

"To live is to roam this earth for 80 or 90 years without being able to see our faults, learn from our mistakes and allow ourselves to grow. To be alive is to accept shortcomings, progress, mature and forgive." Rabbi Mendy Hecht

There was a time when I was shy. I used to hide behind my dad's leg grabbing onto him as though he could protect me, shelter me, and keep me safe from all that stood outside of us. If someone asked my name he would answer for me. He said "Ronni Sue." A name I didn't ever really use. It's a laughable memory now, since I've become so extroverted, so social. This memory is so pungent, as if it just happened. I was the Princess, as my Dad affectionately called me, and my brother Mitch, two years my senior, was the Champ -- 1950's style gender names. It didn't bother me, though I probably wondered, does that mean I can be a champion too? My Dad always meant well. Never witnessed a mean bone or thought in his body or mind. He was not tall, of slight build but strong, steady. His face was kind, gentlemanly, and authentic. His soft brown eyes, dark brown straight hair was unlike the coloring of the rest of us as my Mom, my brother and me were blue eyed and blonde haired. He stood out, unique among us. He was a softer, quieter, gentler member of the family. We tended to be loud, vivacious, and ever ready to talk, share a story, and get something going. Dad was more of a follower -- not the leader or idea generator. He was the one who listened, the one who mostly received. He wasn't completely engaged or disinterested. He just needed coaxing. When you had his attention it was full. When he smiled he beamed. His charm would shine on his face when he got excited to meet someone or greet someone he loved. He extended his hand with a big, almost exaggerated but certainly enthusiastic, warm and manly, fierce handshake. To women he was polite and often affectionate. There was nothing fake about him. He exuded a boyish delight when you made one of his favorite foods. It didn't take much, home made rice pudding, even if you made instant chocolate pudding he was deeply appreciative and ate it with gusto never leaving a trace of it behind, scraping the bowl to make sure there wasn't another fraction of a bite left. When Gramma Jean, my Southern Step Mom served him, which was always, she piled heaps of mashed potatoes, a healthy scoop of vegetables and chicken on his plate, and my Dad would watch and moan, "Jean stop that's enough!" We always knew it was coming and had to squelch our laughter. Everyone at the table waited patiently as the same exchange took place every time. Even though it was "too much" he cleaned the plate -- not to waste good food ever. The dishes didn't need much washing after he finished. And he never gained weight. That used to drive my Uncle Harvey crazy. Harvey loved to tease my Dad about how much he could eat and still be slim. Harvey loved to eat but had to watch his weight -- the source of many family jokes. My Aunt Myrna, his wife, was a skinny mini that considered a meal a mouthful of yogurt. Harvey had a tough road to climb between Myrna's watchful eye and his robust appetite. When there was a pie in the refrigerator, Harvey would leave a fork in the pie so that every time he opened the refrigerator to look for something, anything to snack on he would take another bite. When the refrigerator held too many tempting foods or not enough it was always the same plea "Myrna you're killing me!" My Dad thought it was funny. And when he laughed, he really laughed, throwing back his head and letting loose in a way that was far more uninhibited and boisterous than his usual behavior. It was always a surprise and a joy to see him laugh and let go.

Dad worked all the time, at least it seemed that way. I have very few memories of family time, trips, or even dinners together. That wasn't so unusual for family life in the 1950's and 60's. Men worked and women's lives revolved around family, children, volunteer work, part-time jobs and hobbies. All those years, 35 of them at least, he was up at 5 a.m. shaving, dressing, everything organized and planned the night before, smartly laid out, ready for the human form to slip into. As the rush of the day began and he dashed into one of his smartly tailored suits with the coordinated shirt, tie, scarf ensemble he'd slip on freshly polished shoes. Once the shoes were tied and on at 5:30am they ran through a day non-stop, often till 8pm or later in the evening. He'd timed it perfectly so he could grab a banana and run to the train headed for New York City's Grand Central Station. At the Greens Farms station he'd buy a cardboard cup of coffee and of course the New York Times. Then line up on the same spot on the platform in front of the same door that opened to the same four seater section that had his name on it for the 60-minute ride. He was such a pro that it would be unheard of to get there minutes before the train arrived. Nor would he break from the pattern that was so well orchestrated not even to consider taking an extra moment to buy a donut or muffin to accompany his coffee for the train ride. Not only was that a departure from the well constructed day but it would likely have been considered a colossal waste of precious time. When he arrived in the City he ordered a proper breakfast, always the same place, the same eggs and home fries served by waitresses that knew him by name. "Hi Monte!" He just smiled and said, "the usual," if they even asked. They loved him. Why not? Handsome, polite, sweet, consistent, easy to please, a good tipper – what's not to like? Sometimes I was actually jealous that he seemed friendlier to them, more intimate and willing to smile and engage with them than me, his own daughter. His big grin was reserved for the waitresses, the bank tellers, and the folks at the cleaners. When he smiled...when he laughed, those rare moments, it was a different man who appeared. Not the quiet man with a rigid view of his role in the world, a fixed schedule not subject to change.

