

“She Might Have Been a Rebbe...”

An Uncle's *Hesped* for Judith Young

BY NORMAN LAMM



Photo courtesy of
Rabbi Avrumy Jordan

Still staggering from the trauma of the dreadful news of the demise of my niece, Judy Young, I find myself unable to adequately offer either my feelings of bereavement or an evaluation of her short but full life. My initial reaction is to quote Kohelet: “*Vehinei dimat ha’ashukim ve’ein lahem men-achem*, Behold the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter” (4:1).

You, I, we—all feel robbed, violated, devastated by Judy’s sudden death. And the pain is so great, that there is no consolation.

But if I can’t find my own words, let me imagine what Judy would say to eulogize herself. Knowing her attitude and her exceedingly firm *bitachon*, I believe she would say:

Don’t cry over me! The Ribbono Shel Olam has been so good to me. He gave me distinguished parents who granted me

inspiration and space to grow true to my own nature.

I married a hero of Yiddishkeit; a prince of love, of decency, of devotion and a genuine talmid chacham and educator. We had a wonderful life together, and he was my chavruta as well.

I beat back the Malach Hamavet several times after the doctors had despaired of my recovery. They warned me,

as a young wife, that I would never be able to bear a child. But the Ribbono Shel Olam had His own plans, and I was blessed with seven outstanding children—all loyal to Torah, talmud Torah and gemilut chasadim. In the words of the Navi, “Rani akarah lo yaladah, pitzchirinah vetzahali, Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy” (Isaiah 54:1). In my

Judith Young passed away this past August at the age of fifty. She had been the former Torah studies principal at Machon Academy, a high school for Bukharian girls in Queens, New York, and the founder and director of Machon Bena, a learning program for women in Forest Hills, New York. The daughter of Rabbi and Mrs. Maurice Lamm of North Woodmere, New York, Judith was a much-sought after inspirational speaker, lecturing for prominent *kiruv* institutions including Aish HaTorah, Ohr Somayach, Gateways and Neve Yerushalayim. Working tirelessly in outreach and education with her husband, Rabbi Yitzchok, Judith established *kiruv* programs and built strong relationships with her students in Los Angeles, Atlanta and, most recently, New York. A devoted wife and mother, Judith is survived by her husband and seven children.

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battle for life, I won! So celebrate my life with me! Of course, there will be tears and you'll miss me—but remember always to be thankful to the Almighty on my behalf for all the chesed He showed me.

Judy was a rare individual: she was a born leader—intelligent, energetic, strong-willed, single-minded to the point of stubbornness, charismatic and endowed with a powerful personality, which made her such an inspiring teacher and innovative educator (whether or not one agreed with her educational philosophy) who influenced the lives of hundreds and brought them closer to *Torah umitzvot*.

And to think that all that primordial energy and that talent and that long record of achievement—all thrived in one short and fragile frame! How did she manage to pack all that superior ability and creativity into barely fifty years?

People noticed that as the Chofetz Chaim grew older, he increased his activity in the study of Torah and

chesed. When asked to explain this phenomenon, he offered the following parable: Life, he said, is like a postcard. At first you write in large, bold strokes and indulge in pedestrian commonplaces—“How are you? I wish you were here,” and similar platitudes. But as you come closer to the end of the postcard and realize there is precious little space left for the really important message you want to deliver, you begin to write in packed sentences, with no superfluous words. Life, he concluded, is like that postcard: The older I get, the more concentrated must my activity become and be focused only on that which truly counts.

That, to my mind, was both the conscious efforts Judy made never to waste a moment, and her unconscious awareness of the shortness of life. Judy was an unusually effective pedagogue; she was also a gifted organizer. She not only established but she administered schools and *chesed* institutions worldwide. Both by native inclination and by

the experience of possibly imminent mortality, she shunned *bittul Torah*. She heeded scrupulously the teaching of Rabbi Eliezer: “*Shuv yom echad lifnei mitatchah*, Repent one day before your death” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:15). Thus it was that Judy became such a popular teacher and achiever who succeeded in her life-long ambition to fulfill the words of the Sages: “*Ehov et habriot umikarvan laTorah*.” She was indeed a first-rate *marbitzah Torah* whose energy flowed from her profound *bitachon*.

