

From the Rabbi's Desk
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D'var Torah for Yizkor

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LIFE

IN A



BOX

My father, may he rest in peace, passed away a year and a half ago. By then, traveling to Israel was impossible and I couldn't attend his funeral in person. My brother-in-law traveled three hours to the north to take care of the funeral arrangements. On his way to the cemetery, I asked him to stop by my father's assisted living place and pick up a few valuables and papers, which he took with him back to his home in Ashkelon.

When my mother, may she rest in peace, passed away six months after, it was after the summer and Covid-19 was again rampant. The cases were up, especially in Israel, and the country was in lockdown. Not only wasn't I able to be with my mother or to attend her funeral, but it was almost impossible to get someone to visit her at the hospital, a major source of contagion. My brother-in-law traveled three hours to the north, first to visit my mother, to allow me to see her over the phone for a few seconds in which my mother told me for the last time that she loved me; and a week later, again, to take care of the funeral arrangements.

While my father's funeral was attended by a handful of people, when my mother passed away, the Covid 19 situation in Israel was so bad that only my brother-in-law and the members of the Chevrah Kaddisha were in attendance, but thanks to technology, my brother and I, together with our loved ones, were able, somehow, to be present and to share eulogies through Zoom.

On the way back to Ashkelon, I asked my brother-in-law to stop by my mother's nursing home in Akko, also to pick up valuables and papers.

However, while in my father's place six months earlier they allowed my brother-in-law to enter his room and look around while I was directing him through WhatsApp what to look for, in my mother's place the situation was different. The nursing home didn't allow any visitors, no exceptions. My mother's main nurse, Svetlana, who took care of my mother for the last ten years of her life, went through my mother's belongings, and set aside my mother's laptop, the valuables, papers, photographs, and a few books. She also selected a few items that in her own estimation were good keepsakes, including a scarf my mother used to wear. Then she put everything in a box and gave it to my brother-in-law, who took it to Ashkelon. Svetlana also told my brother-in-law that my mother's clothes and leftover items would be given to charity. And that was it.

My father's apartment, on the other hand, after my brother-in-law took the few valuables, was locked and left basically as it was when he passed away, waiting for me to come one day and take care of his stuff.

This past May, 14 months after my father's passing, I was able finally, to travel to Israel, to visit the cemetery for the first time, and to take care of my father's belongings. Yes, they had left his room locked for 14 months, waiting for me.

While traveling three hours to the north with my brother-in-law (a true tzadik), I had time to ponder if after all, it wouldn't have been a better idea to have someone else, a stranger to go through my father's belongings and to select for me a few keepsakes, like it was done for my mother.

However, I wasn't given the choice. 15 minutes after visiting the cemetery, still with my eyes red from crying, we arrived at my father's assisted living and were given the key to his room. "Take your time." I was told, "and everything you don't want to take, just leave it there and we will take care of it."

I entered my father's room and an overwhelming feeling of sadness and mourning filled my soul. The suppressed tears, pain, and sense of loss, product of the distance and the time passed, found their way out and I was grateful for the holy task I had in front of me, to go through my father's belongings and to select what I wanted to keep and what was going to be discarded.

It took my brother-in-law and me two hours to go through my father's belongings. Actually most of the two hours was spent pondering (I also had to think on behalf of my brother who was not able to be there himself) what to take and what to leave, what to hold on to, and what to let go of.

After the two hours, which seemed to me endless, we put the few items I decided to take in a box. We put the box in the car and traveled south to Ashkelon, where my mother's and my father's few additional keepsakes were waiting.

I spent the next three days before I headed back home going through my parents' now fewer belongings one more time, making an additional selection, since the urgency of boarding an airplane and the limited space my brother and sister-in-law had in their home, didn't allow for an additional postponement of the task at hand.

Each item, each paper, each photograph, each book, was inspected thoroughly and a new decision was made, paraphrasing Unetane Tokef: which ones will be kept and which ones will be left behind, forever.

When I was done, what was left from the lives of my mother and my father was able to fit in a box.

