

Feb 8, 2009

Shavua tov, Moshe and David and family,

I have been thinking about your mother and picturing her as well as hearing her voice. Voices of those who die fade rather quickly from our memories, but during the first weeks, the voices seem to come familiarly to our minds. My father's yahrzeit is this week and from moment to moment in these days I can hear his voice. It has been twenty-nine years; he should rest peacefully.

Rebitzen Green says that when a fine person of considerable quality dies, the qualities of that person float in the air and we can latch onto the qualities. I told Sharon that I would strive for finding the right word for expressing a feeling or a thought--something I think I mentioned to Moshe. With Devorah, the right word always came if only one waited long enough and had patience. The wait was always worthwhile.

What I wanted to share was that a few days ago I read this article about a second generation Holocaust survivor who lives in Berlin. He is an entertainer, mainly a comic and a satirist; and for his performances, he frequently draws on themes from the war and from his upbringing. The paradox of who he is and how he uses his life situation bothered me and I wondered about it. I remembered a dear friend of mine, a talented photographer, who died very young; both his parents went through the war, his mother in Auschwitz and his father in the sewers of Warsaw. I was moved on many occasions when in talking to me he would show me how his photos integrated the stories of his parents' lives. After reading the article, I heard myself say aloud, "I guess the entertainer is doing what he must do to deal with the hand he was dealt." For him that hand included being a child of a survivor, his father, and growing up and living his life in Germany. It was then that I thought about Devorah.

I met Devorah for the first time at Sharon's wedding shower those many years ago. I liked her immediately and felt there was much we could discuss. In the ensuing years, we talked, of course not enough, and not so much since I moved, but often enough for me to know I always enjoyed our interchanges and believed she also did. What often would occur was that sometime during the conversation or afterwards, I would think Devorah should write out her memories--her details were so sharp and precise. Or I would think she should teach, or be a presenter as so many survivors are who have come to my classes to speak to my students. Sometimes I must also confess I thought her memories blocked her perspective on the now--the present--and I would wish that she would dwell less on the past and even her great love of the people who she so cherished and enter the present so that she and I could benefit from the wisdom, philosophy and wit she could apply to the moment. Sometimes I would press her on that and from time to time she would engage with me on the current generation, on teaching, on the events of the moment, on Israel. But often she drifted back to her memories, to her worries and to the concerns she had about her own difficulties with the range of suffering she endured. One thing always brought her into the present with startling attentiveness--news about her great grandchildren, the family she so loved.

Reading the article and thinking about Devorah made me stop and realize that dear Devorah did the very best she could with the hand she handled and the hand she was dealt. She was a woman of great faith, a woman who raised her children well, and achieved the yiddishe naches of seeing the flowering of her great grandchildren. She remained loyal to who she was, how she was raised and she did it all with a

kind of dignity that drew you to her. She laughed when you told her something that really tickled her sense of humor; she appreciated when you empathized with her; she knew when you cared. She was a woman who was genuine with others and liked when you were genuine with her. She never demanded a moment of your time, but always took the time to thank you for the moment you had shared with her. What I realized as I thought about these things was that I could let go of the things that I thought Devorah might have done if only...and I could see her for just what she had done indeed with a hand that was simultaneously over the years, throughout her lifetime, both in the shadows and in the sun. And just at that moment when I let go of the "what might have been" I experienced the pleasure I felt in knowing her, in experiencing her as she was, in benefiting from our interchanges, and yes, in loving her for the woman she was since the time we became connected as family. Remember in high school when you had to write about an "unforgettable character you knew or met?" So within these days of the first thirty days of mourning, I was grateful to receive that small gift of recognizing her for the unforgettable person she was and for loving her for being just that person. I regret that I never told her those things I felt about her, but somehow I trust that she knew. Her with her wise and sharp mind.

Her passing is part of the passing of a generation whose life stories are legends. We will always have their stories and the memories they tried to impart. Best of all was to have had the real article--and Devorah, with her sensitivity to fabrics and her talent with textures--was just that, the real article. May she rest peacefully and may you and yours find comfort in the memories you have.

Warmly,

Joanne