

February 27, 2015 – 8 Adar 5775

Thank you to everyone for being here. It is a remarkable feeling to look around and sense the love in this room, and the genuine sadness and loss that we feel this morning as a direct outgrowth of that love.

Nothing in the fact that we all knew that this day was inevitably drawing nearer makes today any easier. It is only in turning to each other in our shared sadness, in turning to Reb Yankel's family in caring and comfort, that we will make it through this journey of love and loss together.

Jack Erlichson, יעקב בן הרב חיים ישראל למואל ומירואל הלוי, born to Rabbi Chaim Yisrael Lemuel and Miruel on June 4, 1924, in Kraznik, Poland. Brother of Shlomo and twins Itzhak and Fradel. Step-brother of 8 step-siblings from his father's first marriage. All his siblings and step-siblings and his mother were murdered by the Nazis; his father had died when Yankel was 12, in 1936. לבדו יעקב – only Yankel survived.

Husband of Bessie ob"m, alongside whom he soon comes to rest. Father of Miriam (& Victor), and of Frances ob"m, whose passing left Yankel so broken-hearted. Of Frances ob"m & Tim, may you have long and healthy life. Nachas-shepping grandfather – deeply proud grandfather – of Sam and Rachel. You two brought your grandfather the greatest joy and pride and love since the moment you were born.

And to us – the verse from Bereshit says it best: כולנו בני איש אחד נחנו – we are all the children of one man, say the 10 sons of Yaakov when they stand before Yosef. So are we, each in our way, the children of one man – Yaakov, Jack, our Reb Yankel. To us he was father, grandfather, great-grandfather, revered patriarch. And in equal measure in these last years, he was our shared charge – recipient of our care, concern and kindness. Tailor – or better said, *schneider*, gabbai, teacher and wonderful friend.

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I want to pay tribute this morning to our beloved Reb Yankel. To his life, a heroic life, a life of survival in every sense. I want to reflect on his special traits, but I also want to tell his story, to revisit his life.

It is a life perhaps best described by the precious commodity we are introduced to at the beginning of this week's parashah, when God tells the Jewish people ויקחו אליך שמן זית זך

כתית למאור להעלות נר תמיד. Take pure olive oil, crushed and pounded out, to illuminate – literally, to elevate, the eternal light of the Tabernacle.

Every Hasidic master, and Yankel was a descendant of Hasidim, says the same thing about this verse. כתית למאור – crushed, and light-giving. Sometimes the most powerful light is the light that emerges from an experience of being pressed, of being crushed, of being squeezed. If you survive, and you choose to shine – to give, to teach, to love, to serve, you can radiate a light that brightens everything, a light that glows forever. To me, this was our Yankel.

Yankel was born in Krasnik, Poland. He loved his hometown. When, thanks to the work of his daughter Miriam, he was recently able to procure a book which told the history of the Jews of Krasnik, he spent days showing it to anyone who would look. For Yankel, Krasnik was his שמן זית רך, his pure, uncomplicated, simple beginnings, a world in which life was simple and happy, and a rich Judaism was lived and breathed.

Yankel, or Yankele as he recalled being called by his father, was a ben zekunim, a child born to an elder father. How old was his father when he had Yankel? That I thought I'd never know – I think his father got older and older every time Yankel told me the story. He was pushing 100 by the end. Indeed, it seems his father was in his seventies when Yankel was born.

Yankel revered his father. He spoke of him, with emotion, so often. His father was a rosh yeshiva and his life was devoted to teaching and to caring for the needy in his community as well as his students. He headed 2 yeshivot, and many of his sons were teachers in his yeshivot and others.

Yankel never had that opportunity. As the situation worsened for the Jews in Krasnik and Poland in general, he took up tailoring to try to help provide for his family.

When the war came, Yankel started in a labor camp. He was young and strong. He built airplanes and worked on roads. He earned the respect of the Nazis with his precise and efficient work as a tailor.

It ultimately saved his life.

He and other young men were assigned to take literally truckloads of bodies outside the camp to be buried. After they returned from this mission, all the other young men with Yankel were murdered. Why did Yankel survive? He had not yet finished a leather jacket he was working on for a Nazi officer.

