

## Rosh Hashanah 2009

Good morning everyone! Like Mira said, my name is Rosa Blumenfeld. I am pretty involved in the Workmen's Circle and I just wanted to take a moment to highlight the fact that there are many young adults who are getting more and more involved in the Workmen's Circle all the time. I want to take this opportunity to commend the Workmen's Circle for creating truly meaningful and open space for young people within this organization and devoting its resources to young adult programming and leadership development. It makes me proud to say to the world that I am a dues paying member of the Workmen's Circle.

We have heard and sung a lot over the course of this service about how Rosh Hashana is a time for reflection and renewal. It is an opportunity for us to not only take a look at the world around us and ask what is going on. But also an opportunity to turn that gaze inwards and check in.

As I reflect upon the past year, one of the major events that affected my year was the death of my father on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2008, right before Rosh Hashanah. I remember sitting at this service next to my friend Carly who had just had a baby. I was totally dazed and sad, but I remember holding her newborn boy, Eden. When I looked into his face, it dawned on me that even though my Dad would not be with me this Rosh Hashanah, there was new life being created in the world all the time to be joyful for. There really is a circle of life.

Life was what my father lusted after. I have never met anyone with such a strong will to live as the one he had. He was born in Procowicze, Poland, and was a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. My grandparents, my Dad's first wife and child, my aunts and uncles, and other extended family were all murdered by the Nazis in the Holocaust. My Dad re-married immediately after the war, and ended up in Canada with his second family. His daughter Esther died at 27 of cancer, and his wife Jenny died a year later of the same disease. When he met my mother, he decided that he had to start again and have a family, even though he was 40 years older than her. He had my older sister Eva when 70, me when he was 72, and my little sister Kyla when he was 77 years old. He was 94 years old when he died. To my knowledge, we are the youngest second-generation holocaust survivors in the world. But I prefer to think of us as my father's three miracles.

My father first got sick when I was 13. For most of my growing up, I watched helplessly as he got more and more senile. He was slowly robbed of his ability to think and remember by Alzheimer's, and then of his physical control over his body by Parkinsons, amongst other diseases that come with old age. Whenever I saw my father, I would always say goodbye as if it were the last time I would ever see him, because I never knew if it really would be. Despite the fact that he was sick for 9 years before he actually died, I found that when his time did actually arrive, I was still not ready to let go and say goodbye for the last time.

What is so difficult about saying goodbye to my father is not just the personal feelings of missing him. What has been so difficult about losing him, and that I think I have in common with many of you who have lost parents or grandparents of his generation, is that one more link to a past life has been forever severed for all of us. My father knew what it was like to live in a Jewish community in Poland that numbered in the millions, and knew what it was like to speak Yiddish as his mother tongue. His name was Abraham Noah Blumenfeld, but everyone called him Romek. How Avram becomes Romek, I don't know. But were there other Romeks? Was this common? What was it like to joke in Yiddish? To hear everyone around you speaking, debating, and praying in Yiddish? To read the newspaper and go to school in Yiddish? To be separated from the non-Jewish community around you not just by religion, but by physical language? I am sure that many of you sitting here today have thought about that old world that our ancestors brought with them on their backs. Many of you have actually gone back and traced your personal family histories I am sure. But for all of our desires, for all of our hunger for knowledge, none of us will ever REALLY know what it was like. In losing my father, I also lost this one last bridge connecting me to the past. Now that gap feels larger, and the crossing seems farther away.

In mourning my father over the past year, this enormous sense of loss forced an introspection in me that I didn't know that I had. Grieving for him made me realize the importance of so many things, but I will talk about just a few of them here.

One was the incredible importance of and wisdom in Jewish ritual. As a secular Jew, it is easy to forget this point. We have the freedom to take what we want from Jewish tradition and leave the rest behind us. But sometimes, when going through the motions of something is all that's keeping you going, it is nice to be able to fall back on a pre-determined set of motions and traditions that your people have been doing to honor the dead for generation after generation.

