



Writing Eulogies

Misha Zinkow

Upon learning of a death, a rabbi sets aside all other matters, becoming singularly attentive to the needs of the heartbroken. Sometimes, a rabbi knew the deceased. But often, it is only through the memories of the bereaved that a rabbi becomes acquainted with the individual. It is a marvelously holy moment to meet someone through the power of his or her spirit.

A healing process begins when a family assembles to recall its loved one. The gathering, a circle of love and memory, initiates an unfolding and never-ending process. A family should be helped to understand that the purpose of their pre-funeral gathering is not to tell the rabbi about the deceased, but instead to capture, in these precious moments of *aninut* — between death and burial — the close sacred fragments of the their loved one's spirit. Conversations about the departed need not have a preordained outline; the grieving need not worry about chronicling someone's life. It is the rabbi's role to connect the family's words and stories into a narrative that will later unfold at the funeral. A family might also be reminded that a eulogy is not a biography; it cannot capture everything about a person's life.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that every eulogy is a work of art that invites the composer to animate the essence and distinctiveness of the deceased through substance and form. Tearful words and cherished stories are transformed into vivid images that enable those present at the service to experience their loved one in full vigor. For example, a straightforward observation such as "she liked to knit sweaters for the family," in a eulogy becomes "let us be warmed by her memory, wearing her strength, her wisdom, and her love of family over the shoulders of our beings, like a soft light sweater on this April morning." This simple illustration also demonstrates how the comfort conferred by a eulogy might endure beyond the hour of the funeral.

Calling attention to the season, an anticipated or recently observed holiday or festival, the Hebrew

month, the Torah portion, or even the day of death may suggest a theme or structure for a eulogy. A few years ago, my own father died on the morning of Rosh Hashana. The rabbi hinted that in years to come when on Rosh Hashana I rise to magnify the Holy One's Name, I might imagine my father's name being underscored in the Book of Life Eternal. Since then, the *yontif* season has assumed an even higher level of holiness. A eulogy that integrates the Torah portion with a person's life or death can be equally inspiring: "It was on the day that the Jewish people completed the

reading of Deuteronomy that 'Adam' completed the scroll of his earthly journey... and we held the Torah high and chanted, *chazak chazak venitchazek*. So too may we be strengthened and sustained by the gifts he bestowed upon us. His life was indeed a scroll that merits retelling year after year."

Rabbi Karo taught that it is "an important *mitzvah* to properly eulogize the deceased. The *mitzvah* requires

one to say heartening words that promote weeping, as well as to recall praiseworthy attributes ...but we should not exaggerate" (*Shulkhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, 344*). Not only does a eulogy bring tears, but it also emphasizes the unique or sometimes unusual traits that animated a person. If she was humorous, let the eulogy evoke laughter. If he was wise, let it speak his wisdom. If she loved to bake, let the words call to mind the sweetness of her life's work.

Rabbis are often asked to allow others to speak at funerals. Brief, prepared reflections spoken by a family member or friend can be cathartic and often stirring, but it is the well-crafted *hesped* comprising the memories of the many that offers the most inclusive portrait and comfort to the broad community of mourners.

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