I often think of Judy: what if she were born a male instead of a female? I am convinced that if she were born male, she would have been a *rosh yeshivah*. On second thought, not a *rosh yeshivah* but a *rebbe*, who would command the loyalty of hundreds of Chassidim, who would teach not only by words but by example of love and of *chesed* and *ma'asim tovim*, guiding her Chassidim in all facets of their lives, perhaps even to the point of receiving *kevitzlach*. That was the kind of personality she had.

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People say that Judy was *frum*, and indeed her piety was genuine. But I believe she was possessed of a very special kind of *frumkeit*—piety.

Let me explain with a sharp insight of the famous Gerrer Rebbe, the Sefat Emet. Why, he asked, do we not recite a *berachah* when we perform the mitzvah of *tzedakah*? Actually, the greatest of the halachic sages dealt with the question and came up with a number of relevant answers. But the Gerrer Rebbe maintains that the reciting of a blessing before giving alms to the poor fellow standing before me creates a *mechitzah*, or barrier, between me and the recipient of my largesse. The Torah wants me to relate to the needy person as to a subject, not an object—a human being with his own dignity and importance, and not merely an excuse or medium for me to perform a mitzvah and thus enhance my religious experience. The blessing, however important and conscientiously performed, is still incomplete if it interferes with human dignity, *kavod habriyot*, and the very human relationship between me and my fellow man.

That is what was so different, so sensitive, so special about Judy's *shemirat hamitzvot*. Judy didn't use people, even for a mitzvah. If the recitation of a blessing would result in transforming your fellow "human" into a "thing," better skip the *berachah*.

Her foresight led her to plan for her children to be self-sufficient. She taught them to be independent just in case she had to leave for an extended period. But that wise intuition will serve as well at giving them the worldly wisdom of working for themselves and their family.

Any loss of a life is a catastrophe for the mourners, but none is so thoroughly distressing and unbearable as the loss of one's child. In the Psalm we read during Elul, David laments the demise of his parents *en passant*, just mentioning it without much comment: "*Ki avi ve'immi azavuni vaHashem ya'asfeini*, My father and mother have left me but God takes care of me"

(Tehillim 27:10). The loss of a parent is most unfortunate, but it is part of nature, and consolation can be sought and successfully received.


But the same David, confronted by the dying child that Batsheva bore to him, falls apart in grief. So bitter is his grief, so disconcerting his conduct, so extravagant is his mourning that his courtiers fear for his sanity.

In the case of the loss of a parent, there certainly is pain and suffering, but there is a limit to it; it does not exceed human endurance. Not so the loss of a child. Nothing can compare to it.

So, to my brother and sister-in-law—what can I or anyone say to you to assuage your pain? Parents who raised a child through all the dangers and mishaps of childhood, who nursed her through dreadful diseases, who raised her as a role model for thousands, only to lose her at the height of her adulthood? Any words of comfort I can attempt will sound puerile and insensitive. You knew her longer than anyone else. You gave her love, care, worry, anxiety, pride—and the *chinuch* out of which she developed her ambition to live a life of Torah and holiness. And you invested in her your love and devotion, your dreams for a future that would be sated with *nachat*.

A personal word to my brother: I can't—no one can—comfort you. You are the leading expert in the field, one who has written with scholarship and compassion about death and mourning. Thousands upon thousands have sought relief from their suffering in your books and your lectures. No one can properly be *menachem* you. So—you must console yourself and your wife.

So, I am back to where I started: "*Vebinei dimat ha'ashukim ve'ein lahem menachem.*"

I can only conclude with the wise words of Beruriah as she presented to her husband, Rabbi Meir, the lifeless bodies of their two sons: "The Almighty gave us a *pikadon* to watch over and protect; but sooner or later we must return the gift to Him." 

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