

MY FATHER, ABRAHAM SHULMAN, ALAV HASHALOM--1913-1999

In a true sense, the process that culminates in being let down into the earth, being covered with earth, is a process that brings one, and those about one, to the ground.

My father passed away 9:30 p.m., Monday night, the twenty-third of Cheshvon. In the months, perhaps years of a slow decline of health, he had to shed those glamorous gifts with which he had flown above the level of ordinary men and women, and as he did, I had to shed that vision too.

And when he died, it was in one way a relief, for the never-ending fight against mortality that he had waged had, after one surrender after another, been set aside. As he descended to the infirmities and despotism of the failing mechanisms of the body, he descended in a sense to quotidian life and, experiencing life, passed to death.

In his last weeks, in a nursing home, this fierce skeptic, with an aide's assistance, willingly put on a yarmulke and tefillin and recited the Shema and a few blessings. The great fight with God was over. Although to the end he was bitter, railing against the dark of infirmity, perhaps this surrender, so unfamiliar to him, was a comfort.

When Rabbi Myer Fund of the Flatbush Minyan spoke about my father, I for the first time grew intensely aware of the covered casket before me that held his body. With almost a shiver, I seemed to feel the reality of his naked spirit, right there, hovering in the air before me, above his body. And then I cried, for I could feel his spirit divested of the corrosive nihilism that had accompanied him in all but his softest moments--as though for the first time in so long he had been freed.

And then as Rabbi Fund ended his eulogy, he spoke eloquently and grandiloquently of my father's soul rising past the heavenly dwelling place of his namesake, Avraham Avinu, who welcomed him in love. And I could imagine my father's spirit making some amused, disparaging remark, for he was a man who hunted out and attacked whatever he considered bombast, sentimentality or hokum.

It was an unbalanced trait and one that lost him friends--often, it seemed, unnecessarily. But it was also a trait that dared to speak truths--sometimes not very great truths, and sometimes important ones. He was one of the few and early voices to decry a self-serving Holocaust industry propagated often by self-serving survivors of the Holocaust. In his passion to discard fool's gold, he was prone to not recognize real gold. Yet despite the imperfections of his arsenal and the stings his victims suffered, there was a hatred of the fraudulent, of acceptance of lies, at the core of his teaching.

In his eulogy, Rabbi Fund referred to this as an extreme skepticism l'sheim shamayim: for the sake of heaven. It was a skepticism of religion and of all ideologies, particularly of political and utopian passion--this after, having been an ardent Communist, he experienced Communism in Stalinist Russia.

I don't know what my father would have liked to be remembered for most. He was a Yiddish writer. He graduated journalism school in Warsaw and, as a young man, worked as a magazine editor and writer in Melbourne, later in Paris and finally as a staff writer for the Jewish Daily Forward. He was proud of his felicitous Yiddish style: simple, limpid and lucid and, most of all, light--yet acerbic, tight and sharp. It was a style that won him acclaim in the world of Yiddish letters: a spare style that can perhaps be compared to the style of a master musician who has learned to leave out all the unnecessary notes.

He was also proud of his humor. He wrote a regular humor column for the Forward. He would boast to me of how people would write him that they were embarrassed to read his column in the subway, for they would uncontrollably begin roaring with laughter. And I saw people laughing with tears in their eyes at a lecture he gave on Yiddish humor, and at plays he wrote, which were produced off-Broadway and in Montreal. He would complain to me that the Yiddish world didn't take him seriously, for he wrote humor, and they didn't understand that humor is not trivial, but as weighty and meaningful as serious writing.

And despite his deprecation of authority figures, he was proud that the Lubavitcher rebbe said of him that although he is not religious, he has merit, for he makes people laugh.

