

A FUNERAL FOR THE LIVING

Last week I lost a friend. His name was Si Frumkin. 40-some-odd years ago I met Si during the early days of the Soviet Jewry movement in the U.S. My congregation's youth group was planning an all-night sit-in – a popular activity among 60's teenagers – and the topic was Soviet Jewry. I wanted to bring them a guest speaker, so I called the local activist I knew best, Zev Yaroslavsky whom I know since he was a little boy. Now he is a County Supervisor, but then he was a leader in the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. He was committed elsewhere that night, but he said: "I'll get you Si Frumkin."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"You'll like him."

Not only did I like him, he turned our teenagers on so they became enthusiastic participants in the cause of freeing Jews from Soviet oppression. They attended rallies, joining candlelight marches and other demonstrations all year long. And since I shared their enthusiasm, Si and I became much better acquainted. A strong friendship grew.

When Si and Zev returned from a trip to Soviet Russia in 1974, he brought me underground songs of the Refuseniks, which he had taped from their lips. I recorded some of them, and performed them many times.

In later years I participated in a Russian Seder he organized. And when my wife and I went to the Soviet Union in the '80's to find Refuseniks, Si provided us some valuable preparation.

I had the pleasure of officiating at the wedding of his stepson to a young lady whose Bat Mitzvah I had conducted. Also from a Russian family, she was our student at Temple Emanuel Day School. And I enjoyed naming their twins.

When Si was nominated for a Cohon Award in 2006 (see www.cohonaward.com) it was with special joy that I presented it to him at the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Now he is gone. He died much too young. Sudden and irreversible cancer took him with brutal suddenness from full health and vigor to eternity. He will be sorely missed – by his

sorrowing wife Ella and their family, by all of us his personal friends, and by the million-odd Jews that his work rescued. We were all represented at the house of mourning.

Stunning blow though his death was, Si's *minyán* prompts me to write of a subject that is close to all of us, something I was urged to do by a funeral director with whom I recently had the honor to share some services.

My subject starts, not with him, but with another friend of long ago, named Barney. Barney was a good friend and a frequent collaborator on screenplays. We worked well together and spent a lot of time just talking and visiting during my studio days. His wife (a second marriage) was close to my age. He was twice my age. He was also a non-believer. Yet despite our differences we became real buddies. When he suffered a sudden heart attack and died at 71, I grieved. I felt his loss deeply. But when I had to conduct a funeral for him, I thought about his young widow, about all the people in attendance who knew him and worked with him, and what kind of memories we should all be carrying away with us. And I realized that service was not for Barney. It was for us. It was no use our telling him to rest in peace. What do we know about that anyway? Our message was to each other: be glad and be grateful. Because he lived, because he was who he was, and because he was part of our lives.

I learned a lot from Barney, about screenwriting, about the history of the motion picture industry, about old times in New York, about the life of an American newspaperman in the Philippines. But at the time of his death Barney's friendship taught me the lesson that turned out to be the most valuable of all: funerals are not a service for the dead; funerals are for the living.

Somehow schools that train rabbis in our time seem to fail to give their students a handle on the practical side of serving our people. Maybe that is true of other religions as well, I don't know. But over and over again I find that when survivors meet with me to plan a ceremony they say "we want to do right by Mom"; "we want to do what she would want." What they are really saying is that they want to do what will give *them* a feeling of satisfaction. When the funeral is over and they gather at home, they want to feel that they did it right.

Tears have been called a tender tribute to the departed. Laughter can be a tribute too. Often people leave a legacy that includes a great sense of humor. Should that be ignored because they died? People who fought with their children and refused to compromise their

principles may be sorely missed -- just as much as those who always indulged their families unquestioningly, and sometimes even more.

It is always difficult for a clergyman to eulogize someone he did not know. But it is usually possible to sit down with the family and let them talk. Listening to them is worth the time. Clergymen can get so devoted to talking that they forget how to listen.

The Hebrew vocabulary surrounding the burial of the dead is really useful. A funeral is called *levayah* -- literally "accompanying" the dead to a final resting place. Not interment, but accompanying. Similarly, a condolence call fulfills a particular mitzvah -- not sympathy, but *nikhum aveilim*, that is "comforting the mourners." Joining in someone's sorrow is different from expressing sympathy. Much more, too.

For that reason, it is often very valuable to have members of the family or close friends speak at funerals. Many of them feel incapable of doing so. Either they have no confidence that they can speak in public, or they know they will break down and be unable to speak. But frequently there is someone who can be a representative for the family and express something personal and even private, that no outside officiant can equal. Sharing that experience with those who attend the service, the family feels fulfilled.

Celebrate your loved ones for the life they lived. It's more important than mourning their death, because most of the time we don't mourn for them. We mourn for ourselves.

Of course that is not the end of the subject. What about the death of the young? What comfort can anyone give a parent burying a child? How can any text, however profound, or any Midrashic story however beautiful, bring any healing to such a wound? Perhaps all any of us can do is put an arm around the mourners and weep with them. We don't understand the why's of life, most of the time. As the Mishna says, "we have no answer for the welfare of the wicked or for the suffering of the righteous." What looks like a catastrophe may in fact be better than the unknown alternative. Should a young life end, leaving distraught mourners? Or should it wind on perhaps in pain and shame and tragedy and leave its elders trying to keep from asking themselves the awful question: why was this one born? I can claim no privileged insight into the pain of Job on the individual level, any more than I can answer the anguish of the Holocaust on a public level. Again, all we can do -- whether friends, family or clergy -- is to feel each other's pain. Let the bereaved know they are not alone. Keep contact after the funeral is over. Life, not just the funeral, is for the living.

Doing this takes strength. Sincere belief can give us that strength. Reportedly, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe (z"l) was once asked how he could explain the death of a child. A Sorbonne graduate aware of all modern civilization, the Rebbe replied with a question of his own:

"Suppose you are watching television, and you see a human body stretched out and helpless, and hands are sticking knives into it. What is happening?"

"A murder."

"Yes. And then the angle widens, and you see that the person is stretched out on a table. And the hands holding the knives are wearing rubber gloves and white coat sleeves. What is happening?"

"An operation!"

"Right. A medical operation. Not taking a life, but saving a life. You see? That's the difference between the human view of things and the Divine view. We don't see the whole picture."

Any Sunday, a typical rabbi or cantor may be called on to participate in a wedding, a funeral, a Bris, an unveiling, and a Bar Mitzvah lesson. That requires some abrupt gearshifting. It can also keep one aware of as much of the "whole picture" as any of us gets a look at. Beyond that, a prayer for insight is definitely in order.

Driving to Si Frumkin's memorial *minyán*, I thought of Barney. Oddly enough, their homes were just a few blocks apart.

What applies to clergymen, applies in very similar ways to every one of us. In our relations with each other, any good friend can frequently accomplish for you what your clergyman can. Maybe the quotations won't be there, but if the time is taken to listen, to listen to each other, the comfort can come. The strength can come. The ability to face today and prepare for tomorrow. If we can do that for each other, we should. There is no greater expression of friendship. And if we cannot, at least not every time, it's all right. Your clergyman doesn't bat 1.000 either.