

Yizkor SA. 5782

Last week beautiful scach arrived for our Sukkah. It was a gift from Howard — in fact Howard has supplied us with scach for the last nine years. The difference this year, though, was that the scach was a gift from beyond the grave. Despite Howard's passing, he somehow arranged for schach to be delivered as usual. Now when we sit in our sukkah we are inexorably connected to Howard. I would say that he is like one of the ushpizin, but really he's a permanent resident now. Howard and Sukkot are now forever connected in my mind — I will never celebrate Sukkot without feeling Howard's presence. And his many gifts — his generosity, his good nature, his humor, his love of Judaism, especially hands on, his warmth, his kindness — all of those qualities are with me as much as the schach is there, as much Howard is, in the sukkah. And they will be forever.

I have been thinking about these gifts from beyond the grave. A few weeks ago when we read Parashat Ki Tavo I talked about how not only everything we do and everything we say, but everything we think, everything we intend, leaves its impression. This is weighty responsibility. But it is also deeply true. With the schach, I feel all of Howard's good intentions that he put out into the world and are still manifesting themselves even after he is gone. Song of Songs reads: Set me as a seal upon your heart, שימיני כחותם על לבך, set me as a seal on your arm, For love is as strong as death..." That seal is that permanent imprint someone we love makes on our heart forever.

A week ago I officiated at Golda Topf's funeral. Her funeral and Howard's bookended the High Holidays, his the day before Rosh Hashana, hers the day after Yom Kippur. Despite her advanced age and COVID, 20 or 30 friends and family members gathered at her grave. I was deeply moved to learn the details of this brave woman's life, how she sold notions to the Nazis at the age of 10, how she and her mother and sister fled across a field exploding with bombs, hid in an attic, then found their way to a labor camp in Siberia, then a DP camp in Italy, and finally to these shores, where she built a rich and fulfilling life. Her courage and resilience to rebuild, to find joy, to love, to affirm life in the face of evil and death, impressed me deeply.

I was particularly moved by her niece, Felicia's, words. She told three stories that captured her Aunt Goldie. As a little girl, Felicia would frequently arrive on her aunt's doorstep with her small blue valise in hand, having run away from home across the street. Her aunt would take her in, sit her down at the kitchen table, give her a glass of milk, and invite her to pour out her troubles, while she listened patiently and empathetically, encouraging Felicia to keep telling her story. When Felicia had finally finished her tale of woe, Aunt Goldie would look at her and say, "Mamale, you know that I would love to have you live here. But I think that your parents would miss you very much." With those words, Goldie lovingly sent Felicia home. Felicia said she felt that she really learned to listen to other people with great empathy and kindness because of the way her Aunt Goldie listened to her.

She went on to describe her experiences as a teenager working in Goldie's dress shop, learning to make change, deal with customers, display inventory, and complement judiciously. So many practical skills from her aunt.

The last story she told was about her special time with Aunt Goldie. Theirs is a large family and they all lived in close proximity and were together at least once or twice a month, so most of Felicia's contact with her aunt was at large family gatherings. But once a year Goldie would give Felicia the gift of an entire day. The two of them would spend the whole day together and do whatever Felicia wanted. Felicia said mostly they would see a movie and go out to eat, probably nowhere that fancy. But Felicia thought she was a princess in a palace. Felicia remembers her aunt just sitting there, smiling, and saying, "Mamele, have whatever you want..."

and wide-eyed, Felicia would order fries, a shake, grilled cheese, chocolate cake..” looking back at her aunt to make sure it was all OK, to which she would again reply, “Mamele, whatever you want...” These outings still shimmer in Felicia’s memory 30 or 40 years later. She said that from them she learned that this is how you treat people you love, that you give them everything you can.

What powerful seals upon her heart! I don’t really know Felicia at all but I imagine that in her life as a lawyer, a mother, a wife, a friend, she is all the ways Goldie taught her to be — empathetic, loving, generous. What gifts from beyond the grave, threads of kindness that will be woven generations hence, even by people who may not know where they come from or Goldie’s name.

I think these stories were particularly wondrous for me because I do not have a relationship like that with my own grandmother. In Felicia’s stories I could feel the warmth of Goldie’s love literally coming through her voice, her tears, her love, a warmth I didn’t know from my own childhood.

But then I started to think about a pin that my mother recently gave me which had belonged to her mother. It has small diamonds on it and I have worn it several times recently since receiving it. Each time I wear it, someone complements me on it and I tell them it was from my grandmother.. I also have her silver. She rarely entertained, but I use it often on Shabbat and holidays. Thinking about all this, I realized that I enjoy using these gifts from her, that with these gifts, both given to me after she was gone, I feel her love. I can’t say it is really a love I felt when she was alive, but with those gifts, I feel like I am able to do some alchemy, to somehow experience her love for me through them, the love I believe she intended to give and would have wanted to give had she been able. The harsh and poisonous things she said to me when she was alive fade, and the jewelry and silver are left as offerings of love.

Perhaps then it is not only the case that our deceased loved ones love us from beyond the grave, give gifts to us even when they are gone, and continue to teach us how to be in the world in the ways they were. Perhaps death can also be a kind of neutralizer, neutralizing what was hard, and transforming it into something usable. Maybe somehow the essence of love that was always there can come through in a pure form in a way that conditions in life didn’t always allow that to happen.

Today is the last day on which we eat in the sukkah. My schach has browned and dried from the sun. The leaves on the trees above have begun to turn — when we put up the sukkah last week they were still all green. There’s a new coolness in the air signaling autumn’s arrival. The year is turning. We’ll take the sukkah down by the end of the week.

But I know that I will be protected from the sun by Howard’s schach and I will be looking up through it at the twinkly stars at him for as long as I live. The gifts we received, the impressions they made, the ways they continue to love us from beyond the grave — those things are real. In this messed up and crazy world, I think the fact that love is real, love exists, and love endures is nothing short of miraculous.

Shlomo Carlebach tells the story of an old man he met who was a survivor of the Holocaust. Impressed by the old man’s warmth, he asked him how he came to be so kind and warm. The man said that when he was seven years old he left his native Poland. The Shabbat before he departed, his father took him to the Rebbe for a blessing. They stayed the night in the rebbe’s house and he was put to sleep in the rebbe’s study.

The air was so pure, the books so holy and he was so excited that he couldn’t sleep. In the middle of the night, he heard a sound, so he pretended he was sleeping. The rebbe came into

the room, looked down at the sleeping child and whispered, “a zissen kinder.” Then the rebbe thought the boy might be cold, so he took off his coat and placed it gently on the sleeping child.

The old man turned to Shlomo and concluded, “I am now almost 80 years old. That happened 73 years ago and I am still warm from that jacket.”

Today we remember those who left a seal upon our hearts, those who taught us how to be in the world, those who warmed us with their love, those whose gifts keep giving to us even when they are gone.

I think about the words from the song, “For Good” near the conclusion of the musical Wicked:

... It well may be
That we will never meet again
In this lifetime
So let me say before we part
So much of me
Is made of what I learned from you
You'll be with me
Like a handprint on my heart
And now whatever way our stories end
I know you have re-written mine
By being my friend

Maybe that indelible impression we make doesn't have to be such a fearful responsibility. Maybe, like those we remember today, we too can leave handprints on the hearts of those we love.