My father was part of a universe, a cosmos that exists no longer: the universe of the cultural, Yiddishist, secular Jew. This was a universe of millions of Jews that was almost destroyed by the Nazis, and whose remnants were the milieu and audience of my father. As I was looking at the books in my father's library after his death, I came upon a few books (in Yiddish) of critiques of various Yiddish writers. Today, these writers' names are unknown. But not too long ago, they were intensely read, mined for meaning, discussed and appreciated. Twenty-five years ago, when my father gave a talk on secular Yiddish literature, in lecture tours across the United States, South America and Australia, he was received by large and interested audiences.

This was a culture of secular, Yiddish Judaism. This was very much my father's Judaism, culturally speaking. He disliked religion, for he disliked cant, which he discerned in all belief, and in all systems of belief that ultimately demand of the adherent that he close his eyes to contradictory evidence. But he did not dislike Jews. He despised nationalism. But he was proud of Israel. And, once it was clear that my

sister and I had chosen a Judaism of Torah observance, he was, if perhaps puzzled and embarrassed, proud as well: a pride that he expressed in a humorous essay he wrote for *The Jewish Week*.

My father was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1913. His parents were not religious. Their background, however, was Hasidic: the school of Vorke, which is related to Amshinov Hasidism. The name of his father, for whom I am named, was Yaacov Dovid: a well-known Amshinov name.

He met my mother when they were young students and radical Leftists, throwing up banners across streets at the risk of considerable punishment. In September of 1939, the Nazis attacked Poland. My father and mother, as well as her brother and others, left Warsaw, smuggling themselves into Byelorussia. But then they returned, thinking that perhaps the situation would improve. On their return, however, they saw the anti-Semitic posters that the Nazis had hung up everywhere. They asked their other family members to flee with them. But the others believed that things would be all right, that the matter would blow over. In his eulogy, Rabbi Fund said that the faith of previous generations was sometimes destructive in the war-time years, lulling sensibilities to false optimism, and that it was sometimes a fierce spirit of skepticism that made possible survival. Tragically, everyone else in their immediate families (besides my mother's brother, a Zionist, who escaped with them) was murdered by the Nazis.

In the course of their flight from Poland, they had to pass through fields deeply buried in snow. At one point, a woman with whom they were traveling collapsed and wanted to give up, but my parents picked her up by the arms and propelled her forward, probably saving her life. This was Malgoshe Wolfson, who was related (I forget exactly how) to the well-known Rabbi Moshe Wolfson of present-day Mir Yeshiva.

My father had been a starry-eyed believer in the Communist Paradise. He writes in his book, *Jeremiah is Alive and Well and Living in New York City*, that he was now shocked to find Soviet soldiers pointing their rifles at them and refusing them entrance.

But they did smuggle themselves into Russia and traveled illegally by train across the breadth of Russia to its eastern port city, Vladivostok. There my father had enough experiences to disillusion him from Communism--as well as Bundism (a Jewish communist movement), Yiddishism, and many other isms. He always was alert to any signs of demagoguery and appeals to mass emotion. I remember during the riveting Nixon impeachment hearings how, to my initial dismay, he decried the self-serving theatrics of Elizabeth Holtzman and others. He was not a fan of Richard Nixon, but he could not stomach any sort of emotional manipulation of the masses.

My parents traveled the same route as did the Mir Yeshiva students in their famous journey. When they arrived in Vladivostok, they came to the hotel

where the Jewish refugees were staying. Here they found that the ship ferrying Jews to Kobe, Japan, were no longer sailing. My parents naively decided to go to the NKVD (secret police) headquarters and complain. The NKVD was an organization of oppression and murder. My father stayed outside and my mother went in alone, on the assumption that the NKVD officers would feel more compassionate to a woman. The officer laughed with astonishment at my mother's request, and when my parents returned to the hotel, the hotel-keeper was terrified, for he had received a phone call from the NKVD (and all his Jewish guests were illegal). But, apparently as a result of this visit, the ferry was resumed.