After time in labor camps, Yankel eventually wound up in Auschwitz, from which he was liberated at the end of the war.

These were the years of כתיית – of being crushed. They were the years in which every single member of Yankel’s family was killed by the Nazis. In which he saw and experienced unspeakable horrors too many and too painful to recount.

And then what? What does one do after being crushed and nearly annihilated?

Yankel chose למאור – to illuminate. He picked himself up and began a life again. In the post-war years in Europe, Yankel initially assisted a translator in army intelligence, in General Patton’s office, as he recalled. He would drive that translator around from town to town, camp to camp, and he used his knack for languages to help him with the translating. Along the way he participated in some clandestine maneuvers to help smuggle Jews across the Mediterranean and into Israel.

Yankel came to America in the late 1940s, straight to New York, and began to work in the Garment District. He became a designer of men’s and women’s clothing, and opened and ran a variety of dry cleaning/tailoring stores with a partner. He had various such stores in different parts of the Bronx over the years, with one near Yankee Stadium and the Bronx courthouse, which gave him the opportunity to meet and talk with customers involved in both sports and law, something he truly enjoyed. His final store was in the East 80s in Manhattan for many years.

And Yankel was successful! He was a highly regarded and sought-after designer and tailor, and he took great pride in his work. He could eyeball measurements to the 1/8th of an inch and be right.

He lamented how garments became of lower quality over time. I still remember when we went shopping for my wedding suit together. He wanted to take me to a tailor he claimed was somewhere on Central Park Ave. By the time we got to the end of Central Park Avenue and he had not recognized any building or storefront, we were stuck. We turned back and eventually found our way to a Men’s Wearhouse. Reb Yankel quickly sized up the merchandise and starting feeling sleeves here, pants there. In about a minute he came back to me and said, and I quote, “Steve, it’s all garbage” (he did not use the word garbage!). I still can’t believe he let me buy my suit from there.

But that was Yankel. He had high standards and he cared about professionalism and excellence.

Very soon after arriving in America, at the invitation of a friend, Yankel went to Canada to meet a family of lovely girls, and one turned out to be his wife Bessie. They married and were blessed with two daughters, Miriam and Frances.

Yankel was wholly devoted to two responsibilities over these years – making a living and raising a family.

His children grown, Yankel moved with his wife to Riverdale around 1970. As in other locations, they had a simple home, and for Yankel, it was a palace. He was never materialistic.

In Riverdale, Yankel tried various shuls and eventually settled in our Bayit from the early years. Yankel loved Rav Avi, and he loved the energy of our then fledgling Bayit. And when he retired in the mid-'80's, the struggles between making a livelihood and fully observing Shabbat and holidays subsided, enabling him to more fully embrace an observant life.

It was here in our Bayit that we truly saw Yankel's amazing capacity to emerge from the experience of כתיית, of crushedness, and to illuminate, to shine, למאור.

He shone for children. How Yankel loved children! A new baby, a precious smile, could evoke tears from our beloved Yankel. He wasn't a candyman – the sweetness he gave out was the direct encounter, the little tickle, the exchange of words spoken in a child's dialect, or the famous "give me a five". He tried to convince every woman he met whom he thought was still of childbearing age, to have more children. By his count Shira and I should have been up to 3 or 4 already. Children gave him light, and he gave that light right back to them. Kids loved him, and he had a special relationship with so many of the children in our Bayit. He would point to a high school student or 20 year old in the shul and tell me how he had them on his knee when they were a babies. He remembered everyone.

And Yankel shone with a love of Torah. Tim, you told me how he often expressed to you that "Judaism is truth" – and in particular Modern Orthodoxy was the truest way, he felt, to take the deepest of Torah values and commitments and make them livable in an ever-evolving world.

Yankel radiated Torah. It drove him to give a kippah and tallis and tefillin to every man who walked in to shul on a weekday – and offer to help explain to them what they were and how to put them on. And he didn't really take no for an answer. He was passionate about tzedakah.

He always wanted to take the pushke around into the Social Hall at the meal of a simhah at shul, even though I wouldn't let him. Why? Because he believed in the Torah's message that our joy is not full if it is not shared with the needy.

