Pocketing Blessings through Orthodoxy and Creativity

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“There is a tear in my eye; don’t wipe it away. It’s my gift to you.” —Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach

Dad died this past year. He was not a religious person. He didn’t criticize anyone’s choice or practice of religion, nor did he look down on folks who wanted religion to be a fixed part of their daily lives. Organized religion was simply something that did not interest him. He admired people of all faiths. He supported his children’s spiritual paths and choices without reservation. He taught and blessed his children in discreet and silent ways. He learned to recognize God in the voices of his elders as they shared their stories with him. He celebrated life as he saw fit and walked his path without regret.

The day he passed away, sadness surrounded me. My thoughts overflowed with long-forgotten images. I remembered an energetic young father concerned that his children would not have enough books to read; yet there were few memories of Dad reading to us. When he reached middle age, he honored his parents and elders with great kindness and compassion, but often criticized his children harshly. As an old man, he told complex, insightful stories that were composites of the love and admiration he had for people he’d known and choices he’d made in life.

However, I was never quite sure if my choices in life were a source of pride for my father. Whether or not he was proud of how his children turned out remained a

mystery. Dad was a conventional, politically conservative man who, for the most part, supported the establishment and status quo. Still, he occasionally surprised friends by taking positions that were in direct opposition to the majority opinion within our small community.

Even if his opinion was unpopular, he held his ground stubbornly, was meticulous in studying all sides of an issue. In time, he earned the respect of others and often won them over to his point of view. He was, like many fathers, a complex person who provided his family with stability, but kept pieces of his soul private.

When news arrived that Dad was no longer in the world, I began to grieve the father we never really understood. It was the quest for understanding of a complex and good man that would eventually bring comfort and resolve in losing such an important figure in my life. Worrisome thoughts that I'd been more of a disappointment than a source of pride to my father surfaced, bringing with them sorrow and regret. I searched memories for a legacy that would comfort me with a sense of inheritance and belonging. I needed to discover and collect pieces he'd left behind to understand his legacy and expectations for the generation he'd fathered.

It became more than slightly important to learn what my father stood for and to identify any sense of wisdom he might have left behind for his children to consider or follow. In order to accomplish this task, I would need to suspend all expectation and sew old stories, memories, and ethics together as if they were pieces set aside to construct a colorful quilt. If I was able to discover Dad's hopes and plans for his kids, perhaps my life would measure up to his expectations and my broken heart would be mended.

For the most part, Dad led a healthy, happy life. He was close to his mother and beloved step-father. He told wonderful, funny stories of his grandparents and great grandparents. He put his elders first and took their feelings into consideration before making any decisions. His parents were also not religious people, but they were the most spiritual individuals I've had the privilege of knowing. In fact, both sides of the family were comprised of individuals many would describe as secular and non-religious. However, their spirituality was mature and composed of powerful pathways that affected their lives, families, and communities in positive, significant ways.

Dad was a man's man. When I was little, he operated a barber shop and by default managed a billiard parlor that happened to be attached to his shop. The elder men of our small town congregated at this location and told their stories.

They were men who had worked hard and raised families. Now they were old and they wanted someone younger to listen to their stories and accomplishments. They smoked their cigars, pipes and cigarettes, used off-color language they didn't dare use around the ladies. At the end of the day, they wanted to prove that their long, hard-working lives meant something and had purpose. Dad was their sounding board. He stood at his barber chair cutting a customer's hair, or giving someone a shave and listened to every story. In listening, he honored each elder who stopped by his barber shop—whether they were a paying customer or not.

As the years passed and long hair became the style, the old men that congregated at the barber shop passed on and Dad gave up the barbering business. He was also a talented gunsmith and specialized in the artistic repair of antique firearms. Again, he attracted a culture of aging men who wanted to tell their stories and pass their legacy on to someone who cared, someone who listened and would continue to sow their precious memories as seed for the next generation. Although Dad was an excellent story teller and did his part to keep the memory of his elders alive, his real talent was as a story listener.

