



# Keepers of the Broken Tablets

By Rabbi Zev Schostak

“How do you minister to those demented elders, who sit all day in their wheelchairs, drooling and muttering gibberish?” David’s words will forever remain etched in my memory. It was a defining moment in my work as a chaplain working with the elderly.

In the early years of my chaplaincy, I would often visit seasoned colleagues and join them on rounds to observe the finer points of pastoral care. One morning, on a beautiful fall day in early November, I visited with David Lane, a highly respected chaplain who specialized in the field of pediatric oncology. I observed David talking with his young cancer patients, precious little children with bald heads. He joked and laughed with them and offered them encouragement. When a six-year old looked depressed, he held her hand and listened with extraordinary sensitivity and patience, as she related her misery and woes. Later, after the morning rounds, David and I met for lunch in the hospital cafeteria. I was amazed at how David was able to do such

emotionally draining work, day in and day out. I had read much of the pioneering work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross with young children dying of cancer. She discovered their resiliency and hopeful optimism, their angelic, spiritual essence—born, perhaps, out of the innocence and naïveté of childhood. So I could understand how David was able to connect with them spiritually. But, there was one thing in particular that I found truly challenging about David’s life work.

“David, I admire the wonderful work you do with these children. It must be emotionally exhausting. Frankly, I wonder how you’re able to do it. But there is one thing that I find most difficult of all: What do you say to give support to the parents of children who are dying of cancer?”

David reflected for a few moments. “Zev, after all is said and done, sometimes all I can do is listen to their story, hold their hands and cry with them....But, you know, I don’t believe I could ever do your work....How do you minister to those demented elders, who sit all day in their wheelchairs, drooling and muttering gibberish?”

I couldn’t believe what I heard! I was stunned, dumbfounded. Was this the public perception of nursing home life? Is working with the demented the greatest challenge in my work? David’s question left me speechless, but it led me to some serious soul-searching about what my chaplaincy was all about.

Sadly, like many of my generation, I am no stranger to Alzheimer’s. Years before I entered the chaplaincy, my father suffered from Alzheimer’s. In the last years of Dad’s life, he

lived in Florida, while my brothers and I lived up north in Michigan and New York. In family visits to Florida, I couldn't help but notice the vacuous look in Dad's eyes. It seemed that despite the occasional glimmer of recognition, Dad's mind was fading. Though Dad's outward appearance was the same, inside, the father I knew was no longer there. My kids would embrace Grandpa and he'd smile with delight as he hugged them. But, for me, these get-togethers had become bittersweet because Dad couldn't remember my children's names, and they would never get to know the father I knew. In due course, Dad's health seriously declined, and the family debated about whether he should be placed in a nursing home. Years before, when Dad was still in good health, we talked about planning for the "golden years," and he asked me to promise that, whatever happened, I would never put him in a nursing home (as if I had some say about controlling future events). As fate would have it, Dad's last day on earth was spent in an ambulance on the way to a nursing home. He was never admitted!

The great health fear of my generation of baby boomers is that Alzheimer's or dementia -- the slow death of one's personality within the body -- will afflict their elders or them. And this fear is real and growing: the fastest growing segment of our population -- our elders over 85 -- have the highest risk of Alzheimer's disease. By 2050, 14 million older Americans are expected to have Alzheimer's disease. In fact, researchers recently projected that the number of new cases will double every year between 1995 and 2050--from 377,000 to 959,000 -- if current population trends continue and no preventive treatments emerge!

So, returning to David's most poignant question: How do I minister to those demented elders, who sit all day in their wheelchairs, drooling and mut-



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tering gibberish? How do I provide spiritual care to their loving spouses, children and families when, in their minds, the real person they knew and loved may have died long ago? What meaning, hope, and support can I offer them?

I believe that behind the mask of dementia, there are occasional glimmers of the person we once knew and loved. He or she is still there, and these glimmers are manifestations of the soul. Sometimes, an elderly parent with dementia has a magic moment, where she recognizes her child, smiles, and speaks clearly for a few minutes, only to revert to a nonsensical state. At a musical program, a resident with advanced Alzheimer's spontaneously taps his feet to the beat of music popular 50 years ago and hums along. At religious services, demented residents respond positively to the prayers of their childhoods, reflecting their joy in being able to participate in an experience which still has meaning in their lives.

