

DRASH FOR MY FATHER'S FIRST YARZHEIT
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Special thanks to you Rabbi Chai, Rabbi Judith Haptman, NitZIAH Shaked, Alice Webber and Shalom Spencer

My beloved Father, Baruch Bendet ben Shimon Nusan v'Yentl's first Yartzheit is in 1 1/2 weeks. And today is Shabbat Zahor, the Shabbat of Remembrance. *Main tayere Tatenu, Ich benken noch far du mit main gants harts.*

Yartzheit is a Yiddish word and means "time of year".
Remembrance is a core and essential value of Judaism.

In this week's portion, T'Tazavveh, Exodus 28:23 page 508:
"Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the Urim and Thummin, so that they are over Aaron's heart when he comes before the Lord. Thus, Aaron shall carry the instrument of decision for the Israelites over his heart before the Lord at all times."

And from the Zohar, Pekudei 21:183

". . . we have learned that they were called Urim because their words gave a clear and direct answer to the questions ... directed to them; and Thummim because their words were fulfilled to perfection.

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 27:19:2

”if your heart desires to know the truth look at the body, And consider the most glorious thing in it. . . I will secretly reveal the mystery of the Urim and Thummim. In the Torah portion entitled; “And Thou Shalt command the Soul. In other words, develop your soul and you will learn the truth.”

So what were the instruments of my Dad’s decision-making in his life? He didn’t have an Urim and Thummin to guide him but I believe he actually did:

He remembered his parents’ teachings; his rabbis who taught him how to live and always remember Torah,
His beloved Father z’l, Shimon Nusan, a pious and righteous man who read Shulhan Aruch every week to his family on Shabbos in the forest in summer,
My father remembered and recalled what his beloved Mother, Yentl, z”l said to him in 1939 after the Nazis turned their world and community upside down:
“Whatever you do, save yourself!”

So my Father, just 18 years old, reluctantly escaped deep into Russia and he was safe. Months later, he learned his family had been kicked out of their apartment and his Mother was sick. He immediately chose to smuggle himself back into Nazi-occupied Poland in 1940 - remembering “Honor your father and mother” He said he didn’t know what would happen but he wanted to be with and help his family.

How did he help fellow prisoners through his six years of humiliation, degradation, slavery, starvation, beatings, whippings and relentless, harsh work? Nightly in Auschwitz he remembered God and urged all his fellow prisoners to hold onto hope, never give in, never give up, to be strong, as he told them; “This too will end”. And it did.

What did he do years later when I was born? He remembered God and the blessings of his life. At that very moment in the hospital when he saw me, a newborn baby, he rebirthed himself from an angry, hateful, depressed and bitter man to one who embraced life and the world.

What did Ben do in 1978 when Nazis threatened his new life in Skokie, IL? He remembered again; he remembered everything. He mounted and led a stunning defiance; convincing, speaking, writing and gathering ¾ million signatures of support nationwide, to deny Nazis in uniform from marching in the streets of his adopted hometown. And he did stop them.

What did Ben do at 90 years of age, when he led 29 high-school students on a trip through Poland and Israel? He spoke from his heart, he comforted the distraught students and their tears, and told them if he could survive the Holocaust, they could and would survive learning his story. I watched each student that week, transform from teenagers to adults because they heard and listened and then, continued to remember all their lives.

What did Ben do at his 100th birthday Aliyah? He cried right here in our Shul, Netivot Shalom, as he stood at the Bemah to bless the Torah, saying he saw his whole family standing there in the balcony looking down and smiling at him: at his long, nearly impossible survival and the deeply, meaningful life he chose to live that brought him to this moment, from childhood in the Molgenica Shtetl in order to stand in the Shul his daughter created for him in Berkeley, Ca. And without saying anything, everyone in the congregation stood up to honor him when his name, Baruch Bendit, was called and they stood throughout his Aliyah.