In a distant memory, I recall accompanying him to a gathering of firearm vendors. An old man began to tell my father a long story about his days as a boy and the Stevens single-shot rifle he used to hunt rabbits in the cow pastures of his youth. He reminisced about the rapid-fire weapons he'd been loaned to protect his country as a young soldier in World War I and realized, like his father and grandfather, he believed in something beyond himself. When the old man finished his story, he politely moved to the next vendor with a bony frame that was less arthritic than before the seeds of his life were sown upon the fertile soil of our imaginations with hopes they would find roots in new and distant gardens. One of the vendors approached Dad in a manner that could best be described as man to man.

Men of Men, like my father, have a sense of authority that is rarely questioned or challenged in male-culture. They are admired, are keepers of the establishment's accepted viewpoints, and their approval can secure one's place in a crowd. The approaching vendor, eager to be taken seriously and confirm his sense of belonging exclaimed, "That old geezer is telling the same line this year as last, except this year he received four purple hearts and last year only one. If he wants to tell these yarns, let him buy something first." How rude, I thought at the tender age of eleven. However, we'd been raised to remain respectful, stand when elders were in the room and not talk back. The silence between Dad and this potential

colleague was momentary. Dad's rebuke was more of a sigh than a response. He looked the vendor with the baggy pants and exposed money belt straight in the eye. "Buddy, when I get to be that age, maybe I'd like to tell a few tales. When I get to be that age, I hope somebody will listen to me without expecting pocket change for the privilege." Baggy Pants, with his money belt and desperate need to belong, cowered, then faded into the blue steel and WD-40 smell of the convention, never to be heard from again.

Old age hit Dad suddenly. It snuck up on him and it took his children by surprise. He was not one to write or call his kids on the telephone in order to make small talk or stay in touch. Memories of past stories and the way in which he lived his life, respected his parents, his elders and conducted his business within the community was how Dad chose to teach and eventually pass his legacy on to his children. He taught his kids silently by living and modeling what he believed was ethical behavior.

A few months before his death, I learned that Dad was becoming confused. He was having trouble walking; he was becoming lost, selling possessions that had been in the family for generations for only a few dollars just so he could share his beliefs, ideas, and memories with others. Our mother was frustrated and finally, Dad was admitted to a nursing home where he could receive more support than our mother could provide.

Being 3,000 miles away, I arranged with the nursing home to be able to call him on a weekly basis. Happily, he recognized my voice. His sentences were abrupt, disorganized, and frantic. Instead of his solid, male presence, he was fragile with a hurried air of panic in his voice. At first, his words were confusing and only served to cement the reality that Dad had become old and was on the verge of leaving us and this world behind. But, if I listened closely and took the time to connect pieces of off-hand comments, sentences, and half told stories, there was Dad—teaching me about his soul, who he was, what he'd accomplished, who he'd become and the hopes he had for his only daughter and eldest child.

Our "end of life" conversations concluded as abruptly as they began when I received a call that Dad had suffered a fall, was taken to the hospital, and gently passed away. A non-religious man had left the world, but in the few weeks before his passing he'd successfully and creatively provided his daughter with her inheritance—his ethical will. Dad's last thoughts, fragmented memories and stories were of a moral, principled and spiritual nature: listen for the tears of others; practice kindness and inclusiveness; stand up for your beliefs; allow no regrets; fix your mistakes yourself; be honest; recognize and treasure the places

