine refused to let that happen. If the source of Job’s hope was the memory of his past, the source of Elaine’s hope were the memories she had not yet

created for the future – for her children and for her grandchildren. Elaine left us many memories of strength, courage, fortitude, grace and graciousness, pride, dignity, love, moral passion, love, family and hope. Selfishly we wanted more. She did, too.

Most recently, I experienced the reality of Elaine's death only last week at our annual post-Rosh Hashanah dinner. Elaine was so obviously not there. Missing on that evening was the hope whose source is memory, most especially the memories of the future, not only the memories of the past. I realized then that Elaine's special gift to our family was to model for us that when we gathered for an occasion like that meal only a small part of it should be based on memories of past gatherings. The *real* reason to gather was to create memories for the future. We tried, Elaine, and I think we did OK. It wasn't the same without you.

I truly feel that Elaine was there as we came together to celebrate the New Year, differently than before, but nonetheless present. I believe that she was still hopeful and that the source of her hope was the memories she did not have a chance to complete for our futures. When I first met Elaine, she somehow enabled me to glimpse the memories she would be creating for me in all the years to come. Perhaps, when we gathered for Rosh Hashanah last week, I personally met Elaine as she is now. The message of her physical absence tells me that it is now our turn to create the memories of the future, the ones she would have created and the ones we have an obligation to create for those who are next in line.

After the death of someone we love, sometimes we fear our memories. We fear that they will trap us in a quicksand of sadness. We fear that the sorrow will be unshakable because our memories will constantly remind us of who is not there. That is why what my mother-in-law, Elaine, taught our family about the purpose of memory is so valuable: Memory must come from hope in the past and the present so that it can be the source of hope for the future. There is no way around the sadness when we travel through memories of those who are no longer physically here. All memories are precious, even the most bitter and difficult. All memories, and the people who created them, deserve our ongoing respect. When we embrace the sorrow, we become intimate enough with our memories to gather the seeds of hope within. Then, those who planted those seeds become intertwined with our present...and the memories of the future that lie beyond us all.

**Chazak, Chazak** © Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels

**Chorus:**

Cha-zak cha-zak v'nit-cha-zeyk (2x)  
Turn my sorrow into strength  
Make strong my turning from this place  
I'm not leaving you behind

From every son of Chava mother  
From every daughter to Adam born  
From their death there comes new living  
In the earth new life is sown

With every breath you gave me teaching  
Never knew you taught so much  
And that you were making mem'ries  
To live beyond the tears and dust

I leaned upon your love to come here  
Your love will guide me as I go  
In this slow and fragile dance of living  
Whose steps I never knew I know.