My parents remember that it was Purim when they crossed the straits to Kobe. There were religious Jews on the ship who danced and sang with joy, and even pulled the Japanese sailors into their dancing. My parents had told me that these were Mir students, but a friend has told me (and so it appears in my father's *Jeremiah is Alive and Well*) that these were Amshinov Hasidim--perhaps they were a mixture of Amshinov Hasidim and Mir students. At any rate, this friend tells me that he heard of this celebration from other sources and that the Amshinover rebbe was on this ship.

It is a source of great pride and happiness to me to think that it may well have been the initiative of my parents that saved the lives of these Jews.

Kobe was at that time an unwesternized Japanese city. The Japanese there still wore kimonos (my mother has one in her closet), and they regularly went to steam baths twice a day. In Kobe, the Mir students and rabbis received visas to Shanghai, and their stay there has been well-publicized. My parents, on the other hand, received visas to Australia.

My parents lived in Australia for ten years, part of the expatriate community. Initially my father worked in a factory and then he worked as an editor and Yiddish writer. Ten years later, my father received a job offer in Paris. In 1950, my parents moved to Paris, where my father began by supplementing his income as an English-language tutor and worked again as a magazine editor and Yiddish writer. It was in Paris--in Montmartre--that my sister and I were born.

In 1960, the Jewish Daily Forward offered my father a position, which he accepted, and we moved to the United States--first to Crown Heights for three years, and then to Sea Gate (the tip of the Coney Island peninsula), which had for many years been a community of Yiddishists: writers, musicians and artists. It was there he lived until he passed away.

In the course of his life, my father was the colleague of the creators of a rich and fertile Yiddish culture. His friends were writers of all kinds--essayists, story-tellers, poets, scholars--as well as musicians, actors, painters, sculptors and others. The best-known names are Elie Wiesel (who was a fellow journalist in Paris) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (a

colleague on the Jewish Daily Forward). But there were many others: Melech Ravitch, Itzik Manger and, among the living today, Avraham Sutzkever, Tzvi Kanar, the artist Yossel Bergner. Unfortunately, I did not meet most of these people. I do recall two of my father's friends, however. A few blocks from us when I was a boy lived a sweet old lady named Eliza Greenblatt. I knew her first as a nice old woman (rather boring to a little boy) and later, when I was thirteen or so, as the grandmother of Arlo Guthrie. Still later, I learned that she was a famous Yiddish poet who had, in the nineteen-thirties, traveled and sang her songs as a roving troubadour. Then, when I was in my early twenties and newly Torah-observant, I went to Israel, where I looked up an old journalist friend of my father, Leib Rochman, who had written one of the first and classic memoirs of the Holocaust. He was a beautiful Yiddish writer, and his house was a cultural center in Jerusalem for the famous and for all sorts of curious, alive and intense young people.

I was fascinated that each of the people who spoke at my father's funeral had seen a different side of him. Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter of Columbia University was the man who had known him best, over the course of many decades. Dr. Schaechter is an academic Yiddishist. He remembered my father as a fellow Yiddishist, as an intellectual jousting partner. My father, in his opposition to all isms, would mock Dr. Schaechter's Yiddish neologisms. But--unlike others who were the target of my father's acidulous pen--Dr. Schaechter seemed to respond with humor, and the two men were always personal friends.

The present editor of the Forward, Sam Norich, a relatively young man, told of how he first met my father: a "Bohemian" who entered his office and began describing with passion the various book projects he was working on. Mr. Norich spoke of my father's humor, his intelligence, fierce sharpness and drive.

Rabbi Myer Fund put my father's life in context. It was a life that spanned the majority of a tumultuous, revolutionary, and often tragic century of Jewish life.

One trait on which all the speakers seemed to agree upon was my father's determination, his energy, his courage, his drive.

I would say that my father's skepticism "for the sake of heaven" (as Rabbi Fund had stated) was for the sake of heaven because it was, in a concealed way, a passion for truth. My father was very clear about the humbug he detested. Yet he found it hard to express the truth, the ideals in which he believed.