Sometimes, miraculous awakenings happen. I will never forget Rose, a 75 year-old resident who sat impassively like a mummy, in her wheelchair for years, never uttering a word. One fine day, out of the clear blue, Rose started talking and continued talking -- non-

stop. What was especially astounding was that Rose picked up on conversations she had with her daughters years before she took ill. She criticized their wardrobes and talked about their children. She voiced her opinions and dispensed unsolicited advice, just as she always did. Then, about one week later, Rose stopped talking, and returned to her passive state. There were no medical explanations for her unexpected awakening. No one could solve the mystery of how she came back to life and then disappeared into a silent cocoon. To my mind, Rose's awakening

revealed her spiritual personality which was still very much alive within her. Like many things spiritual, what we see isn't always what we get. We see an aphasic old woman paralyzed in a time warp, sitting motionlessly as a piece of furniture. Indeed, as life passes her by, people pass her by with barely a nod, as if she were a lifeless rag doll. So, sometimes G-d reminds us all that beneath that frozen surface, there is a truly remarkable woman, Rose-- a strong, loving, tell-it- like-it-is mother and grandmother who was a major influence on her family. Some honor elders who can no longer care for themselves because of whom they were. They feel obliged to take care of Dad, who is now so fragile and demented, because of what he did for them when he was young and healthy. Certainly, we all owe our parents a profound debt of gratitude: Much of who we are today is because of them. But I maintain that we should honor Dad not just because of who he was and what he did for us. I believe that G-d is telling us is that my young Dad is still here, his spiritual personality, his very essence, his soul lives behind the wrinkled mask. I honor Dad now because of who he is, not just because of who he was!

## SPIRITUAL SELF-ESTEEM

Is my father buried within the shell of his body or does his spirit yet live behind the mask of dementia? Do I honor the father that was or the father that is?

My approach, my inspiration in relating to these heart wrenching dilemmas has been nurtured by the teachings of Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823-1900) a preeminent Hasidic thinker of his era. Rav Tzadok affirms that an inimitable spiritual source -- the soul -- lives within each of us and reflects our unique personalities and very reason for being.

He comments on the well-known verse and Talmudic teaching:

“And thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18) --

Rabbi Akiva says: This is the major principle of the Torah! ( Sifra, Kedoshim 2 )

We're all familiar with the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you!” This popular maxim is drawn from “thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself,” and serves as the foundation of virtually all human relationships. Civilized society is founded on this reciprocity: mutual respect for one another's self and property. But “loving our neighbor,” speaks nothing about our relationship with G-d? Prayer, Torah study, mitzvah observance, and spiritual growth? Where do they come in? How can Rabbi Akiva categorically state that the great universal principle of the Torah is our interpersonal human relationships and omit our relationship with G-d?

In order to arrive at the answer, we must go back to the very beginnings of man: “and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word, nishama or soul is related to nishima, which means “breath.” Man's soul is the breath of G-d. Since one's breath is the very essence of his being, G-d not only breathed life into Adam, He infused him with bits of His very essence -- His inimitable Divine qualities. Just as G-d is an incomparable being, He created each of us as distinct individuals, unlike any other that was ever created before us or will be cre-

ated after us. We know that we have fingerprints and DNA that are ours alone -- even if we are one of identical twins. So, too, each of us has our own spiritual DNA building on the spiritual achievements of our ancestors. Before G-d sends a soul down to this world, He charges each with a unique mission that only it can fulfill. Every mission is special, making a distinct contribution to perfecting this world -- “tikun olam.” Since each of us has a singular role to play, which no one else can fulfill, he or she can truly proclaim, without boasting, “This world was created for me!” (Sanhedrin 37a) G-d also endowed us each with exclusive, creative forces -- strengths, talents, and abilities, to enable us to complete our missions. Sometimes, though, G-d handicaps some souls to challenge them and their loved ones in fulfilling their respective missions. Thus, when the Bible says that we were created “in G-d's image,” it means that in some very small measure, we reflect G-d's individuality and creativity. Then, the Infinite One in prescient perfection decides to send our souls down to this world to be born at a certain point in history to parents of His choosing to make our special contributions. This bold concept that each of our souls is one-of-a-kind with a unique mission in this world is what I call -- “spiritual self-esteem.” Our self-image is not projected by others -- extrinsic, but rather reflective of G-d's qualities -- intrinsic! Our self-worth is assessed by G-d in response to completing our respective worldly assignments, and is not necessarily measured by our value to society.

