



## An Orphan at Age Fifty-Seven

My father passed away at age sixty-seven, in 1990. Some months back, my mother, age eighty-four, also passed on. May peace be upon them and their memories be blessed. And, now, I, aged fifty-seven, am an orphan.

We are not used to considering graybeards in their late middle age as orphans. Point of fact, though, is that is when many of us first confront life as orphans. This process, despite following the normal *seder* of life is, nonetheless, a very potent one. For, regardless of when you become an orphan, the fact remains that it is a type of utter aloneness that forever redefines life.

As long as one has parents, even one parent, even a weakening and ageing parent, life has a validating cushion. There is someone who is interested absolutely in us, who cares, absolutely, about us. There is someone who we can visit or call and when they ask us, "What's new?" really wants to know and will have the patience to listen to our answer. There is someone who, in every circumstance, will extend their love for us to embrace our children and grandchildren. And, there is no one else in the world to visit or to call who will ever give us that unconditional validation.

Yet, being an orphan doesn't just mean we are deprived of a parent's counsel, attention, and love. It means we will no longer be able to repay that love in kind with our encouragement and attention to them. In the two-way street of parents and children, both ways are now forever blocked.

In my case, I was particularly blessed. My mother, always concerned with her children's happiness, repeatedly told us that she knew she was old and would soon die and that she was at peace with this reality, with her life and wanted us to know that. She said she knew we loved her deeply and didn't want us to be overly hurt by her passing. Her only request for her funeral was that we read from the third *perek* of *Koheles* where "a time for everything" is noted, including a time to live and a

time to die. In fact, we found among her belongings a personal letter addressed to her children in which she told us, posthumously, how happy she was that we were her children, who loved her deeply, and that she could face her own mortality with peace due to this fact. So, in a sense, she softened the blow and continued to soften it, even from beyond the grave.

All this is surely a comfort but it cannot silence the loss or fill the now-permanent void.

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Nor can it silence the now-vivid truth of our earthly odyssey, the new "batter-up" nature of our own mortality. It is an inescapable truth that being orphaned means moving out of the on-deck circle, and stepping up to the plate. We are now, logically speaking, the next members of our family line that will leave this mortal coil. As a wit once put it, "My grandparents died. My parents died. It seems to be a definite family trend." There is no distinct subgroup of the human species that is not subject to death. It is part of the human condition from the moment we are

born. As orphans, this ignored but obvious fact becomes overwhelming.

It is brought home to us by the vivid, yet, somehow also numbing experience of hospitals, especially those sections devoted to the critically ill. The machines of life's preservation, respirators, intravenous lines, circulatory stimulators, blood pressure monitors, and so on surround us. Families gather in hallways in quiet conferences with doctors, hospice experts, or just with each other; a scene of high dramatic tragedy. Yet, throughout this set walks a hospital staff, that, despite the best efforts of some of them, cannot avoid imparting the sense that this is a daily job. For them it is all part of life's banality. We are reminded that outside of our family circle life goes on. Our loved one's struggle to remain in this world affects few. In almost all cases, once that struggle is lost and, a few decades pass, we will be remembered by no one.

How are we, Jews of *emunah* and *bitachon*, whose life's quest is "*kirvas Elokim*," to deal with being orphans?

The first and most fundamental part of this new reality is that we are, in fact, not alone. The Ribono shel Olam is here with us. His mercy surrounds and caresses us. It is He toward Whom our this-worldly path is taking us. We must realize that it is before Him we now stand. And, in that vein, being stripped of a parent may just be one of the hidden blessings of our own aging. The props and scenery are being removed from the stage of our lives. We must now focus on what we *can* take with us into eternity. The consolation of a mother's love strengthens us in life. When it is removed we are, hopefully, fortified enough to now face our own final *din v'cheshbon* openly and honestly.

The second teaching of Toras Hashem so relevant here is that the grave is not the empty abyss of materialists' fantasies. It is just the beginning of a wondrous existence, beyond our



ability to fathom. And, at the End of Days, there is a return (either permanent or temporary) to some form of bodily resurrection as well. Our loved ones are never lost to us. The buffetings of this world and the separation of death are but fleeting parts of a process which is but a part of the ultimate goodness of Hashem. We will yet be with our parents. The brief tale of life in this world is, simply put, just the first stage of wonders and love still to be experienced.

