

# My Father

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Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

It has been almost exactly one year since my father died.

During the year before he died, he spoke less and less. Our time together was filled with longer silences, and fewer full sentences. Eventually he could produce no sentences at all, only fragments, and one word responses to questions. Often when I asked him a question, he would not answer at all. After a lifetime of words, of stories, of teaching, of asking and listening and diagnosing, of songs and of jokes...he became less and less and less communicative. It became harder and harder to know what he was thinking.

From the few times he did speak, it seemed that **he was still in there.** At one of our last family meetings in the nursing facility, we gathered together with his doctor, his nurse, his physical and occupational therapists and his social worker. Each of the medical professionals gave their report, and we family members asked our questions. My father sat through it all completely silently, his face expressionless. Who could say what he understood, or what he thought or felt? Finally, before the meeting ended, the doctor turned to my father and asked him "Dr. Cohen, do you have anything to add?" To which my father said: "Don't make any mistakes."

Out of his silence, my dad had just delivered the punchline of one of his favorite stories, a true story, in which New York's Governor Mario Cuomo had asked his Italian immigrant mother Immacolata if she had any advice for him as he took over as governor and she replied: "Mario, don't make any mistakes." So while my Dad spent most of the last year of his life in silence, in some mysterious way, he was still in there.

During the long months of my dad's decline, I traveled back to Rochester to spend time with him about once a month. It wasn't easy pulling away from all my responsibilities here, and flying the three flights it takes to get from Santa Barbara to Rochester. Usually I would take the red eye and arrive exhausted, stay for a day or two and then fly back. As my dad became less and less communicative, I sometimes asked myself "why I am doing this? I sit next to my dad, help him eat his depressing nursing home food, and we don't even talk. I tell him about my life and our kids, and he tries to act interested, but he just goes blank. I have no idea what he is thinking."

The one thing that elicited a response from my dad, even in his last months, was reading to him from his own memoirs, especially the funny parts. I read to him his favorite stories, of the elderly Jewish patients from his first year of medical residency at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. The old woman who when he came around to her room to draw blood would say "Hitler! Why the slow torture? Why don't you just kill me with an ax, go on a picnic, leave me alone!"

Or Mr. Greenberg, 88 years old, who was admitted with diarrhea. My dad's partner asked "how many bowel movements are you having per day?" Mr. Greenberg answered "one." "You are having one bowel movement per day and you call that diarrhea?" Mr. Greenberg replies "yes, it starts at 7:00 in the morning and it ends 11:00 at night." When I read these bits out, my dad would start quaking, his face would turn red, and his eyes would fill up with tears and we laughed together uncontrollably ...until he couldn't breathe, and we'd have to stop to allow his nurse to come in and change him and clean him up.

My dad also loved to hear the stories he used to tell us from the rabbi of his youth, Rabbi Phil Bernstein, a great storyteller with a particular fondness for funeral jokes. Here's one: Sara is dying and she says to her husband Sam "with my last breath I have a favor to ask." "What is that?" "I want you to sit next to my sister Rose in the first car in the funeral procession." He says "I can't do that; I can't stand your sister Rose. I have never been able to stand her, I am not going to sit next to her." "Sam, I am a dying woman, with my last breath I am asking you as a favor, please sit next to my sister Rose, in the first car." Sam says "OK, I will do it, but *it's going to spoil my whole day!*" These stories were Torah in my family...passed down from Rabbi Bernstein, to my father, to us...and now as my dad was approaching his own death, it was my turn to tell them back to my father...and he would silently quake, and turn red, and his eyes would fill with water.

Then I'd put his memoir away and we would sit together for hours without speaking, until it was time for me to go to the airport and fly away for another month.

To be honest, the long silences between my father and me began long before he became ill. There was always plenty of conversation when other people were around....my mother, my siblings, Marian or our kids....my dad loved being the center of attention and never was at a loss for a great story. But when it was just the two of us, it was different. After I reached adulthood, we had a hard time opening up to each other. We would ride in the car together, and not know what to say.