Now, we may apply Rav Tzadok's revolutionary insight. Why do I love you? For the very same reasons I love myself! I love you because no one else ever was or will be like you. No one has your talents, strengths, and abilities! Indeed, no one but you can fulfill your unique role in this world and bring it to for perfection. I love you for the very same reason I love myself -- because G-d loves you, and feels you worthy of existence. And G-d put you together with me in this world at this point in history so we can fulfill our mutual destiny. So, in the end, “love thy neighbor

## Two Mothers Anonymous

I had two mothers . . .  
Two mothers I claim.  
Two different people  
Yet with the same name.

Two separate women  
diverse by design  
But I loved them both  
Because they were both mine.

The first was the mother  
Who carried me here  
Gave birth and nurtured  
And launched my career.

She was the one  
Whose features I bear  
Complete with the facial  
Expression I wear.

She gave me some music  
Which follows me yet  
Along with examples  
In life that she set.

Then as I got older  
She some younger grew  
and we'd laugh as just  
Mothers and daughters can do.

But then came the year  
That her mind clouded so  
And I sensed that the mother  
I'd known soon would go.

So quickly she changed  
And turned into the other.  
A stranger who dressed  
In the clothes of my mother.

Oh, she looked the same  
At least at arm's length,  
But she was the child now  
And I was her strength.

We'd come full circle  
We women three  
My mother the first,  
The second, and me.

And if my own children  
Should come to a day  
When a new mother comes  
And the old goes away.

I'd ask of them nothing  
That I didn't do . . .  
Honor both of your mothers  
As I've tried to do.

as thyself,” is not speaking merely about human relationships. It is truly affirming G-d’s role in our lives, which give them meaning and purpose. “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” is truly the universal principle of the Torah, affecting both our relationships with man and G-d. This is the essence of spiritual self-esteem!

In my work, I welcome all new admissions to our facility. Recently, I met Joel, who accompanied his chronically ill father to Gurwin for long-term care. Typical of many, he talked about his father in the past tense: “Dad enjoyed a good life! Until Mom died five years ago, he was very active and independent. Dad was outgoing, had a great sense of humor, and was always the life of the party. Before retiring to Florida, Mom and Dad traveled around the world and really had a good life together...”

The saddest part of this conversation was not that Joel talked about his Dad’s life as if it were history. It was that he casually mentioned all of this to me in the presence of his fully alert father, as if he weren’t there. In the

process, Joel unwittingly echoed the feelings of so many in our generation: Once you’re sick and old, and no longer independent and productive, the “good” times are over, and you have nothing to look forward to. You have lived your life and, for all practical purposes, it’s over! Our perennially youthful boomer generation, though it will age, will never get old. But our elder’s generation... well, that’s a different story! Thus, Joel talks about his dad as if he weren’t in the room because, subconsciously, Joel viewed his dad’s life as history!

Spiritual self-esteem declares that Joel’s dad’s life isn’t over simply because he has become a permanent resident in a nursing home. The value of our lives is not measured by what we may yet contribute to society. It is not defined by the wealth we have amassed, or the power and influence we wield. Our lives are not about what we own, but about who we are -- our deepest convictions and most precious personal values. Our lives are reflected in our spiritual self-worth, not our material net worth! Ultimately, our lives are about our

unique spiritual core, our souls which are part of G-d and ever present within us -- even though others on the outside can’t see it because it is masked in the shell of dementia.

When a loved one is afflicted with Alzheimer’s, we must always remember that what we see isn’t always what we get! The real mother we knew and loved has not died within her body. Mother is still there even though we can’t see her. On a spiritual level, which transcends the physical senses, she truly sees and hears you. She is aware of your presence and feels your love. So you honor your mother not only because of who she was but because of who she is.

