

The Fragrance of Paradise

Rabbah bar Abbuha met Elijah standing in a cemetery. He cried to Elijah: I am too poor to take time for learning as I would like. Elijah led him into the Garden of Eden and said to him: Take off your cloak and gather in it some of the leaves. As Rabbah left, he heard a voice saying: Who would consume his portion in the future world as Rabbah bar Abbuha has done? Frightened, he shook out his cloak and scattered the leaves. Yet, since it had carried the leaves of Paradise, his robe had absorbed their fragrance. He sold the robe for twelve thousand dinars—a legacy for his children. Rabbah left the cemetery richer than when he had entered. (Paraphrased from Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 114a.)

There are no longer many who knew David, the 94 year old who had just died. For many years, he had lived in another town. It was mainly the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, the Burial Society, who awaited him and his family at the cemetery as they made the long trip back home to where David had grown up with seven siblings.

The hearse arrived followed by a large procession of family. With a simple burial, David would be back with three generations of his family. We walked slowly from the cemetery gates to the grave—family pallbearers handing off the honor to the *Hevra Kaddisha* after we had halted seven times along the way. The *Hevra Kaddisha* bent to the task of lowering the coffin, but no maneuvering could compensate for the narrow grave.

Elijah the prophet reminds us that in the cemetery, Paradise is only a step away. In cemetery terms, the grave was not big enough. In Paradise terms, before us was a life that could not be contained by this grave.

We entrusted David to the care of the *Hevra Kaddisha* and we proceeded to visit family graves of three generations. With each stop, we brought new stories to life: The location of Mama's grave proclaimed her prominent role in the *Hevra Kaddisha*. Papa had died on her birthday—a forgotten drama restored by a close reading of grave stones.

Not far away from Papa's grave was the grave of David's grandfather, Jack. This gravestone offered another treasure, this one from the ancient family album. Jack's Hebrew name, *Ya'akov*, was spelled with a *vav* carrying the weight of the "o" vowel instead of the accepted, leaner spelling in which the vowel is only implied. In cemetery terms, his name was misspelled—there was one character too many. But in Paradise terms, the stone has an enriching character.

An ancient teacher observed that the name *Ya'akov* appears with the *vav* five times in the Bible. Just so, the name *Eliahu*, is spelled only five times in the Bible *without* a *vav*—not *Eliahu*, but *Eliyah*, the prophet Elijah. There is an ecology of sacred letters. A letter missing from here must turn up there—and with a purpose. Whether referring to our biblical grandfather or David's grandfather, the name *Ya'akov-With-A-Vav* carries a bit of *Eliahu*, the prophet and imparts the fragrance of a future beyond the cemetery in which all stories and the lives that carried them live and prosper.

Now, we returned our attention to the grave too narrow and the life too big. A lithe, powerful grave digger was finishing his work. His pick arced around a focused face that betrayed neither age nor fatigue. When he stopped, members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* reached their hands towards him and pulled him out of the grave—a Paradise moment brought to life in the cemetery. The grave digger stood nearby, breathing easily and watching as the *Hevra Kaddisha* lowered David’s coffin.

Now, the grave digger raised his hand to the family and said: “I offer the family my condolences. I hope that the delay did not disturb you and that you take the best of him away with you.” Then, he turned and walked off.

I had thought about asking the grave digger his name. But I did not do it because Elijah often prefers disguises.

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