Sometimes it seemed that he believed in no truth and in no one. Everything was a meaningless farce: empty, meaningless, filled with endless suffering--a hell in which, in his terrible words, even God was trapped. There was here in such words a trace of some awful cosmic vision of the

exile--but one which, unlike a Torah view, had no alleviation and no hope. And his estimation of the human race was often equally bleak.

Yet there was also a soft side to him, a fondness for humanity and the Jewish people. In his theatrical works, this could become positively sentimental. I am thinking of his *Stories of Chelm* (correct title?), which played successfully in Montreal (and, I think, off-Broadway), and his adaptation of *A Bintel Brief* ("A Bundle of Letters," based on the "Dear Abby" type letters to the editor of the *Forward* at the beginning of the century), which I believe was staged for the *Folksbiene Theater*. But ever the man skeptical of the maudlin, and ever the entertainer and craftsman, he would shift sentimental scenes quickly into comedy before bathos could set in.

My father wrote *The Hotel Polski*, a non-fiction study of a group of Jews trapped in this Warsaw hotel, who almost saved their lives using foreign papers. "*The Anthropologist and the Girl*" was a novel based on the experiences of a friend of his who was subjected to measurements and tormenting procedures by a Nazi anthropologist attempting to prove a physical difference between Jews and Aryans. He wrote two books published in Yiddish, collections of essays on the various communities he visited in his travels around the world in the course of his lecture tours, from Peru to New Guinea. And he published a translated collection of some humorous pieces entitled *Adventures of a Yiddish Lecturer*. (My wife was reading it lately, and every few minutes, I heard her laugh out loud. My father would have been pleased.)

But my favorite works of my father are a series of three books: *The Old Country*, *The New Country*, and *The Promised Land*. In the early nineteen-seventies, the *Jewish Daily Forward* moved from its Lower East Side location to mid-town Manhattan. My father learned that the *Forward's* yellowing and crumbling archives dating back to the nineteen twenties and perhaps earlier were simply going to be discarded. These newspapers had weekend supplements with interesting, historically significant and often touching and beautiful photographs. My father saved at least a remnant of these and, with an accompanying text, published them in three volumes that focussed on, respectively, the Jews of Eastern Europe, the Jewish immigrants to America, and the Jewish revival of the land of Israel. In presenting these photographs and in his accompanying text, my father described Judaism and the Jewish people with affection, appreciation, even, dare I say, with love. Here was no lacerating pen, no descents into a sudden blackness of savage nihilism (similar to the later writings of a perhaps kindred humorist, Mark Twain)--and not even the deprecating humor of a Shalom Aleichem. Here, in this format, my father expressed an appreciation for people, for the meaning of their lives in even the most humble of roles and for the worth of their efforts, for their significance as human beings, as Jews, as family members, as workers, as learners of Torah, as Hasidim, as pioneers, as people whose lives had dignity and deserved respect and appreciation.

One of the men to deliver a eulogy was a simple religious Jew whom my sister had hired a few weeks ago to spend some time with my father in the geriatric center. He was able to overlook my father's asperity--which was particularly difficult at this time-- and spoke of him with fondness and warmth. He thanked my father for having given something to him, and he concluded with simplicity, "So long, Avraham! Shalom!" These words, which might have sounded trivial from someone else, were spoken from the heart of this person: simple, affectionate and unaffected words.

The eulogies that were delivered broadened my view of my father, my knowledge and awareness of him. And the various feelings, including the conflicts, struggles and anger that I was dealing with, reached a level of calm as I saw him more expansively, through the eyes of these other people, each of whom had known him so differently.

And on Wednesday morning, with small group of people, I stood at his grave side on a windy day in Long Island, and I shoveled earth onto his grave. And as I did so, I whispered to my father, "Goodbye, Pop!"

May his soul be bound in the bond of life.

Yaacov Dovid Shulman

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