There was a morning I deliberately tried to interrupt his routine. In between contractions I imagined my Dad's morning, where he was in the schedule. As I was jarred into another contraction, my thoughts would wander back to "I wonder if I'll catch Dad before he boards the train?" When I saw the hour I realized that wasn't happening. "Breathe. Relax. I can do this.... I can birth this baby now," my mind spoke those words. 15 hours of labor, not so unusual for a first baby. As I neared the 12th hour I believed I was on the cusp of releasing this baby from me into the world. From 5 am to 9 am I looked at the clock on the hospital wall at passing intervals. "Well my Dad is just waking now. Well now he's getting on the train. Won't be calling him this minute." I thought. Another hour passed "Well not now I guess." "Wow, the Lamaze teacher didn't prepare me for this." I gasped as another contraction rocked my body." At 9:02, hours after I anticipated her arrival, my baby girl Alexandra made her appearance-- healthy, beautiful, eager to nurse and join this world. My first phone call was to my Dad.

For many years I imagined what he would be like as a grandfather. It turned out he was very much like he was with me. He adored my three daughters, Alexandra, Hannah and Sophia. He wasn't the Grandpa to get down on the floor and play games with them or even know how to comfortably start a conversation. When we visited him during his

last months at the assisted living facility in New York City where he moved for his last year of life, I witnessed him holding his one month-old great granddaughter Devorah Leah. Alexandra lifted her to him as he lay in bed. Devorah Leah cuddled up to his cheek. My Dad smiled and my granddaughter Chaya Moussia, the new big sister, eagerly watched as she saw her great Grandpa experience the skin-to-skin contact of her little new born sister soft against his beard. We all watched as he inhaled the scent of a new baby and as he thankfully soaked in the love. After that moment of caressing a child 92 years his junior, acting like a young child, he hungrily devoured marshmallow after marshmallow. It's a wonder he didn't say "Enough." My granddaughter Chaya Moussia, has since gratefully taken over the custom of marshmallow eating in his honor.

The first day I met my son in law to be, Michael, we visited my Dad. As we were driving to Manhattan from Crown Heights, touched by the love I already felt for him, I was pondering how beautiful it felt that he didn't hesitate to suggest that we come together to visit my Dad. We entered his 2nd floor apartment to see him laying in bed. Until recently he had been a healthy vital 90 year old man. At 92 he was blind and frail. As I announced we were there he seemed hesitant and a bit awkward. How hard it was for him to be social when he spent much of the day, day after day alone in his room, unable to see and with very little reason to socialize. With some coaxing he was doing his best to sit up and be socialable. We sensed that even though he was glad to have company, he was already withdrawing from our world. So much so that he couldn't muster the energy or proper state of mind to attend their engagement party or wedding-- something I never thought would happen. This sadly was now the second wedding in our family he didn't attend. Thinking of Alexandra's wedding in Israel a five years before, I recall a moment, as I walked to the Chupah at Sunset. We were in the heart of the Judean Hills of Israel, where our Jewish ancestors walked, lived, worked, married, bore children. My heart already full of the emotion of the moment, marrying off my oldest and first born daughter, standing there, me and my three daughters, our arms looped through each others, the Rebbe's wedding niggun playing, my daughter Hannah whispered in my ear, "They're all here, all our relatives are looking down at us and sending blessings." In that moment, through my tears I felt their presence too.

Now, as a 64 year old woman, a wife, a mother, grandmother, I miss having my Dad around to kid, cajole and to honor in his aging days. On December 24th 2019 we buried him, at the age of 92. He struggled the previous three years after losing his wife, my step mom, Gramma Jean and losing his vision one year after loosing his spouse. It was more than most could bear. He navigated as best he could with a certain royalty and style that became him. Still, seeing his demise, seeing his body diminish and his desire to eat and interact with the world fade away is not the way I will remember him. It will always be the loving father who never lost his enthusiasm, especially when there was good news to share. His words still clear in my mind and ear: "Atta girl!"

