

**8<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF PESACH  
YIZKOR  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

Each year I attempt to pick up a new Haggadah to add to my collection and to my knowledge about the Pesach Seder and its meaning. This year, I was fortunate enough to find an edition edited by Rabbi Yisrael Bronstein entitled *The Haggadah Experience – The Pesach Haggadah with Classic Stories and Commentaries from Our Gedolim*. Rabbi Bronstein brings interesting comments on the text as well as parables and stories from Hasidic rabbis throughout the ages. One of them I found especially meaningful.

In commenting on the section of the Haggadah detailing the fact that we were saved by G-d with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and “whoever elaborates on the story is praised”, he tells the following story:

The story is told of a wretchedly poor, simple man who became very rich and rose up to great stature. He hired teachers to train him in etiquette, all forms of decorum, and every sort of wisdom, until he succeeded in becoming educated, refined, and adept in all the social graces.

Every year, on the anniversary of the date on which his fortunes changed and he rose to power and wealth, the man held a large feast for all his friends and acquaintances. At this festive meal, he thanked Hashem for all the good He had bestowed upon him.

Time passed, and the man’s fortunes reversed themselves. He lost all of his money and became as desperately poor as he had been before. Despite this misfortune, every year on the appointed anniversary, he nevertheless arranged a festive meal, just as he had done before.

“Why are you doing this?” his acquaintance asked. “Why are you holding this feast in honor of your wealth, when you have in fact now lost all your money? Why are you rejoicing now?”

“True, I have lost my money,” the man replied. “But the education and refinements which I acquired during my wealthy days – these remain irrevocably mine, and no one can take them from me! For these, I am happy and grateful. And therefore, I will continue to celebrate, even though my fortunes have plummeted and I am once again impoverished.”

I found the story quite meaningful in suggesting that we should be grateful for the gifts that we have and, even though we may suffer some losses along the way in the journey of life, we should appreciate that which we have been granted.

This is an especially meaningful story when it comes to the eighth day of Pesach as we prepare to recite our Yizkor memorial prayers. The purpose of Yizkor is to remember those we have lost. But, at the same time, even in our sorrow in recalling them, it reminds us to appreciate

their impact upon our life. It is not easy to do both at the very same time. On the one hand, in our sorrow we are saddened that our loved ones have been taken from us. We wanted more time with them. On the other hand, it forces us to gain the proper perspective and appreciate that the time that we did have with them was precious and that we should not take our own time on this earth for granted either.

As many of you know, the holiday of Pesach for my family is really bittersweet. It is a holiday for family and friends and its message of freedom is universal. Yet, for my personal family it is now forever tinged with sadness. On the second day of Pesach, 2006, as I returned home from the evening service, I was informed by Bryna that we had received a call that my mother had passed away. On the evening of the seventh day of Pesach, two years ago, I received a call from Bryna in Toronto telling me that my father-in-law had passed away, and last year, on the afternoon of the seventh day of Pesach I received a call from my sister Renee informing me that our younger sister was dying and, indeed, passed away during the night. Thus, on the eighth day of Pesach for these last two years, as I stood to share with you a Yizkor sermon, I was in personal mourning on the eve of funerals either for my father-in-law, Sam Wise, or my sister, Janice Freedman.

As I stand here this day, I attempt to gain some perspective based on the story taught to me by Rabbi Bronstein. Alfred Lord Tennyson in one of his poems taught us that “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” While the sadness of losing someone is deep, we would have been much poorer not to have loved those who were closest to us as they continue to leave behind wonderful memories. It is a perspective that is essential for life and, especially, when we come to the Yizkor memorial services.

Perspective is ultimately what we need most not only when we contemplate the loss of those nearest and dearest to us, but also we consider our own lives. Rabbi Harold Kushner has just written a new book for the nextbook series entitled *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*. Rabbi Kushner’s continuing comments on life and its meaning teach us about having the proper perspective on the lives that we live and the legacies that we leave behind.

In one passage he writes, “Some years ago, the social critic Lewis Mumford, suggested that the mass production of mirrors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century had more of an effect on society than was generally appreciated. For the first time, people had an accurate idea of what they looked like. Before that, their self-image was defined largely by the respect or scorn they saw in the eyes of others.” Mirrors allow us to look at our outward physical appearance, but they also give us telling insight into our very souls. Since the invention of mirrors, too often, we have become overly concerned about the former and not concerned enough about the latter. Kushner’s book attempts to deal with the concept of loss that Job must have felt in his lifetime. He never really loses his faith and continues to want contact with G-d in the hope that he will find a G-d who is ever-present in his life. In our time of loss, we want the very same. Like Job we may ask questions and our faith may be tested, but, at the very same time, the search for a compassionate G-d can be a meaningful part of our return to emotional wholeness and healing.

Rabbi Kushner informs us that the sages tell us: “God is like a mirror. A mirror never changes, but everyone who looks at it sees a different face.” Our concept of G-d may change during the time of our losses and difficult moments, but we continue to pray as the Psalmist in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm did: “Though I walk through a valley of shadow of death I fear no harm because You are with me.” We want that reality – G-d always by our side when we sense the shadow of death, yet, sometimes, we feel the lack of His presence.

This has been a very long year for me. I observed Shiva for my sister in Toronto and followed it up with the rest of sheloshim here with my congregational family at Beth El. I recited Kaddish three times a day. Observing the mourning rites was a helpful part of the journey of making meaning out of the loss. After the sheloshim, I was no longer obligated, as a sibling, to continue to recite Kaddish on a daily basis. However, being present at services wherever I am around the world, it seemed to be the right thing to do. So, whether it was in a minyan here or in Canada, Israel or Ukraine, I continued to recite Kaddish for my sister. The process was helpful as each time I did, I spent a few minutes reminding myself of her life and the relationship that we had. Janice was seven years younger than I and, yet, over the years of we spent many meaningful moments together. In Toronto, Chicago, and in Israel our lives intertwined with one another.

I think it is a meaningful custom to cover up the mirrors during the Shiva period. We shouldn't be interested in our own physical appearance. Instead we should look into our souls and examine the meaning of the loss of our loved one. If G-d is like a mirror, then by looking for G-d we also look for ourselves and the reflection back has an effect on the type of people we are and we become. Loss is never easy. We can only hope to deal with it, move on with life, and somehow carry on the legacy of our dearly departed.

The story from Rabbi Bronstein's Haggadah puts a meaningful perspective on everything. First of all, we should appreciate what we have, for it is fleeting. Secondly, we should recognize that what is really important is showing gratitude for the gifts with which we have been presented. This will afford us feelings of contentment and happiness. And, thirdly, when we experience loss, we should put it all in perspective and recognize that everything is temporal, nothing but G-d is eternal, and our lives are too often correctly described by the Psalmist in Psalm 103: “The days of a person are as grass; he flourishes as a flower in the field. The wind passes over it and it is gone, and no one can recognize where it grew.”

Putting it all into perspective reminds us that even on the holiday of great joy, we come to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. Putting it all in perspective means that we must make the most out of life and treasure those who are around us at any one particular moment. Putting it all in perspective means that we must attempt to latch on to that which is eternal, G-d, and yearn for the contact with the consoling, comforting, Shechina, G-ds presence.

May our losses be few, and may our lives be filled with moments of joy, happiness and gratitude.