where you've discovered belonging. The day after Dad's death, it occurred to me that the passing of this non-religious soul should be grieved in a special, creative manner. The accepted, Orthodox way did not provide the level of comfort or honor I wished to bestow regarding the passing of my father. I decided to start a new trend in sitting shiva. In honor of the life of my father, I planned to perform at least one mitzvah a day without the knowledge of others and without expectation of personal reward. This was how Dad said his final goodbye to his parents. It seemed appropriate to do the same for him. Additionally, I sought out elders and spent time with them to listen to their stories. It might not have been the "orthodox" way of expressing grief, but I like to believe I assisted my father's neshama to take off like a little rocket and land in the highest portion of heaven available. If I ever run into his soul again, I want him to know his life amounted to something, that his purpose in life had been met, was valuable and that his daughter not only carries his teachings and stories, but my life, spirituality, and religious boundaries were strengthened and softened because I had an ethical, kind, and spiritual father. I don't have a need to walk in his footsteps, but I take comfort in knowing a path exists in this world that he made and through memories and quiet moments I can stop by that path should I become lonely. Orthodoxy is a cute word. If you look it up in a thesaurus you'll find synonyms like "accepted view," "conventional," "accepted belief," and "prevailing attitude." If you look the word up in a dictionary you'll most likely find the definition of conformity: the practice of observing established social customs and definitions of appropriateness. Conversely, if you research the word creativity, you find descriptions with words like "originality," "inspiration," "ingenuity," "inventiveness," and "visionary." At first glance, it would appear that these two words are often at war with each other. Can you be original and conventional at the same time, or inspired and visionary while embracing the prevailing attitude or accepted view? Despite not adhering to dogmatic or established religious behavior, Dad was a conventional man—any form of "orthodoxy" comforted him. People described him as an authority figure, and his position on various subjects often became the "accepted view" within his community. He held on to old ideas and stood his ground with strength and occasional stubbornness. I am a traditional, Jewish woman. Like my father, I can be stubborn once I take a stand and believe in something outside myself. The prevailing attitude of my Jewish/ Orthodox community is important to me. I read and listen to the leaders of Orthodox Jewish communities before I formulate my opinions. It is a safe, easy feeling to belong to a community where behavior is outlined and expectations are clear. By nature, most individuals want to belong and need to have an idea of what their purpose in life is and will continue to be. It is an important part of living to wonder if any part of your life will be left over for the next generation to learn

from, celebrate or admire. Did you count for anything while you were living and breathing in this world? Did you offer anything special to the world or your family while you were here—or were you merely a follower who performed every rule and law to the letter because someone told you this is how you must act or behave? If you were to suddenly leave your place in the world, would anyone miss your contributions? One summer in the mid-1970s, I had the fortunate opportunity to sit next to Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach while he taught his holy stories about purpose. In those days he was teaching his students through the stories and songs of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. One of the tales was the story of how Reb Nachman became a Rebbe. Shlomo told that Rebbe Nachman married at age fourteen. At his wedding, he met a young man his age. He asked the young man, "What are you doing here?"—meaning, are you with the bride's or groom's family? The young man answered Rebbe Nachman, "That's the problem. I wake up at night wondering, what am I doing here?" Reb Nachman responded, "Ah, you're my kind of Jew. Come to the forest with me and we'll talk with Hashem." Reb Shlomo concluded, "That was the night Rabbi Nachman of Breslov became a Rebbe." This little story has stayed with me a long time. After hearing it, I spent significant time wondering about purpose and individual contributions to my chosen community. I even constructed prayers and shot them off to God, saying things like, "Give me purpose. What do you expect from me? What do I count for, anyway?" For a while, it was a significant part of my personal spiritual quest. At times it was comforting to have a crowd to follow. However, I often saw myself as standing alone in a crowd of connected Jews wondering what the point was, thinking, who really needs my opinion? Orthodoxy, conventional behavior, acceptance, talking and dressing like others in my community was a blessing. It kept me grounded and tethered. It is a safe feeling to be able to "borrow" tried and true ways of thinking and acting when you're not sure who you are, or what your legacy is or might become. It is encouraging to be taken seriously, but easy to become confused and even easier to ask a selected spiritual leader for answers you can blindly follow. There is safety in learning to "fit in" without taking the chance of alienation by asking too many questions or taking what should be a positive risk and offering your own interpretation of Orthodox values and practices. Belonging has its dark side. Like Baggy Pants—the vendor who desperately wanted to be taken seriously in my father's world—you can forfeit your unique personality without meaning to. You can spend your life speaking insincere words at the expense of others instead of sharing an authentic piece of your soul simply because you need to prove you are an accepted member of the crowd, or are afraid to deposit a genuine piece of yourself into the gene pool. Purpose is equated with knowing where you belong because you have something special to offer, rather than learning to mimic the status quo because you are