When he first died, the fact that my family and I had to reach for a shovel and put dirt on the grave, was the first physical act that actually made his death real. It reinforced the fact that he was no longer with us, but in the ground. Having our shirts ripped as a sign of mourning, and sitting shiva in Israel for him, were both actions prescribed by our tradition that I am grateful for. During the shiva, I ate and gave in to the desire to sleep whenever it came upon me, no matter what time of day it was. I was in complete shock and got the time that I needed to process what had just happened because of the Jewish ritual of sitting shiva. When I got back to Boston, I went back to work because I literally needed to be around people every single hour of the day between when I got up and went to sleep again. I could not be alone with my own thoughts. I would sit at work like a Zombie, being pushed along from one activity to the next like a ping pong ball. It felt like someone had reached into my chest, grabbed ahold of my heart, and squeezed as hard as they could, for every single minute of every single day.

The next step in this process was when I went back to Israel for the unveiling of the tombstone (Israeli custom dictates that this happen 1 month after the funeral) there was a second round of actions that put me one step closer to a sense of closure. I didn't need

people around me constantly, but I still walked around in a daze for most of the day. My heart still hurt. I still sobbed out of longing for my father. But there was something about seeing the tombstone, and knowing that my father still had a place in the world that was comforting. There was something about the fact that I still knew where he was, and that he would not be forgotten that helped me to feel a little bit better.

This past August, my fiancé and I went to Israel for the final memorial ceremony to mark the year since he passed. The memorial was very emotional, but also comforting to take the time to remember who he was, and visit him in a way. It was nice to see my 88 year old aunt, our family rabbi and others who were close to my father. It was true for me that the first cycle of Jewish holiday, birthdays, and anniversaries were the hardest. But I was grateful for the traditions that are part of my culture that helped me get through the grieving process.

Dealing with so much pain also helped me to realize that I am part of a wonderful safety net of so many people who love me in this community, and stepped forward in so many touching ways to help in any way that they could. This reinforced for me the importance of being part of a community. Whether someone in the Workmen's Circle community, or the labor community in which I work, knew me well or not, they all had a hug, some comfort and often times some food to share. They all sincerely asked me how I was doing, and actually paused to listen to my answer. In everyday life, we rush through Good morning, how are you –good –how are you? When I was grieving, having people just ask me how I was doing helped me, because it acknowledged what I was going through, and was a sign of respect for me and the person that I have lost. Being part of this community helped me grieve and feel better and for that I thank you.

The last point that I want to touch on before I end, and the most important thing that I have learned over the past year, is the incredible importance of feeling loved. It is an amazing discovery to feel that one is loved. To feel that people are willing to go out of their way to make you feel better, that you have earned your place in their hearts. I do not believe that a person can have a happy life without loving others, and without feeling love themselves. This is also something that seems so obvious that I hardly need to mention it here. But how many times in the past year have you paused to let the people around you know that you love them? Love is an action, not just a feeling. It is a verb TO love. I think that our world would be a lot better off if we practiced that a little more often.

At Rosh Hashanah it is important to remember the past and those who came before us. It is also important is to look to the future and think about the legacies that we are responsible for carrying out. A legacy can be a heavy burden, but it is also a special responsibility, honor and privilege. I am proud to be my father's daughter and I carry out his legacy by working as an Organizer in the labor movement, and participating in the Workmen's Circle. Especially over the past year, I have thought about my actions as measured up to his standards. It is a heavy test to take, but I hope that I have passed. I hope that this would have made my father proud of me.

As I think about the coming year, I hope that all of us will be striving to create a more just and equal world. Because it will take all of us. I hope that we will have the courage to take the bolder step. Not just to speak up for what is right, but to take action to make it real. I believe that we are at a key turning point in America, which has consequences for the entire world. We have seen remarkable things happen in the past year. On the one hand, we have seen our economy crash as a result of savage unchecked capitalism and corporate greed, but on the other hand, we have seen the transformative power of collective organizing in the historic election of President Barack Obama. I believe that we are currently in the fight of our lives to shape the future of our country and our world. I believe that we are currently presented with a unique opportunity to band together with other people of the left, and take this country back from those who would take everything that is beautiful away in order to transform it into profit. So ask yourself, how will you be part of this fight this year to take our country and our world back? What are you willing and able to do? What is your legacy and how do you plan to carry it out? Rosh Hashana is a time for introspection, but is it also a time for action.

Thank you.