Love, Loss and Life

Like many of you, I have had my share of losses over the last three years – all of which eroded part of my identity. The loss of my father was hard on its own and compounded by the grief that resurfaced related to the death of my mother. The following year came the loss of my mother in law, yet another anchor in my life. And in May of this year, the loss of my dear brother Miguel who valiantly fought the glioblastoma that had become an uninvited growth in his brain. This last loss erasing my sense of place – no longer one of three but now, one of two (siblings.)

The search for meaning in life is partially found through our connections, the links we have with one another. And when those links are broken, we feel an incredible sense of disorientation as we try to find our way back to who we are without them.

The late American writer Robin Moore wrote – “When someone dies, it reveals the fault lines in the bereaved family, even the deepest, most hidden ones. If you know about loss, you know about family, and about love, survival, resilience and strength. If you know about loss, you know about life.”
When my brother Miguel was diagnosed, I began to savor every conversation with him, whether it was through actual words that were uttered or through an implicit understanding of what was not said. I wanted to capture these moments in my mind – in my heart, looking in some way, to hold on to his spirit, his neshama.

There were so many occasions when I observed Miguel interact with his caregivers in a way that truly recognized their humanity. Like the time when preparing for yet another MRI - which would either bring dreaded news or provide another month of relief – knowing, that the tumor had not developed further roots in his brain, Miguel’s focus was not on himself but on the nurse. He greeted her with kindness, asked how her grandson liked his new school and how she herself was doing. What irony, that while his brain was being overtaken by his disease, he remembered details about someone else’s life and responded from his heart and in his own way - Olam hessed libaneh – building this world from love.

Even though 3000 miles separated us, that distance was not a deterrent to creating space to be together as I felt I was responding to something bigger than myself.
It wasn’t always easy. As hope that he would defeat this disease faded, there were moments when my ability to think clearly and act with compassion were severely tested. I began to prepare for the loss. At the same time, I realize now, that many others were doing the same- his partner of 12 years, his children, my sister and daughter, dear cousins and my father, who I know had to wonder whether he would be burying his son.

When decisions were made that went against what I felt Miguel would have wanted or were in his best interest, I struggled. How could I be respectful of the diverse opinions, values and needs when we were all in our own way were preparing for the loss?

In part, my role in my family has been to find ways to solve problems and bridge differences. The realization that no matter what I did, I could not bring all those who loved Miguel to a common understanding of the best way to care for him – unmoored me.

As happens in so many families, times like these are ripe for the fault lines – sometimes dormant for years, to resurface with ferocity.

In fact, these fault lines still haunt me day and night - were there paths not taken that would have resolved the conflict in a more compassionate way? And maybe the most impactful question for me – did I do right by my brother? Wasn’t everyone trying to do right by him in their own way?
I am left to wonder what parts of my experience with my brother were real and which ones I may have interpreted in a way that made me feel better but may not have left space for his true voice to be heard. What caries me through the dark times is the knowledge that the love I have for him and he expressed to me - I know to be real.

At this time of year when we are offered an opportunity to reflect, to sit with our losses, to take an inventory of our lives, I ask myself, might hessed, loving kindness, be a way to heal the fault lines within our heart and those of others?

_Yehi ratzon milanecha_- May it be your will that although I may never be able to heal all the fault lines - maybe, through acts of hessed to myself and to others - especially those different than myself, I can begin to repair some of them and build this world from love.