

When Our Hearts Are Broken **Yom Kippur 5779 Yizkor**

Fern Buchner. Does her name sound familiar? Probably not. Until recently I wasn't aware that she died almost two years ago, on September 23, 2016. Fern and her husband were members Temple Beth Shalom, a congregation I served in Florida, New York: a charming village nestled in the southeast corner of New York State. Early in my tenure at their synagogue, Fern and her husband invited me to their home for Shabbat lunch. It was during that visit that I learned that this was their weekend home. Their primary residence was in the City, New York that is. I also learned that Fern was a makeup artist and that her husband was a professional, artisanal baker. They were a lovely couple, quiet, easy going, down to earth.

In the late Fall of 1992, Mr. Buchner died unexpectedly. Since they didn't belong to a synagogue in Manhattan, Fern asked me to officiate at the funeral, which would take place in NYC, with the burial on Long Island. Fern and I spoke at length, as is the usual practice. We talked about her husband's life journey. We talked about how she, born and raised in Henderson, Nevada, met her *bashert*, a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. We talked about their children. We discussed the logistics of the funeral, who of the family and friends would share eulogies. We coordinated where and

when *shiva* would be. As you can imagine, it was a difficult conversation. Fern sobbed uncontrollably and repeated over and over that the love of her life was gone, that she felt so alone, so lost. The best comfort I could offer Fern was being an attentive and sensitive listener. Perhaps that's the best any of us can offer.

On the morning of the funeral, I drove into Manhattan from our home in Westchester County for what was going to be a very long and emotionally taxing day. I'd never worked with this funeral home before: Riverside Memorial Chapel on the Upper West Side. Fortified with a full tank of gas and plenty of healthy snacks since I was seven months pregnant with my son Joshua, I pulled up at the funeral home behind the line of hearses and stretch limos in my apple red Pontiac Grand Am. The valet and doorman couldn't have been more solicitous. They handed me off to a funeral director, who led me upstairs to the chapel where the family was gathered. It was a beautiful space: a small, dark paneled room with tall, Gothic windows. The plain wooden casket stood off to the side, surrounded by more floral arrangements than I'd ever seen in my life. Fern sat beside the casket, wailing. It was heartbreaking to witness.

After being introduced to the family, we stepped aside to perform the ancient ritual of *kri'ah*, the symbolic rending of the garment as a sign of

mourning. Then we returned to the chapel for the memorial service. The family was seated in the first row, opposite the casket. Fern couldn't sit still. She was so agitated, quite out of character from the composed congregant I knew. But it was understandable, given the circumstance. As I began the service, Fern sprang up from her chair, grabbed my arm, and dragged me to the back of the chapel saying, "There's someone I want you to meet." Standing in the doorway was a couple still bundled up in their coats and hats. "This is Woody," Fern said, "and Mia." Oh, my goodness! Was this really happening or was this a joke? I'm supposed to be officiating at the funeral of a Brooklyn baker. Instead, I'm being introduced to Woody Allen and Mia Farrow! Extending my hand and muttering, "Nice to meet you," I forgot all propriety as I turned to Fern and asked, "How do you know them?" "I'm Woody's makeup artist," Fern replied. "I do the makeup for his films." Well, if I wasn't nervous before.... This was surreal. During the service, all I kept thinking was that one day I would show up as a caricature in one of Woody Allen's comedies: the nervous, pregnant Rabbi. To my knowledge, he's spared me the embarrassment.

Fern Buchner, *zikhronah livrakah*, may her memory be a blessing. How did I find out that she died? I saw Fern's photo during the "Oscars in Memorium" tribute which aired last February during the Academy Awards.

I was fortunate to know Fern those many years ago. And though you probably never met her, surely you saw Fern in one of her many cameo roles. Certainly, you know Fern through the legacy she left behind: her artistry and her skill, the dedication to her craft which for posterity is recorded on film. Her creativity touched our lives: in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*; *Zelig*; *Stardust Memories*; *Hannah and Her Sisters*; *Radio Days*; *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. And in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*; in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*; in Jon Avnet's *Fried Green Tomatoes*; in Barry Sonnenfeld's *Addams Family*; in Paul Mazursky's *Scenes From a Mall*. And so many more.... 66 film credits!

Fern lived an incredible life and interacted with people most of us "know" only through sensational tabloid headlines. The *shiva* was like a cast party: everyone who was anyone was there. What touched me most about that gathering wasn't **who** attended, but **why** they attended. They were Fern's *chevreh*, her friends, the community with whom she interacted professionally and socially. They were like family. As family, they felt Fern's pain. They understood the depth of her loss. That's why they made the effort to attend the funeral. That's why they took the time to sit *shiva*, to surround Fern with support, to envelop her in love and consolation. We read in the Talmud that one of the most important mitzvot is *l'vayat hameit*,

accompanying the dead to their final burial place. Why? Because it is the only truly selfless act; it's the only "favor" you can do for another person without any expectation of the favor being returned. Equally important is the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*, comforting the mourner, which is why Woody and Mia and Johnny Depp and Anjelica Houston and so many others were crammed into Fern's tiny NY apartment, respectfully paying a *shiva* call. Laden with Zabar's babkas and Zaro's rugalach, they came to lend a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen, and a hand to hold.

I don't anticipate that Woody Allen or Mia Farrow will show up at Temple Sinai for a funeral (if they do, I doubt they'll be sitting together). In any event, we have our own *chevre*, our own family and friends who are by our side when our hearts are broken, when we need a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on. Temple Sinai has lost so many loved ones this year, dear family and friends. You know who's not here. You know where they sat, with whom they *kibbitzed*, what made them smile, what made them cry. It's been a painful year. We are so fortunate that this is a loving and caring community. It has happened more than once that a family has requested to convene the funeral service in the beautiful Abrahams Family Chapel, only to discover that there aren't enough seats for all who have come to pay their respects. What do we do? When we can, we squeeze in more chairs.

When we exceed capacity, either some people stand, or we delay the service for a few minutes and relocate to the Zwerin Sanctuary. Even when we plan to have the funeral service in the Zwerin Sanctuary, we sometimes have to call on the custodian at the last moment to open the back wall and set up additional chairs. These are welcome inconveniences. They demonstrate the compassionate soul of this community. They are testament to the care, the respect, the empathy and the sympathy that we have for one another. We whose hearts have been broken by the loss of a loved one can appreciate such loving gestures. We know how comforting it was when others were there for us in our time of mourning: to listen to our stories, to sit with us in silent reflection, to look at old photos, to share cherished memories, to make sure we weren't alone.

As we take a few moments to think of our loved ones who no longer are beside us physically but are so very present in our hearts and in our minds, think also of those who reached out to you during your time of mourning, who were with you to perform the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*, comforting the mourner. Think also of how you, through your compassionate words and through your thoughtful actions, fulfilled the same mitzvah for others.

In a moment, we'll read the names of our loved ones who died this past year. Many of the names you'll recognize; some you won't. But I can assure you that every person mentioned has a life's story that is inspiring and notable, more complex and more profound than any of us ever could imagine. The sacredness of each life's journey unfolds itself to us and inspires us. For all of our loved ones we say: *Zikhronam livrakhah*, may cherished memories live on through us as eternal and blessed legacies.