How, indeed, do children “honor thy mother and thy father” when their parents become victims of end-stage dementia? How does a daughter care for a mother who no longer recognizes her? How does a son respect his father who is irrational and incontinent? Finally, how do I, as their chaplain, support them on this long and arduous journey?

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## TWO MOTHERS-AN ALZHEIMER'S TALE

Alzheimer's is a mother, who no longer recognizes you, who calls you by the name of a sibling, who pushes away a spoonful of soup when you are gently trying to feed her. Dementia is a father who has wandered into the world of never-never land, endlessly replaying the events of yesteryear or the fantasies of his deepest fears and hopes--expressed in a language of gibberish, which you barely comprehend. In my experience, the long-term victims of Alzheimer's and dementia are not the patients. The suffering victims are the family members. To my mind, the loss of a parent's personality is by far more painful for a child who must live in its wake than it is for the parent who now resides in another world, often blissfully unaware of what he or she has become. I have met sons who have refused to visit their demented parents, declaring, "The Dad I remember and loved died two years ago." And I have met daughters who, undaunted, visited their mothers who suffer from advanced Alzheimer's to give them dinner, with the patience and perseverance of a mother spoon-feeding her baby. Is it still possible to "honor one's father or mother" under these conditions, I wonder, if my father or mother no longer recognizes me?

My mind reflects back to the days when I was a yeshiva high school student in Chicago and studied the passage from the Talmud (Kiddushin 31b), which addresses the obligation to honor one's parents. How do we honor our fathers and mothers in very practical terms? The sages respond, "Honor means that

he [the child] must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, and escort him in and out." Back then, as a teenager reading these guidelines for the first time, I pictured my Dad, sitting in his easy chair and how I would bring him some fruit or a hot drink. I felt grateful that I would be respecting his wishes and, in the process, follow the Biblical imperative to honor my father. Now, that I'm middle-aged myself, I reread this passage in the light of a chaplain who ministers to the elderly and their families.

The Talmud speaks to us about caring for our elderly parents. When mom is so demented that she has nearly forgotten how to swallow, feed her ever so patiently: give her a drink of a specially thickened beverage so she may swallow safely. When she can no longer dress herself, "clothe" her. When she shivers, but can't tell you she's cold, "cover" her. If mom no longer walks without assistance, gently place her thin, bony arm around your shoulder and support her as she ambles with her cane. If she can no longer walk, "escort" her as you push her wheelchair down the corridor. These acts of loving-kindness for a mother who can no longer care for herself are the ultimate challenge of "honor thy mother."

## LET ME SHARE WITH YOU THE STORY OF A VERY SPECIAL DAUGHTER AND HER MOTHER.

Ruth, a retired teacher, visited her mother Dorothy every day for years, with a near-perfect attendance record. I admired Ruth because she had a second sense about always doing the right thing for her mother. In the early years, when Dorothy was still alert and oriented, Ruth would drop by at lunch and banter with her mom about the news of the day, family happenings, and Dorothy's aches and pains. Ruth was the bright spot in Dorothy's day, her link to the outside world and her family. Dorothy's face lit up the minute she caught a glance of Ruth. Her frown would turn into the warmest smile, her tired eyes began to dance, her bony hands and frail arms outstretched to hug her daughter. Their love for each other was so palpable that it radiated across the dining room. But, sadly, these magic moments came to an end. As time passed, things slowly changed. Dorothy became demented.

At first, Dorothy recognized Ruth, but was angry and agitated. She stubbornly refused to eat. Only after Ruth prodded Dorothy to taste the food did she take a bite or two. Dorothy became ever more cranky and ornery. Dorothy continued to decline. She stopped eating and started talking her own language, a few nonsensical expressions interspersed with some intelligible words. Soon, Dorothy no longer recognized her caretakers and became alternately hostile and paranoid. Undeterred, Ruth faithfully visited her mom each day at lunch, but Dorothy ate so slowly that the meals frequently lasted an hour or more. Dorothy, like a stubborn one-year-old, would clench her teeth and refuse to let Ruth feed her. Yet, Ruth patiently persisted until Dorothy finished eating.

