Gilda Angel: In Memoriam

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(Thoughts by Rabbi Marc D. Angel for the “sheloshim”—30 days of mourning—for his beloved wife of nearly 58 years.)

Everyone knows intellectually that we are mortal, that death is inevitable.

But when death claims a loved one, our intellectual awareness of death gives way to grief. Death is shocking.

Scientists can explain the process of death. Doctors can identify the symptoms leading to death. Theologians and philosophers can offer discourses on the meaning of death.

But death remains a profound mystery. All the explanations in the world still leave us at a loss. Someone we knew and loved is gone. The new silence is deafening. We strain to hear a beloved voice, to feel a tender touch, to share a living moment.

But no, death has taken this all away.

We mourn. No matter how wise or experienced we are, we find ourselves crying and mourning over an irreplaceable loss. The one who died is at peace; but the survivors are bereft.

Jewish tradition provides a framework for coping with death and mourning. It understands that mourning is a process; it takes time; it develops stage by stage—seven days, a month, eleven months, a year…a lifetime.

The Talmud (Berakhot 46B) records the opinions of Rabbi Akiva and the Sages on the appropriate blessing to recite when a loved one dies. Rabbi Akiva suggests: Barukh Dayan HaEmet, blessed be the True Judge. This is a blessing of resignation. We don’t understand the mystery of death, we aren’t sure how we are going to get through our grief: but we affirm that God is the True Judge and ultimate Master of life and death. We bow our heads humbly.

The Sages suggest a different blessing: Barukh Hatov VeHameitiv, blessed be the One who is good and bestows good. This seems like an odd blessing to recite when we are grieving. We don’t necessarily feel that God is good or does good when we stand before the dead body of a loved one. But the Sages may be suggesting a profound way of coping with death. Yes, of course we are sad and forlorn; but we also need to inject positive emotions into our mourning. We need to remember all the blessings and happiness the deceased person had enjoyed. We need to call to mind all the good that

was accomplished and experienced. We need to remember the happy times, the achievements, the special moments. We affirm that God is the source of goodness.

Gilda Angel (April 24, 1946-June 3, 2025) lived a beautiful life. She was a wonderful daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, aunt, teacher, friend. She was bright, loving, wise. She lived with a keen sense of God's presence. She taught science for over 40 years; she wrote a food column for ten years and also authored an amazing cookbook "Sephardic Holiday Cooking." She was an active "rebbitzin" in a wonderful congregation; she was hospitable and gracious, always with a welcoming smile on her face. She loved music, nature, art, travel. She loved Israel; we spent many summers in Jerusalem. She was kind, charitable, sociable…the list of her virtues goes on and on.

Gilda and I went on our first date May 8, 1966. We were married August 23, 1967. I am grateful beyond words for the privilege and joy of having spent these many years with her. The Almighty blessed us with wonderful children, grandchildren and extended family.

Barukh Dayan HaEmet: As a rabbi for over 50 years, I've been at many death beds, officiated at many funerals, made many shiva visits. But one never entirely comes to grips with death; it remains a mystery beyond our ken. With the passing of my beloved Gilda, I have lost my life partner, my light and my blessing. In resignation, I acknowledge God as the True Judge. God will shine glory and peace on Gilda's soul. God will provide our family with as much consolation as is possible.

Batukh Hatov VeHameitiv: Even in mourning—or perhaps especially in mourning—we need to recall the many blessings the Almighty bestowed on us. Gilda lived a beautiful life, full of love, happiness, fulfillment. When I reminisce about our life together, my primary emotion is gratitude. I thank God who is good, who bestows good, and who blessed our lives with so much good and goodness.

Our tradition teaches that the memory of the righteous is a blessing. Gilda's life-force will continue to impact positively on me, our children and grandchildren, on Gilda's sisters, on our extended family, friends and her many students. Her faith, love and wisdom live on within all who were blessed to experience the radiance of her life.

Blessed be the True Judge. Blessed be God who is good and who bestows goodness.