The shivah is a faint inkling of this. In its grueling series of visits is the reminder that even in This World we are not completely alone. Faces from the present and, at times, the distant past emerge, old friends and rebbeim return to comfort us. We do not walk through the storms of life without company.

And, so, I am orphaned. Far from a comfortable *baal tefillah*, I relish every Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos along the way that relieves me of the burden of leading the davening. But it is a burden we fulfill with dutiful resignation. It is the least we can do.

At the local Rachmistrivka *shtiebel* in Monsey, where I daven when not in yeshivah, there is a fine minyan, composed primarily of kollel *yungerleit*. The pace set by the Rav is just right. The davening is usually lively and engaged. The *mikveh* is hot, as is the coffee. And after davening there is a daily *l'chayim*. Cookies and *bronfen*. *Sip-purei tzadikim* on the various *yahrtzteits*. What more could any Jew want out of life? And, so here too, in the *shtiebel*, I am healed daily.

I have recently transferred some old films of my mother to DVD. Images from the 1950s, from a different universe. My mother in her early thirties. My grandmother about as old as I am now. A Brooklyn Dodgers jacket. Sitting in the bleachers at Yankee Stadium for the 1958 World Series against the Milwaukee Braves (and, as a dutiful Yankee hater, rooting for the latter). Rowboating on Prospect Park Lake. Where has it all

gone? What remains of those days when my mother took me on endless trips to the library, to the Museum of Natural History, encouraging every interest a boy could have? So many lives, so many years, all just a memory now, smiling and youthful only on a DVD?

**And who can we speak to about this? Yes, my children and grandchildren. But, do they know the woman who raised me, consoled and encouraged me always? And, do I know the woman whose husband went off to bomb Germany, who graduated from Brooklyn College, Lincoln High School, and Booty Junior High in Brooklyn of the 1930s?**

And who can we speak to about this? Yes, my children and grandchildren. They knew my mother and had a splendid relationship with her. But, do they know the woman who raised me, consoled and encouraged me always? And, do I know the woman whose husband went off to bomb Germany, who graduated from Brooklyn College, Lincoln High School, and Booty Junior High in Brooklyn of the 1930s? Or the girl who played on the railing on Ocean Parkway's islands in the 1920s?

No. It is not just memories. The *ma'amin* has far more than memories. He has more than elegies in graveyards. For the *Rofeh l'shevurei lev* will make all our sweet memories live again in some manner that no eye has seen, nor ear

heard. We will yet ride the merry-go-rounds of youth with our parents or partake, perhaps, of something so much better that we cannot envision it. And we, for our part, had best prepare ourselves to be more spiritually presentable, to be better able to absorb those future joys in the "day which is all good."

I write this during the Three Weeks. It is a period of national mourning, for which we have many halachos and *min-hagim* geared to remember and partake in the sorrow of our exile. This is no easy task for those of us living in the relative comfort and security of our time. We are, conceivably, the first community in Jewish history that is called upon to experience *galus* in its primary aspect of spiritual dislocation. On the one hand, this spiritual exile is seen in the obliviousness of the overwhelming majority of Klal Yisrael to Torah and mitzvos. It is also found in each of us, in the myriad faults that we see daily in our own communities and in ourselves.

And, if we suffer primarily spiritually, our ancestors suffered immeasurably from poverty and persecution. So many of them lived shortened lives with their hopes and dreams snuffed out all too soon. And, let us not forget that we too know the pain of sickness, and family troubles, and ultimately of death.

But the Three Weeks will end. As the Berditchever writes in *Kedushas Levi*, "*Nachamu, nachamu ami*" is a double expression of comfort, for we pray for the day when G-d's infinite goodness will be a tangible comfort to us, that we may not merely accept it as a matter of faith but actually experience it. He relates it to the *pasuk*, "*Hareinu Hashem chasdecha*." We ask to see the mercy with our human eyes.

And, just as we will all, hopefully, speedily see the goodness and the making right of our history as a people forever, so too shall individual death one day become merely a distant memory. I and all of Klal Yisrael will not be mourners for too long. ■