After lunch one day, when the dining room was clear, I approached Ruth. "Ruth, I can't tell you how much I admire and respect your devotion to your mom. She must have been a very special lady. Could you tell me about her?"

Ruth closed her eyes and smiled, obviously thinking about

happier times gone by. Ruth's face was etched with tired wrinkles, reflecting the fact that she, too, was an aging grandmother who loved to baby sit with her grandchildren and now was called upon to do so with her mother.

"You're right, Rabbi! Mama was very special! Truly one of a kind." Ruth smiled again. "Where do I begin? There's so much to say."

"Why don't you begin at the beginning?"

"I remember Mama cuddling me when I was a little girl. Whenever I had a 'booboo,' Mama put on a band-aid, hugged me and kissed away my tears. If I had a stomachache, she gently rubbed my tummy and, amazingly, I felt better almost instantly. Mama had this magic touch. I can't explain it.

In Ruth's parting words that afternoon, I discovered the source of her great love and devotion. "Rabbi, as I grew older, Mama was more than a mother." Ruth paused. She sighed and started to cry. I handed Ruth a box of tissues and she regained her composure. "Mama was more than a mother," she continued. "She was my confidante to whom I revealed my deepest secrets. She was my adviser and guide, always ready to listen and help me listen to my innermost thoughts and feelings. And, without fail, she was always there with her wonderful common-sense advice, her warmth and love." Ruth stopped, pausing once again to reflect. "Mama," Ruth declared, "Mama was . . . Mama is my best friend!"

A while back I came across an anonymous poem, entitled "Two Mothers," reportedly written by a daughter in my nursing home. It captures the essence of this bittersweet end-of-life relationship between a demented mother and her loving daughter

What strength and comfort can I offer to such a devoted daughter?

I tell her: Your life has come full circle. You, who were once the baby, have now become the mother, while, sadly, your mother has now become the baby. When you were an infant, your mother nurtured you with love. She changed, bathed and dressed you, expecting so little in return: a cute smile, perhaps a little cooing. Her love for you

was boundless, wholesome and natural. And, now that life has come full circle, G-d has given you the opportunity to offer your mom unconditional love, even though you know full well that she will never be able to reciprocate.

Whose love is greater--your mother's love for you, or your love for your mother? I believe it is yours. When you were a baby, your mother took care of you, her precious bundle of joy. You kept her up at night, crying when you were teething or in pain from a childhood illness. She cradled you

in her arms. You couldn't say "thank you" when she brought you relief. But Mom took comfort in knowing that you would grow up some day and become the wonderful daughter and mother you are. That would make it all worthwhile.

Now your mother has become the infant, totally helpless and dependent on you, and you have been called upon to become her mother. But you know that your mother will never be able to say "thank you" again, never speak to you or even recognize you. Your love, then, is totally unconditional. Purer. Higher.

#### **KEEPERS OF THE BROKEN TABLETS**

As I contemplate my life work and those of my colleagues, I sometimes ask myself how I can best describe what it is that we do. What words capture the essence of our mission?

The Torah relates the story of Moses descending the mountain with the 10 Commandments inscribed on two tablets. These tablets were extremely precious and holy because G-d Himself recorded the Commandments upon them. When Moses approached the bottom of the mountain, he discovered

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the children of Israel dancing around the golden calf. Moses was so outraged by their conduct that he grasped the tablets and flung them against the side of the mountain, shattering them into small pieces. Later, after the violators were punished, Moses once again ascended the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights and returned with another set of tablets. What happened to the shattered pieces of the original tablets? The Torah reports that they were treated with the same respect and reverence as the whole tablets and placed together with them in the holy ark.

We work with the frail elderly and their families, offering comfort to the chronically ill and the dying, and to those with dementia and Alzheimer's. Our elders are lonely and broken-hearted. Their lives have been devastated.

But I believe to the very core of my being that though their bodies have been shattered, their lives are still holy and precious. They bear the image of G-d and their spirits are forever young and vibrant. Their shattered tablets must always be treated with reverence and placed lovingly within the holy ark.

#### **We are the keepers of the broken**

**Invitation plus**