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In Memory of Jacob Elliott

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In Memory of Jacob Elliott

I aimed the van into Sue and Jack's driveway, an unusually warm night, the first night of March. Many were here already, cars spilled up and down the street, and the house glowed with friends carrying in cookies, leaning to hug Barry from where he sat in the chair, voices everywhere ringing with empathy.

I sat in the chair a foot across from Barry, Judy by my side leaning into him as he spoke about Jacob, how he was born, how he died. She had her hand on his shoulder, and Dinah, on the couch, was tilted toward him, listening and nodding.

By the time I stood up to check out the crowd and the food, I was amazed to see the East Lawrence old guard of what were once called "neighborhood bitches" (in memory of Shelly Miller) mixed with the Jewish center crowd, noshing together on lemon bars and juice, everyone turning occasionally to take in Barry, soak up an invisible bit of the grief.

By the time I returned to Barry, leaning on the handsome buffet bedecked with Japanese art and cards for Barry and Robin, he was starting to tell the details of Jacob's birth, and afterwards, that moment that stopped him, made him sit down. "I was afraid I would lose my wife and child at once," he said, crying.

Suddenly, the room hushed as if called to some greater purpose than the milling small talk, expressions of how terrible it is, between eating and talking with Barry. Everyone stopped and looked toward Barry, waited and listened.

He told more about the birth, and then how much Jacob did, was able to do, despite such a short life.

Sherry jumped in and asked Barry if he and Robin would try again to have children, telling them of someone who had three kids after losing one. She seemed just enough adamant that several of us exchanged “Oh-I-wish-she-would-shut-up” looks with each other. Barry explained how hard it was for Robin to get pregnant, and how after shots in the butt that hurt both of them for so long, this procedure and that, she saw her acupuncturist and then went to Bermuda (?) for more pro-bono work before coming home, taking a pause in the medical whirl of get-pregnant-against-the-odds procedures, and of course, she got pregnant. “We could tell you the hour,” he said.

He told us about how a Chabad House rabbi was leading the burial service on Thursday, and later, a Conservative rabbi would be involved, and then the memorial service led by a Reform rabbi in concert with Jewish Renewal Movement texts. How Jacob brought people together who usually never come together. “I’m very proud of him,” Barry said before telling us of Robin’s amazing friends. These friend were apparent both in the hospital after Jacob’s death when the police wanted to question Barry and Robin separately about the death, and in her office, where they raised enough already for a piece of playground equipment that would bring together children with and without disabilities.

A life only half a week long, and all the adults and children he has already and would soon bring together.

As I got in the car, I thought of Barry’s words to me as I was leaving. He said someone told them our lives are like a tapestry – one side forming a coherent and often very beautiful picture, but that’s the side we can’t ever see. We just live within sight of the backside of the tapestry, where the loose threads from sudden transitions hang.

The next morning, after Ken or I dropped off Forest at Cordley, Natalie at South Junior High, and then Daniel off at Lawrence High School, we headed toward Milton's, split some pancakes, and then got on the road to Kansas City. We weren't going to go to the burial – Ken's dad is in the hospital and has been for six weeks; we live with three kids, two of whom are in their teenage sarcasm-feeding time, we both work full-time and have been under enormous pressure lately in our jobs, and we each had long lists of reasons why we should have skipped the burial.

Yet the night before, when I met Ken near the cookies at Sue and Jack's, we looked at each other, and before I even said, "Do you think we should go to the funeral?" I knew. We were going.

It suddenly seemed more important to be there, to witness, to help shovel in the dirt. It suddenly seemed like one of the key reasons we were alive.

So we went, and thankfully, found the cemetery – in a part of the city where we hadn't been before – and then the Shalinsky graves, and then the open rectangular hole for Jacob. It was deep, carefully dug, waiting. Standing with the others in the sun and wind, warmth and cold together, I watched others gather, wait, try not to cry or cry so hard.

Neil came carrying the coffin, longer than I thought it would be, but narrow and simple. I wondered if the baby was cushioned in there in some way. Then I realized there was a baby in there, and my heart broke just a tiny bit wider. As the mother of three children, two of whom we almost lost at various times, I know that gap that can open in the earth, and how just imagining losing a child is imagining the unbearable like no other

unbearable. There can be no greater loss, no greater grief. Yet the people who walk this territory of grief do keep walking, and Barry and Robin are now among them.

We saw Barry, in a suit with his cap on, walking slowly. He was swallowed up by the crowd, hugged by one person after another, crying everywhere. I watched him cry with a woman and her two daughters, all holding each other. Then he was within hugging distance of Ken and I, so we cozied up to where someone was finishing a hug, and waited our turn.

The rabbi was young, dapper with unusually small feet. He stood by the open rectangle in the ground and read Jacob's psalm, the first one, about resisting evil. He told us that sometimes a soul is so pure that when he comes into the world, he finishes his work in just a few days and returns to Ha-shem, and then to the next place, a place that sounds like heaven but was hard to name without erasing it.

The men from the cemetery carefully lowered the coffin into the ground with great tenderness and accuracy. Soon we couldn't see the top of the box, so far down it was, from where we stood in the circle. I felt Barry breaking, and I reached out and held his hand tightly as he tightly held mine. As the sister to a brother named Barry, I have felt like every other Barry I've met in my life (although they're rare) is my brother, and at this moment, I felt that intensely.

The rabbi read Barry's psalm, the 52ⁿ one, and then Robin's, the 41st one, and talked about how these words spoke of them and the work they do for the world in their lives. He told what Barry had spoken of before, how Jacob (Yakov) Elliott (Eliyahu) was named after grandparents and Robin's sister, a bevy of Jakes, Jacobs, Eleanors,

Esthers, Ellens and the like. I thought of how his short life held so much of the spirit of all those who went before him.

Then Barry said people keep asking what they do for him and Robin, and here's what we can do: we can love our children even more, listen to them, spend time with them, and most of all, learn from them. Ken and I looked at each other, both of us falling into easy arguments with our 16-year-old son lately. We knew the ease of that conflict wasn't where we wanted to be. "Learn from them," I thought and keep thinking, grateful to Barry for this reminder, for this vision.

Soon it was time to shovel the dirt onto the grave, and Barry picked up the shovel. The sound of the dirt hitting the wooden box is one of the most ancient and haunting sounds I know, one that calls right to the deepest cries in us. Soon we were taking the shovel and dropping in the dirt. A few people at first, and then most of the people, and some again. I took the shovel from Bill the balloon man and carefully dropped in seven shovels of dirt, seven being the luckiest number I know. Ken took the shovel and put in many more. Barry took the shovel again, and then others, and then Ken again, and soon the grave was full.

The grave was full, our hearts were full...of life even if of its saddest manifestations. Our hearts are empty too, and somewhere in Tampa, there's a crib or cradle empty. I remember when our oldest son, Daniel, was born, and there was something wrong with him, wrong enough that he was whisked to intensive care for a week from the birthing center. And walked into our house to get a few things for our time with Daniel at the hospital after the long birth. Seeing the baby clothes and crib and diapers brought me to my knees in agony at that moment, crying so hard that the upstairs

tenant, who usually disliked me intensively, rushed downstairs and gathered me in her arms. To be home without the baby in my arms.

I think of Robin right now in Tampa, healing from her so outrageously hard and long pregnancy and birth. I think of Barry in Kansas City or on his way home. And I wish for them with all my heart and soul and might that the empty places they meet in their home and beyond are met with a fullness of love and prayer surrounding and holding them. I wish for the deepest healing to meet this deepest loss.