It's the same with my mother. It's not that we don't love each other. We do, intensely. But I always feel some nervousness before every phone call. As she and I both get older, each phone call feels more and more important...but we often struggle to know what to talk about. **After all these years!** Neither of us likes small talk. But it's difficult to just dive in and begin with the big stuff. Of course we discuss the **other** members of the family, and her friends, and the latest happenings here at the Temple. But we always end up with "I don't know what else to tell you. Isn't the election terrifying? How are you physically? When is your next visit? OK, I need to let you go." Don't get me wrong...we do communicate. Often, in our weekly phone call, we do end up sharing on a deep level. But it's not relaxed!

Sometimes we talk about how difficult it can be. My mom came across an article in the the New Yorker recently, in which the reviewer of a play by George Bernard Shaw comments that "Shaw writes at great amusing length of parents and children and of the **shyness and discomfort** between them."

Only my mother could find a clipping which speaks so tenderly about the awkwardness between parents and children, and underline it and save it to share with us....her children....**so that we could talk about the shyness and discomfort between us!** At age 83 my mother is still my most important teacher.

Our Torah reading this morning, the Binding of Isaac, may be the most poignant account ever written of the silence, the questions, the love and the nervousness that exist between parent and child. Abraham and Isaac walk together, in silence, for three days. Abraham raises his eyes and sees the place from afar; he tells the servants to wait there and loads the burden of wood onto his son. *Vayelchu shneihem yachdav. And the two of them walked on, together.* Isaac breaks the silence, asking simply "Avi?" "Father?" And Abraham replies: "Hineni vni" "Here I am my son." Isaac asks his father a question and receives an answer, and then *Vayelchu shneihem yachdav. And the two of them walked on, together.* This ancient story, full of mystery and tension between man and God, also captures perfectly for all time the eternal discomfort between father and son. The silence, the love, the shyness and the uncertainty between parent and child.

That silence between parents and children has a purpose. A religious significance. As parents, when our children are small, we fill their lives. We teach our children language, stories, songs, religion and culture, we pour ourselves into them. And then a time comes...right around age thirteen...when we parents step back and simply watch and wonder. We invite silence to enter between us and our children. The silence between parent and child becomes a sacred space, a dwelling place for God. A holy of holies.

It scares us. It is a place of intimacy, of vulnerability. At times it can be a place of feeling judged, of guilt, and disappointment. With courage and wisdom, on both sides, parents and children can enter that sacred space together and share with each other what is in their hearts. Offer each other compassion and forgiveness. But at least in my family, it's not easy. It takes courage. And a sense of humor.

Avinu Malkenu, Our Father Our King. In those two words, we speak of the God who dwells in the silence, the shyness, the intimacy and the awesome sacred space between parents and children. Avinu Malkenu. Our Father, our King. Our experience of God originates in our experience of our parents. On this first Rosh Hashanah morning of my life since losing my own father, with whom I walked for nearly sixty years in love and in fear, in laughter and especially in silence, I want to close this morning with a brief reflection that I wrote a number of years ago about my father and God. This is what I wrote:

Because I grew up as the son of Jules and Doris Cohen, I developed early in life a trust that the world was fundamentally a good and safe place. This is not to say that our home was always peaceful. In fact, a picture hung in our living room growing up, of a beleaguered father looking toward heaven, surrounded by three children and a house in a state of tumult, which we all agreed depicted our family. But because Jules and Doris were our father and mother, the chaos did not feel threatening. Now that I am grown and work as a rabbi, I think often about faith and prayer. I tend to accept the notion that as children we form our earliest impressions of God based on our experience of our parents. In my own case, at least, I would say that when I am most deeply, most urgently, and most honestly in prayer, God feels and smells a bit like Jules Cohen.

I wrote that for a book presented to my dad at his retirement, so I know he read it...but we never discussed it! L'shanah tova!