And at 102, my Father wasn't well, he was getting weaker and weaker. I asked him if he thought he was strong enough to go to his great-grandson's Bar Mitzvah in Los Angeles. He replied "For what do you think I'm living for?! Of course I'm going!" He had an Aliyah with us in the synagogue and later when the music started, he asked me to dance. The music was slow, so I said yes. I knew it would be our last dance. Then the music switched to the Hora and my Dad said let's join the circle. I said "Dad it's enough, let's go back to our tables and relax." I went back to my table and one month later I see photos from the Bar Mitzvah and my Father is kicking up his heels, laughing and dancing the Hora in a fast moving circle!!!

His last public mitzvah before he died, was giving money on the street at Arch & Vine to a homeless person in front of Peets, along with a warm personal greeting, words of encouragement and a handshake. He always remembered being homeless

himself. When I saw him struggling to get out some dollars, I reached to help him get the dollars out of his pocket, he firmly stopped my hand. He remembered that to do a mitzvah, he was required to do it himself, saying “This is my mitzvah, I need to do it.”

He always remembered God, the Torah and how he was taught by his parents to be a mensch. He wore his personal Urim and Thummin on his heart throughout his whole life. Stunningly, he embraced the San Francisco German consul-general, a GTU student, granddaughter of unrepentant Nazis and the former head of the American Nazi Party.

I too have an Urim and Tummin over my heart; we all do. It was my heart and soul one night that called to me in my dreams to create this Shul, 36 years ago, that would be strong, alive, welcoming and relevant enough to live beyond all of our lifetimes. Remembering the destruction of the Jewish community and my family in Europe, I decided to rebuild by starting a new Shul from my kitchen table with the hope I would not be alone. Look around at this beautiful, caring community and know we are not alone. No one here is alone.

Now it's almost his 1st Yartzheit and our remembrance of him keeps him alive, hopefully for many generations to come. I hear his words daily, remembering his wisdom, his kindness and the fierce hope he treasured that led to decades of defiance and action against anti-Semitism, hatred, racism and injustice. He lived a moral life. He said that indifference is more dangerous

than evil. Indifference is easy when you don't remember or know what happened. When millions of people were indifferent, our people almost perished completely. Evil cannot be allowed to go undefied – all this is his legacy.

He survived the hell of slavery and irreplaceable loss. His compass was true and real; Hashem, the Torah and his parents' teachings. He knew with absolute clarity the difference between right and wrong. Yes and even in Auschwitz, in a moment when he could no longer pray, he guarded a fellow prisoner who begged him for protection so he could daven daily morning prayers from a small prayer book, he smuggled inside Auschwitz. My father guarded him so he could pray in a potato storage shed. Separated for years afterwards until - when walking with my future beloved Mother, Chaya Bat Shimon Nusan v'Yentl z"l in Bergen-Belsen DP camp, a strange man came running up to him screaming, crying, yelling and falling to his knees to hug him, saying over and over; "You saved me. You saved my life! I was the man you guarded so I could pray!"

The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, Magid, Ha Lachma Anya 3:1

"The law of the Lager (concentration camp) said: "eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbor," left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the law of the Lager was death . . . But one who is willing to divide his food with a stranger has already shown himself capable of fellowship and faith, the two things from which hope is born. . . Reaching out to others, giving help to the needy and companionship to those

who are alone, we bring freedom into the world and with freedom, God.”

My Father did hard, kind and good things his whole life because it was the right thing to do. His Urim and Tummin were over his heart his whole life.

So, remember. And ask yourself, “What would Ben do now?” I know he’d be urging us to never, ever give up faith and hope, the foundation of courage. He taught me you cannot have courage without hope. Live with courage and kindness, despite our pain and our breaking world. On this Shabbat of Remembrance, Shabbat Zahor, the Urim and Thummin - my Father’s story and teachings belong to us and the world. May we see clearly and act wisely - with time enough and soon enough in our lifetimes. Amen

