

*Yizkor on Shemini Azeret, 2003:*

This past July, my brothers, my extended family, and many friends of my parents gathered to unveil my father's tombstone. After a short graveside ceremony, we reconvened at a golf club for lunch to celebrate him and to say goodbye to the chapter of our lives that took place in Great Neck, my childhood town. The day was hot, but beautiful, the grounds of the golf club gorgeous, redolent with summer's lushness, and the company was intimate. Everyone in attendance felt my father's and my mother's absence. How they loved a party. All of us were aware that day that we were closing a chapter in a book, the book of a home on 2 Schoolhouse Lane, of my mother's legendary gardens that my father maintained after her death, of my father holding court -- in his younger years from his library, and in the years of his infirmity from the recliner in the living room -- of the noisy and slobbery basset hounds that were always the first to greet anyone who turned the lock on the door. Closed, too, was the short cut near Shea Stadium, left toward the Van Wyck Expressway, that everyone in my father's inner circle used to get to Great Neck more quickly than by taking the Grand Central Parkway. These are the roads of my childhood, often travelled in the darkness of the morning when I came to the City with my father, who left Great Neck at 5:30 a.m. in order to beat the traffic and to have a toasted corn muffin and coffee at Leo's before the phones started ringing at his medical practice.

My father's fate was sealed two Rosh haShanahs ago; the last page in his book of life was turned on the tenth of *Av* 5762. Everything now is memory, the reconstructed past, and the silent dialogues I have with him.

All of us here stand today, remembering those we have loved and known whose fates have already been sealed, whose books of life have been closed.

It is fitting that I am speaking on *Shemini Azeret*, when we read Kohelet, the Hebrew Bible's great skeptic. To the degree that my father would have loved a biblical book, he would have loved Kohelet and been tickled by his unflinching rationalism, his impatience with pieties, his enjoyment of, but ultimate boredom with, material pleasures, and his naturalism. Kohelet did not fear death nor believe in life after death. For him, there was no distinction between the fate of animals and the fate of humanity, no proof that the "life breath" (נִשְׁמָה) of a human being rises "upward" after death (Kohelet 3:21). In my father's world, life and death were all about DNA. Like Kohelet, he did not believe in the world-to-come or in the immortality of the soul and he did not fear death.

Yet my father's expansive intellect and zest for life bespoke a person with a huge soul. Although he suffered every ravage possible from type II diabetes, his body's betrayal never seemed to get in the way of his appetite for ideas, for words, for debate, for reading.

RaMBaM's *Guide for the Perplexed* may seem like an unusual place to look for something appropriate for *Yizkor*, but his comments in Book III:51 of the *Guide* seem particularly fitting for my father and, oddly, even for Kohelet. For Maimonides the philosopher, the body was a hindrance to the soul's apprehension of God and to

humanity's achievement of intellectual perfection. The body's demise meant liberation. He tells us that at death, when the soul separates from the body, "a perfect man" becomes joyous at the prospect of finally reaching a state of intellectual apprehension of the Divine. Leaning on the Rabbis, RaMBaM cites the Talmudic discussion in *Bava Batra 17a*, where the phrase (על פיה יי'), "according to God," in Devarim 34:5 and Bamidbar 33:38 that describes Moses' and Aaron's deaths is read as "by God's mouth," or more felicitously, "by a kiss." The Rabbis averred that Miriam,

נמי בנשיקה מתה, "also died by a kiss." RaMBaM concludes that the three prophets "died in the pleasure of this apprehension [of imminently knowing God] due to the intensity of passionate love."

My father was neither a perfect man nor a prophet and would not have wanted to be remembered that way.

But what child of a parent – now a parent herself – wouldn't hope that her beloved father was accompanied on his final journey not by a slap of a wooden oar on the River Styx, or by the sharp, glistening scythe held by the Angel of Death, but by God's tender, loving embrace?

May my father's soul and those of all who are remembered here today be bound in the bonds of life and may they have merited God's kiss with their final breath.