

The Angel of Death Has Been Working Overtime

Yizkor, 8th Day of Passover

April 13, 2023; 22 Nisan 5783

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

The *Malach Ha'Mavet* has been very busy this week. The Angel of Death, it seems, was working overtime during Pesach. No matter that the Jewish people are supposed to be celebrating and rejoicing...*zman cheiruteinu mikra kodesh*, no matter that this is the season of our redemption; a sacred, holy time on our calendar. For those of you who have experienced a loss during *chol ha'moed*, either during Passover or Sukkot, you know that formal mourning, *shiva*, is delayed until after the festival is over. Even if the funeral happens during *chol ha'moed*, there is no *kriyah*/rending of garments, no public observance of mourning until the conclusion of the holiday. The Shulchan Aruch states *asur lehargil et ha'hessed be'chol ha'moed*, it is forbidden to deliver eulogies during the week of the festival. This is supposed to be a time of uninterrupted joy. And even if a loved one passes, you have to somehow delay explicit, public mourning until after the community has concluded the celebration of the holiday.

But Jewish law makes one exception: for the *talmid chacham*...If a person of extraordinary Torah learning, a person of outstanding piety passes during the holiday, such a person can be eulogized. We can, we must lament such a loss, as it is a loss not only to that person's family and friends and community, but a *talmid chacham* is a unique loss to all of the Jewish people.

Last week not one not two but three *talmidot chachamot* were taken from this world. Three women of remarkable character and devotion to Torah and mitzvot. A 45 year old mother. A 20 year old daughter. A 15 year old daughter. Like many people do during *chol ha'moed* this family, olim from London, set out on a hike near the Sea of Galilee. But the *Malach Ha'mavet* was lying in wait. Seeing only Israeli license plates, Hamas terrorists ran the car off the road, and sprayed it with 22 bullets. The daughters died at the scene. Their mother was airlifted to Hadassah Hospital Ein Kerem, where, in a coma, doctors fought for days to save her life. But she too succumbed to her injuries. Lucy Dee *aleiha l'shalom*, was an English teacher. A rebbetzin. A beloved member of her community. Upon her passing, her organs were donated, reportedly saving the lives of five people. Maia and Rina Dee were so young, so full of potential. Everything I have read about these two girls suggests that they brightened any room they entered. They were exceedingly kind, generous, caring...and they had their whole lives ahead of

them! Maia was doing *sherut le'umi*, a post high school volunteer program, working with children in a local school. Rina had just started high school.

My family went on a *chol ha'moed* hike just this past Sunday. We brought our matzah sandwiches and kosher for Passover chips, and drove out to the Shenandoahs. We hiked. We explored the Luray Caverns. We ate lunch on picnic tables outside. And we returned home happy and safe. The Dees left as a family of seven and returned as a family of four. The father, Rabbi Leo Dee, while eulogizing his beautiful daughters wondered how he would possibly be able to tell their mother that Maia and Rina had died when Lucy came out of her coma. If there is any mercy in this senseless killing it is that he won't have to have that unimaginable conversation with her.

Yizkor Elohim nishmot kol acheinu bnei Yisrael she'masru et nafsham at kiddush Hashem...

May God remember the souls of our sisters and brothers, martyrs of the House of Israel, who gave their lives for the sanctification of God's name...*ana yishama be'chayeinu hed gevuratom u'mesirutam*, may their bravery and sacrifice be reflected in our lives...*ve'yeira-eh be'ma-aseinu tohar libam*, and may our lives bear witness to the purity of theirs...

On Friday April 7, another holy Jew passed from this world to the next. He was 103 years old. Ben Ferencz was born in Romania and came to the U.S. as an infant. Twenty seven years later, standing only 5 feet 2 inches tall, Ferencz was the lead prosecutor in the Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunal. This young, Harvard trained lawyer who had never set foot in a courtroom, was center stage in one of the most famous courtroom drama in history! Ferencz hurried to enlist in the Army when the second World War broke out, but was dismissed for being too short. His legal training landed him in a unit in General Patton's Third Army, which was created to investigate war crimes. As concentration camps were liberated, Ferencz's unit came in to gather evidence. What he saw continued to give him nightmares for the rest of his life. In the ruins of the Third Reich's Foreign Ministry building, he came up on a cache of top secret documents, in which the Nazis meticulously recorded the victims of death squads throughout eastern Europe. While every one of the 22 defendant he prosecuted pled not guilty, Ferencz, who only spoke Yiddish until he was 8 years old, calmly and convincingly used their own records as evidence against them...every single one of them was convicted. He devoted his life to the prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity. At the age of 97 Ferencz was interviewed by Leslie Stahl

on 60 Minutes. He still got choked up when relating the stories of what he saw in the camps. But when Stahl asked him how he can be so hopeful about the world, he proclaimed with a twinkle in his eye, “It takes courage not to be discouraged.” That piece of wisdom is precisely what I needed during this week that has been so painful and challenging.

In Hallel, which we have recited every day since the first seder, we say in the words of Psalm 118:

Sabuni gam s’vavuni...Sabuni chid’vorim, I am utterly surrounded; My enemies surround me like stinging bees; *b’shem Adnoai ki amilam*, but with God’s name I overcame them....*Ozi ve’zimrat Yah vay’hi li lishua*, God is my strength, my might, and my deliverance.

Those are empowering words. But as Ferencz suggests, it takes courage to say them, and even more to believe them.

As we soon turn to our Yizkor prayers and remember parents and spouses, siblings and children, martyrs and members of our congregation who are no longer with us, I will be meditating on the lives of Lucy, Maia, and Rina Dee, and Ben Ferencz, among others. And I will pray with all my heart:

Yizkor Elohim nishmot kol acheinu bnei Yisrael she’masru et nafsham at kiddush Hashem...

May God remember the souls of our sisters and brothers, martyrs of the House of Israel, who gave their lives for the sanctification of God’s name...*ana yishama be’chayeinu hed gevuratam u’mesirutam*, may their bravery and sacrifice be reflected in our lives...*ve’yeira-eh be’ma-aseinu tohar libam*, and may our lives bear witness to the purity of theirs...