afraid you might not be considered worthy by friends and colleagues. Purpose is learning to hear the tears of others and having the courage and respect to not simply wipe them away. Orthodoxy or belonging to a conventional, established group should give the individual the courage to speak from the heart and soul with authenticity and without fear of ridicule. This is how the creative spirit balances itself with conventionality. Several years following Reb Shlomo's rendition of Rebbe Nachman's wedding day and finding one's purpose, I visited Reb Shlomo in New York. It was a sweet, meaningful visit. We ended up at his shul, where he sang and told stories to his beloved students until the wee hours of the morning. By this time, only the most dedicated students remained. To an outsider, it would certainly be time to say good-night and head back to respective hotel rooms and apartments. But, we were on "Shlomo-Time." It was 3 a.m., and time for Shlomo to go "cruising." This could mean one of many things: visiting the homeless under the bridge, standing on a street corner giving money away to strangers, or visiting some incredible, spiritual rebbe whom the general Jewish community had not quite heard of yet. This particular night, the hevrah was planning to follow Shlomo to visit a special rabbi who truly had uncovered the esoteric truths of Torah in a way never shared with the world before. I did not have the desire to accompany my friends on this holy sojourn that started in Manhattan and ended somewhere in New Jersey. Instead, I had planned to visit Shearith Israel to listen to the men recite the morning prayers. This was a highlight for me personally. I had missed the formal atmosphere of this synagogue and kind-hearted people who always smiled at each other. It brought me strength, it was a beautiful place, I liked the people and I needed to be there. So, politely, I declined to accompany the hevrah and said good-night, or rather good morning, to everyone. The next evening, I dropped by Shlomo's shul. My plane was leaving in a few hours and I wanted to say goodbye to my friends. Instead of open arms, I was greeted with raised eyebrows and questions asking why I did not follow Shlomo and the group the previous night/morning: "Why didn't you come with us? What were you thinking? You missed something important." I was devastated that my friends were dissatisfied with my decision and concerned that I'd unintentionally disappointed Shlomo. By not following the crowd, I felt I'd jeopardized my belonging and missed the one opportunity I might have had to find and truly understand my purpose in life. One of my best friends looked me in the eye with extreme severity and asked, "Where were you?" "Well, I wanted to go to the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue for the morning prayers. I couldn't do both." "The Spanish Portuguese Synagogue? What's over there? You had a chance to really meet someone holy and get a special blessing. Shlomo said this rebbe was holy. How could you have missed that?" One chance in a lifetime to see someone holy and I missed it? Truthfully, I didn't care about not