And Yankel shone with a love of people. He was incredibly bright, gifted with a great memory and a knack for languages, of which he spoke 8 or 10 in part if not in whole. And he loved connecting with people in all those languages. In he walked to the Bayit, with "Good morning" for most of us, and "Dobre Utra" for Victor, and for Bryan or Elmer, "Buenas dias, mi amigo!"

And when he smiled and laughed his beautiful smile and full laugh, you felt in your bones that ultimately the human spirit can rise above every attempt to drag it down.

להעלות נר – כתית למאור – Yankel emerged from oppression to shine. But the pasuk concludes, להעלות נר, תמיד, to elevate, to light up, a perpetual lamp. This was one of Yankel's greatest traits, his absolute dependability and consistency. From the founding of the 8:15am tefillah until the most recent years when he had more health problems, he simply never missed. He came early so he could schmooze at the first minyan, and then suited up and davened with us at the second minyan. At Joe Hoch's request after Joe's fall, Yankel became gabbai, and he was simply always there. He was our נר תמיד, our eternal light. In these last years and months, he simply spent his day walking back and forth from the Atria to the Bayit.

As he told it, right before the war broke out, his father took him close and said to him, Yankel, you are going to live long years, but you have to be committed to shul. Go regularly and make it a priority. I think Yankel took comfort in knowing that in his consistency in these last few years he was honoring his father's wish.

When I look around this room, I see generations of people who received Yankel's refined light and shined it back upon him. I see Jack Lew, with whom Yankel had a special relationship. Jack, may you be blessed for your special care and attention. I see Peter Singer, who drove Yankel so often when he was still living on Kappock Street and walking to shul in the ice and snow, and who was a true lifeline to Yankel. I think of Judith Blank, for whom he had a great love and appreciation. She often looked out for him, together with Paul, and he always appreciated that. I see our whole 8:15 tefillah hevra who are an extended family, who reminded me when Yankel was not in shul and did whatever each of you could to give him life and love. I see our whole Bayit staff, each of whom cared for Yankel in their own way. And I see countless more of you and your unique relationships.

Yankel brought out the best in us. And to each of you who receive his light and shined it back – yourself, or with your children, please know that it made him incredible happy. Belonging here, truly belonging, and everything our Bayit stands for, was a source of strength and vitality for Yankel.

But as consistent as he was in our Bayit, we shared Yankel. The fuel of his light was family.

He loved his Bessie. She was not a shul person and she didn't tolerate crowds, but they enjoyed drives up to the country, the outdoors, and the blessings of family. Bessie died about a dozen years ago, and Yankel now comes to rest beside her.

How Yankel loved his daughters and their families. Life had its ups and downs, but he loved them both and would do anything for them. He was so proud of how educated and accomplished they were, and felt blessed that they had far surpassed him in education and professional advancement.

When he lost his daughter Frances almost 2.5 years ago, he never fully recovered. He loved all the holidays, but especially the Passover seders with you, Tim and Frances and Sam and Rachel, and all the guests at your table, and he was as beloved in your shul as he was here.

And you two, Sam and Rachel, were his greatest joy. He was always telling me what “the girl and the boy” were up to. Your education was his top priority, and he made it a point to invest in that for you. He was so proud of everything you did, and he took special pride in your continuing to embrace Jewish identity and tradition. Your visits were the highlight of his week or month. May you always feel his presence and his overflowing love.

Tim, you have been a son-in-law as devoted as a son. Yankel would simply not have lived as long as he did or as well as he did without you. You always went above and beyond for him, and he loved you very much. We are always here for you and your family in whatever way we can be.

Miriam, even though you were not able to be here, I want you to know that I know that Dad was always on your heart and mind as you were on his. Your calls and vigilant checking in about his health and wellbeing helped him stay on a steady and healthy course over these last years. I pray you know and feel his love and presence always.

And for me, Reb Yankel, you were the most precious of friends. You were a role model, an *alta zaide*, a *gabbai* partner, a teacher of consistency, of love of Torah, of family, of children, of how to squeeze love and life out of a nearly crushed soul.

I will miss you beyond words. But I, and we, will carry you with us always. You will be, in your family and in your Bayit family, a נר תמיד, and eternal light and an eternal source of light. We love you.