

The Blessing of Having Loved
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Ohel Sholom Temple
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Dear Friends,

Another twelve months has passed and again, on Yom Kippur, we gather in this sacred place to honor our dead. Our memories swirl and love stirs our hearts.

Children remember their parents. Can you ever forget their years of worry, their anguishing nights of prayerful waiting and watching? The mother on whose breast you whispered so many heartaches? The father who toiled so, sacrificing for your welfare?

Husbands reach out their hands to their wives and wives breathe a prayer for their husbands -- the dear companion whose confidence and trust sustained and strengthened you; the partner of failure and success, loss and achievement; the one to whom you could turn, when all else failed, to find an ever-loving welcome, an ever-steadfast hope.

And even parents call to mind their children -- the eyes that trusted you and sweetly depended upon you. You remember how you took the hands of your little ones and led their faltering steps through their childhood years, hoping against hope that their well-grounded roots and strong wings would carry them safely through life.

There is none among us who does not mourn for some loved one -- parent, partner, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, friend and, God help us, child. For some, it is a fresh grief that aches like an open wound. For others, an old grief that lingers and rises at times in our hearts with poignancy that brings tears to our eyes.

Yet there are also memories that bring smiles to our hearts, that is the blessing of having loved: the knowing that we were to someone the light of their lives; that someone loved us and believed in us even when we could not love or believe in ourselves; that our departed loved ones taught us the lessons of life -- how to make meaningful lives for ourselves and those we love, lives that matter, and to leave legacies that last.

In his book, *Life Doesn't Get Any Better Than This*, my friend, Rabbi Bob Alper, shared such memories of his parents, now both of blessed memory. It is called: "Old Lovers." He remembers:

"My mother and father observed an unusual ritual throughout their nearly forty-nine years of marriage. Whenever they left home together, just before walking through the door, they would kiss each other. Usually it was a perfunctory kiss, a force of habit kind of thing, but without question it was mandatory for them, almost like paying homage to a superstition, which it was not.

Apparently they had kissed at the door ever since they were newlyweds, and the custom held. Even if they were in the midst of a quarrel (and their arguments were always civil), there would be that brief pause, the kiss, and the discussion would continue as they walked outside. As a kid, I thought all couples kissed whenever they left their home.

Certain memories surrounding my father's death remain especially clear in my mind. The phone call, the funeral, the hundreds of people offering consolation, my teenage son's arm around my shoulders; and reciting *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer I had led thousands of times, now as a mourner myself.

But most of all, I remember watching my mother leaving the apartment on the way to the funeral. When she reached the front door, she paused for a moment, only a moment, and sighed. Then she squeezed my hand hard, and walked out into the hallway.

I wouldn't dare try to characterize my parents' marriage. After all, what does a child, even a grown child, really know about his parents' relationship? But there is history that I experienced along with them, and themes in their lives to which I was privy. Lots of heartache and hard times, but also a good deal of joy and pride and a more comfortable life toward the end.

My mother and father often joked facetiously that theirs was an inter-marriage, and perhaps in 1940 they did qualify somewhat, Mom as the granddaughter of German-Jewish immigrants and Dad as the grandson of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Her ancestry was of the punctual, exacting variety and his of a more relaxed, quixotic nature. Their two backgrounds occasionally clashed, as at the conclusion of a Thanksgiving visit to our home in Philadelphia.

Always one of my favorite holidays, this Thanksgiving we had enjoyed a large, festive celebration on Thursday, and now it was Friday afternoon with just Sherri, our kids, and my parents sitting around the dining-room table picking through leftovers. Everyone was feeling relaxed and full. My mother excused herself from the table, announcing that she was going upstairs to pack so that she and my father could get back home to Baltimore in plenty of time to attend Sabbath evening services. A few minutes later, the predictable call from on high: "Norman, are you coming up to help?"

My father, who in his later years had developed grouching into an art form, was annoyed. Not only was he annoyed, but this day he had an audience to whom he could ruefully complain, "Punctual. Always punctual. She has to be on time. Everything done on schedule. Very precise." (The final syllable emphasized through clenched teeth.) He was enjoying himself as he rehearsed the old theme. Mom called again, and Dad continued to expound on the qualities of persons afflicted with a German-Jewish heritage. The kids fell silent. Sherri and I became increasingly uncomfortable. For one of the first times in my life - for I was still their child - I decided to intervene, and the device I chose was humor. I took a big breath, then looked at my father with raised eyebrows and suggested, "Yeah, Dad. She's a real pain. Why don't you dump her?"

Sherri and the kids did double-takes, then began to laugh hysterically. My father, caught off guard, smiled, pretended to agree that it was not a half-bad idea, and joined in the laughter. Even my mother thought it was funny, once we let her in on the joke.

In the final years of their marriage my parents experienced an increase in tension, sniping, impatience, and anger. I stood to the side, sad, hoping the same would not happen between Sherri and me, and wondering if what I was witnessing was unique to Mom and Dad or a natural by-product of the frustrations of aging.

Still, the psalmist wrote how in God's sight a thousand years are like one day. In human experience I learned that sometimes one brief moment can outweigh decades. One brief moment can become more significant than all the events and feelings of the years that surround it. A moment in a cold, formal hospital room, for example.

A few months after that Thanksgiving encounter my father entered the hospital for prostate surgery, a common operation for men his age but scary nevertheless. On the morning of the surgery he was slightly groggy but still cavalier when my mother and I kissed him good-bye. We ate a little breakfast and passed the time as people do in hospitals until the doctor arrived with a good report and the promise that Dad would be returned to his room within an hour.

We awaited him. Finally a squad of orderlies and nurses wheeled him into the room and carefully transferred him from litter to bed. When the people cleared away, I looked down to see a much older-looking Norman Alper, his hair matted, his mouth shriveled, a red mark across the bridge of his nose and saliva sliding down his chin. He slept fitfully.

But soon he awoke, and looked at us, and smiled. And then one of the most wonderful scenes I have ever witnessed took place. Carefully, lovingly, Mom handed Dad his dentures, which, in his vanity, he had never been without. He fitted them into his mouth, and his face brightened. Almost ritualistically, she returned his glasses. His hearing aid. She dabbed his cheek and combed his hair. And at the last, she replaced his wedding ring on his finger.

Step by step she brought him back to her. Step by step he returned to her. Pure joy. Pure, sweet joy passing back and forth between them. I stood nearby, but, to them, not present. They were alone with each other.

I watched my elderly parents. Lovers. Still."

Friends, we have all lost dear ones bound to us by ties of marriage, blood or friendship. At this sacred hour of *Yizkor*, of remembrance, in this holy place, filled with the loving presence of those who have gone before us, we thank you, God, for the blessing of memory, for the gift of having loved and having known the love of our dear ones. We cherish all the laughter and every tear; all of our hopes and dreams and triumphs and, even, the heartaches and sorrow and failures; the signs between us no one else knew, the special secrets we shared, the passion, the tenderness, the love. We bring them back to us now moment-by-moment, step-by-step, memory-by-memory. *Zichronam Livracha*, they are, every one of them, our abiding blessing.