being blessed by the world's greatest rebbe, but had I inadvertently insulted Shlomo or lost the respect of my community by not being a good follower? What would become of me? I was devastated, but only for a moment. My dear friend had barely finished her commentary when I heard Shlomo's voice address the group as if we were a bunch of misguided, noisy children. "Hey. You know what a good idea is? A good idea is to know your path when you see it. It takes a little bit of courage to know where you belong and what your purpose is. If everyone's on the same path we wouldn't have anything to dance or sing about." The group looked at each other, nodded their heads in agreement, and began dancing to Shlomo melodies completely oblivious to my presence and perceived error in judgment and etiquette. I was never so relieved to return to my place in the crowd and blend in with every other dancing Jew. As I was leaving, Shlomo followed me out the door and whispered in my ear, "Shearith Israel? The highest, holiest place in New York!" As always, his eyes were twinkling with joyfulness as if he could see from one corner of the world to the other and all that existed was goodness and peace. He continued, "You know what the saddest thing in the world is? The saddest thing is when a Jew fails to recognize who they are and where they need to be because they're afraid they won't be accepted by the establishment. You know what establishment means? It means already obsolete. I bless you, bless me back, with eyes that see and ears that hear what truly is holy. When you're not here, I miss you. That's how you know where you belong. You belong to the people you miss and who miss you back." I metaphorically stuffed Shlomo's blessing into my pocket so I wouldn't lose it. It, too, became a kind of ethical will—a gift offered to express a teacher's wisdom and sincere hope for a student as she learned to navigate the world on her own terms and develop a balance between creative individualism and belonging in Orthodox Jewish communities. It's not good when Orthodoxy and Creativity are at war. First, there is nothing to win by pitting these two polarities against each other. Second, if one does overcome the other, you either have rules without compassion, or belonging without purpose. Orthodoxy and Creativity must live peacefully beside each other with each entity learning to borrow from the other. If communities are not intimidated by the consideration and debate of new ideas, continued renewal of our ancient ways will be celebrated and the establishment will rarely become obsolete. Everybody knows an ethical will is an ancient Jewish tradition of one generation passing on its hopes and wisdom to the next. Our Torah is filled with stories of our ancestors passing on legacy in this thoughtful, creative, and holy manner. In Bereishith, Yacob gathered his sons to offer them his blessing, and requested that he not be buried in Egypt but in the cave at Mahpelah beside his ancestors. In Devarim, Moshe Rebbeinu instructed us to be a holy people and teach our children accordingly. Much of our time spent studying our holy books is

reading stories and learning ideas passed down from one generation to the next, perhaps to keep us from becoming an obsolete people. Providing a child, or even a community, with an ethical will, can breathe the soul of an individual who is no longer with us back into our lives. It can heal broken hearts, solve mysteries left behind by silent parents, bind us to our past, and strengthen our hopes for our future possibilities. The challenge often is that an ethical will might not be easy to find or recognize. Not every parent writes a scroll, publishes a book, or summons their kids to gather around their bedsides for a formal good-bye or blessing. It takes effort to recognize how a loved one might communicate a personal, authentic teaching. For an ethical will to effectively blend conventionality with inspiration, the teaching generation must offer their truths in an individual and unique way. The receiving generation must learn to listen for an unexpected voice and recognize their elders' spirits in whatever sound and shape their teachings assume. The process is a worthy, meaningful way of teaching, healing, and growing spiritually. Efforts individuals make in searching for ethical statements within their family or communities will be rewarded by the welding of inspiration and conventionality into one complex soul that comprises many ideas and differences. Not long after my father left the world, I was speaking to a friend who knew Dad quite well. "So," he asked in a nosy, meddlesome way, "what did your father leave you? Is it enough for you to stop working and start relaxing a little bit? Or was your old man so cheap he spent it all on himself before he died?" It took effort to keep from expressing anger toward this individual. However, my struggle to maintain dignity was short-lived. Actually, this insensitive family friend inspired a sudden, intuitive leap of understanding: Hashem is the source of wealth and money, not my deceased father. I am thankful to be a working woman, thankful to have opportunity to give something of myself to others. I am thankful to believe in something outside myself. I'm fortunate to have opportunity to treat others compassionately and kindly, to have found the courage to express an opinion freely without fear of being unceremoniously abandoned by people I assumed accepted me without conditions. I have enormous gratitude for having the opportunity to fix what's been broken and express myself with honesty and resolve. In reality, I've become a living legacy guaranteed to honor the wishes and life of my father. And so, I spoke up, looked this meddlesome friend squarely in the eye and answered, "Inheritance? When my father left the world I became the wealthiest daughter you could imagine. The worth my father acquired in this world was left for me to treasure and spend in whatever manner I see fit." I wanted badly to wipe away the tears that were still in my eyes following Dad's death and graciously hand one of them to this individual. But then, I decided to leave these tears where they belonged and continue my life as an Orthodox, religious Jew who was the recipient of the greatest blessing possible—eyes and

ears that are capable of knowing what is truly holy. The meddlesome friend of the family looked at the ground, somewhat self-conscious with his coarseness. He was quiet for a minute, then shrugged his shoulders and sighed, “You sound just like your old man. I see that he really has left you something special.”