I am afraid, what I am sharing with you, the painful experience of going through my parents' belongings, is familiar to most of you. Some of you, like my parents did eleven years ago, went through a process of downsizing when you moved from your homes in the neighborhood to your smaller apartment in North Shore Towers or in the City. You knew you couldn't take everything, but to decide what to take and what to leave behind was a daunting task. You probably asked your children if they wanted to take anything, beginning with their own stuff they left in your

homes, and I can guess that they were not so interested. By the way, if I were to collect all the books congregants brought to the shul after they went through their parents' library or their own library, I would be able to fill a few reading rooms.

My children are good children, *keineinehora*, and they don't want to hurt my feelings; and yet they are not in a rush to go through my parent's belongings to see what they wish to keep. Not only that, I am sure that when our time comes to leave this world, hopefully when Silvia and I are 120, they will go through our stuff, take a few items and give away most of it.

Yizkor moments are meant to be insightful moments.

What I am trying to say with this long introduction, is that if I can take with me any insight from the experience of going through my parents' belongings, is that not only can't we take anything with us when we leave this world, but our children and grandchildren might not be as interested in "our stuff" as we are.

While hoarding money might be a slightly different story, since even if children are not too interested in their parents' 32-volume British Encyclopedia, they won't pass on a bank account. The truth is that when we leave this world, we take nothing with us.

This past year I attended a two-day retreat for New York rabbis put together by the UJA Federation of New York. As part of the retreat, I participated in a workshop in which each of us was given crayons and was asked to work on a drawing for 15 minutes. After we finished, we were asked to leave our drawing and to walk for 15 minutes to the drawings of our colleagues and to add to their work using the same crayons that were left on the floor. Then each of us walked back to their own drawing, to their own project, and saw what the others had done to it. The experience was unsettling. I liked what I did with my drawing, but I wasn't sure I liked the additions others had made on mine.

The facilitator invited us to "sit with it," to take the discomfort, and to let go of the need to be in control. Life, she explained, is pretty much like a drawing. You want

to have control over it, but after you are gone, and many times even before you leave this world, those who come after you will incorporate elements of what you left and make them part of their own drawing. They will also add to what you did, and leave behind what they don't need any longer; not unlike what I did with my parents' belongings.

The facilitator also told us a fascinating story about a group of Tibetan monks who had been working on a large mandala on the floor of the lobby at one of the buildings of New York University.ⁱ Mandalas are geometric pieces of art that symbolize the universe in Hinduism and Buddhism.

The mandala was put together on a large cloth sheet and the monks kept adding little pebbles, sea shells and twigs, in beautiful circular combinations. The monks worked for days, a few hours each day, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working as a team. Everybody who entered the building had the opportunity to appreciate the magnificent work they were doing

And then, one day, after they finished their work of art, they picked up the sheet and destroyed it. The facilitator, who was there, told us that a gasp was heard when the monks destroyed the mandala. When asked, the monks explained that building mandalas is an exercise in letting go. What is left after all? Is it a piece of art? Is it the mandala? Is it the 32-volume British Encyclopedia, or even the single box I kept from my parent's almost 170 years of combined life?

What is left after all, after the mandala has been destroyed? What is left after our loved ones are gone, after we are gone?

I believe you all know the answer: what is left is nothing more and nothing less than the experience of building something together, the joy of a joint project, the kindness and the sharing, the love we receive and the love we give. Again, nothing more; nothing less.

This sacred moment can connect each of us not only with the memories of our loved ones, but also with the wonderful liberating truth that our loved ones, who they truly were, cannot be confined to any possessions, not even to a single box.

As we remember those who walk the earth no longer, we pledge to attune our lives to what matters the most and to invest our time, energy and resources in spreading love, kindness, and compassion, the only treasures that will truly survive us forever.

May the memories of those we remember today be for a blessing, and may Hashem bless each of you and your loved ones with a year of meaning and shared memories, with a year of compassion and kindness, with a year of health and joy, with a good and sweet year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10084L3Pgsc>