



Yizkor 5776: *Gmar Tov*

Kol Nidre 5776: Home

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This week, our community lost a giant – a *gadol*, in the truest sense. Rabbi Sidney Shoham, alav hashalom, was a mensch. Many of you, I know, had connections to him going back decades; he came to Montreal in 1956, and built Beth Zion from a house in what were then the wilds of Cote-St-Luc into a thriving congregation. I first met him, as rabbis tend to meet, at Paperman’s. And even though I only had the privilege of knowing him these few years, I quickly came to love his smile, his collegiality, his wisdom and his wit.

At his funeral Tuesday morning, colleagues and grandchildren spoke about how he transmitted his openness and integrity; it was clear that this was a man who, as one person put it, had Torah running through his veins. Rabbi Zeitz drew attention to the fact that at this time, we wish each other “*gmar tov*,” which literally means, “a good completion” – usually meaning, “may the fast and this time of repentance go well.” But, he aptly said, Rabbi Shoham also had a *gmar tov*, a good end to an exceptionally good life. Would that all of us had the privilege of dying in our sleep, after presiding over a beautiful concert, in a place where we are beloved.

Gmar tov – a good end. We honour many good endings this year. Dr. Oliver Sacks, as a ground-breaking neurologist and author, was a different kind of *gadol*, but a great man all the same. He chronicled his own final chapters with characteristic, exquisite eloquence. His memoir, *On the Move*, appeared this spring; soon after he submitted the manuscript, he learned he had metastatic cancer. Reflecting on his impending death, he wrote:

I have been increasingly conscious, for the last 10 years or so, of deaths among my contemporaries. My generation is on the way out, and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of part of myself. There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the



fate — the genetic and neural fate — of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.

I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers.

Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.¹

Six months later, he wrote his last column, with the title: Sabbath. He wrote very poignantly about his experience being rejected on religious grounds by his mother when she learned that he was gay, and he wrote about how, later in life, he experienced the new openness of his Orthodox family's embrace, sharing the Shabbat table with his partner and with them. He concluded with these words:

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.²

May Dr. Sacks rest in peace. May Rabbi Shoham rest in peace. As the giants in their generation pass from this world to the next, whether they were family patriarchs or matriarchs, or people whose words guided our steps, may their memories be blessed.

Dying can be an art form, the end of a life well-lived. Mourning can be an art form as well, though there is no easy way to learn. This past June, Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, wrote a reflection on *sheloshim* after her husband, Dave Goldberg, died suddenly at age 47, leaving his wife and two young children behind. *Sheloshim*, in Jewish

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/opinion/oliver-sacks-on-learning-he-has-terminal-cancer.html>

² <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html>



mourning practice, marks the end of the first thirty days. Sandberg used this signpost to share some of what she had learned. She writes:

A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. Now I do.

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.

But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning.

And this is why I am writing: to mark the end of sheloshim and to give back some of what others have given to me... I have lived thirty years in these thirty days. I am thirty years sadder. I feel like I am thirty years wiser.³

May Dave Goldberg rest in peace, together with all those who left our lives too soon. May those who mourn them find comfort.

Mourning can be an art form, though the valley of the shadow is very dark. In his novel, *Medicine Walk*, Richard Wagamese tells the story of a young man, Franklin, whose father has been an absent and painful figure in his life. The father, Eldon, approaches his death with a body ravaged by alcoholism, and a mind full of unhealed memories. He calls upon his son to walk with him through his final days and to give him a warrior’s burial, according to a tradition Eldon didn’t transmit, and a culture Franklin has struggled to learn. After burying his father, Frank returns to the man who raised him, whose own story also was shaped by the choices that Eldon made. Here is how their conversation goes:

“I don’t know as he ever got what he wanted in the end,” the kid said.

“Whattaya think that was?” the old man asked.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/sheryl/posts/10155617891025177:0>



They stopped and they both put a foot on the bottom rail of the fence and gazed out across the acres. The kid shook his head. “Don’t know. It’s all jumbled up in there. Maybe I was s’posed to forgive him.”

“Do ya?” the old man asked.

“Don’t know that either. Kinda like a thousand-pound word to me right now.”

...”There’s a stone in the pack,” the kid said. “It’s from the grave. I brung it for ya.”

“For me? Why’d ya wanna do something like that?”

“I figured you mighta lost something too.”

The old man clamped his jaws together. He nodded... “We’ll keep it on the hearth,” he said, “That way we can share it, talk of it if we need to. Thank you, Frank.”

The kid looked down at his feet. Then he raised his head and looked at the old man and they held the gaze silently.

“I ain’t sure how to feel,” the kid said.

“Sometimes when things get taken away from you it feels like there’s a hole at your centre where you can feel the wind blow through, that’s sure,” the old man said.

“Whattaya do about that?”

“Me, I always went to where the wind blows.” The old man put a hand on the kid’s shoulder and turned him to face him square on. “Don’t know as I ever got an answer but it always felt better bein’ out there.”⁴

As I read this passage, I thought of the Jewish tradition of placing stones on a grave; we do it to show we have been there; we do it to attest to what endures. We do it to insist

⁴ Richard Wagamese, *Medicine Walk*, pp.243-44.



that the person who has died is still bound up with us, all of us pebbles together in the stream of our shared lives.

Just a few weeks ago, at a wedding, the bride's family used two small bags of stones to hold down the corners of the ketubah while it was being signed. When I asked about their meaning, they told me that these stones would be placed on the graves of the bride's grandparents, who had played a profound role in her life. Their presence at the ceremony was palpable.

When I go to unveilings, I see this again and again: Stones brought from special places. Stones which carry specific memories. Stones painted by children or gathered from cottages or hiking trails or countries around the world. These stones tell a story about how someone lived their life, and how their memory lives on.

Whatever the nature of our loss, it has a weight; it has a shape; just like all of those stones. We carry our memories with us; we walk through the valley of the shadow and we stand where the wind blows through. We pray for a *gmar tov*, a good end, for those who shaped us, and also for us all.