

Chapter Fourteen

For someone who has been a full-time caretaker for any period of time, death brings the added disorientation of losing not only one's loved one, but also one's job. After the death and the *shivah*, the matter of moving forward looms large. I could feel it rumbling inside of me, but at the same time, I realized that my responsibilities vis-à-vis my mother were far from complete. There was much still to do on the practical level and, beyond that, there was the very real work of grieving awaiting me. During the time my mother was dying, I knew she was the one being tested. She rose to the occasion and handled herself admirably. Though it was hard for me, I knew that my test would begin where hers left off. It would be in the days and months following her death when I would be challenged.

While she was dying we were still together. We had our combined strength to call upon, and it was formidable. She set

the tone. Her upbeat, positive, fearless stance provided a framework within which I could give the very best of myself. It was that same unwavering position on life that had continually frustrated me that in the end sustained both of us through what could have been a very difficult and unpleasant period. Instead, it was uplifting and inspiring.

Not since early childhood had I joined her so willingly in her reality. And now she was gone. I stood alone in my own reality, changed by the experience of caring for her in ways that I didn't yet understand. There was much to look at, to feel, and to work through before I would be ready to head back out into the world. And there was still much to do on the practical level. I asked Hashem for the strength to do all that I needed to do in the inner and outer realms. I knew that I was blessed to have the time to handle this transition so consciously, something I hadn't been able to do after my father and sister died. And I trusted that, ready or not, this next chapter would grow me in new ways again.

The first thing I had to do was to take care of all the administrative tasks that follow in the wake of a death. The paperwork that tyrannizes our lives doesn't end with the grave. Everything a person has set up for herself has to be dismantled. Credit cards, memberships, and subscriptions have to be canceled. Death certificates have to be sent out to insurers. Accounts have to be closed. Various government agencies have to be notified. And, of course, every company and organization invariably has different requirements as to what is needed. So there are lots of calls to make and letters to write, each one ratifying the death and underlining the new reality that much more. I was unwinding my mother's life, dispensing with all of her connections to the outer world. None of these things had meaning where she was now.

By this time, too, I had received many notes of condolence and contributions in my mother's memory, and I wanted to write thank you notes for them and for all the kindness that had been bestowed during the months of illness and the *shivah*. The thought of doing all of this entirely on my own was daunting. And that was only the beginning. The whole house, stuffed to the gills with decades of life, had to be gone through and emptied out. I wondered how I could possibly do it all. Yet there was no one else. Somehow, I was going to have to tap reserves within me that I couldn't then even feel. The best I could tell myself was to take it slowly, to identify one small thing to do, do it, and then move on to the next. At some point it would all be done.

Telling myself those words reminded me of a story I had heard years before about a boy who had been given a project by his teacher to write a report about all the species of birds in their area. The boy had been overwhelmed by the task. Not knowing where to start, he put it off for days. Finally, shortly before the project was due, he worked up the courage to tell his father his dilemma and ask for help. The father was quiet for a moment and then he put his arm around his son and said to him, "Bird by bird son. That's the only way to do this. Bird by bird."

Thinking about that advice in the context of clearing out my mother's house, I decided to pick one room and start with one drawer in that room. I told myself that all I needed to think about and do for the moment was that one drawer. When it was finished, when I had sorted through its contents, keeping what I wanted and either discarding what I didn't want or earmarking it for disposal by some other means, I would go on to the next. I wouldn't even think about anything besides the one drawer which, of course, seemed very manageable. My body relaxed as I freed myself from thinking about the enormity of the task in

its entirety. What was the point? The only way to do it was bird by bird. And that's what I did.

I looked at everything — every photograph, every letter, every scrap of paper. I didn't want to miss any part of the story that might lie hidden in a closet or box. I knew from going through my sister's things after her death, that there is a level of knowing, an intimacy of sorts, that happens in the process of sorting the belongings of a loved one who has died. There is no other time when we have access to all the stuff of a person's life at one time. We don't even encounter ourselves with this level of totality, except perhaps when preparing to move, and then it's easy to just throw things in boxes without really looking at them.

Here was a chance to study my mother's life beyond her relationship with me, beyond her role as mother; to see her world through her eyes. All the things that mattered to her, that she considered valuable and important, were gathered in one place. The books she had read, the music she listened to, the keepsakes she had treasured, the quotes she had bothered to write down, her recipes, the cards she had kept, the names in her address books, and on and on. A collage of her life, and to some extent my father's and sister's, laid out before me. Though sad that my sister wasn't there to do it with me, I felt fortunate that I could take the time to go through it all. There was something healing in the process, some way of reliving and then letting go of the past.

There was also something redemptive. By going through all of my mother's things systematically, I was redeeming what couldn't happen for her with her own mother from whom she was so brutally separated, never to see her or anything of hers again. I had the opposite experience — able to be with my

mother as she died and to lovingly go through her things, taking care that each found its right address. This chance for *tikkun* felt like an enormous blessing as well.

My friends who knew what I was doing joked with me when they called, and asked what decade I had been in that day. Especially when I went through all the photo albums, some of which contained photos so old and tiny that I had to use a magnifying glass to get a good look at them, I would feel transported to earlier times and experience them as if they were happening now. There was something comforting about being immersed in the history of my family at the same time that I was adjusting to the reality of being the only member still alive. It was as though I was shoring up my memories, reminding myself of all that had been even as I prepared to go forward without any of it. What would be left of the past would be what lived on inside of me. In a sense, as I was reviewing and culling through my mother's things, I was also reviewing and culling through my family's story. The process was giving me another vantage point from which to view and understand my origins.

But some days the whole thing felt more like a mundane and tiresome task that I couldn't wait to finish. There were so many everyday things to dispose of. Also, my mother had collected things in her life and on her travels that over the years had increased in value. I didn't want to squander assets, yet I didn't want to get bogged down in selling them. Before doing anything, I carefully picked out items to give to her friends and relatives to remember her by. I had done this with my sister's things as well and it gave me — and them — great pleasure. I liked knowing that something that my mother or sister had enjoyed now graced the home of someone close to them. I knew they lived on in all of these people's hearts, but somehow, having something tangible of theirs in all of these places added

another dimension that was significant for me.

I also appreciated those of my mother's things that I was keeping for myself. When I would wear a skirt or blouse or jacket of hers, I somehow felt her with me more. That also happened when I would wear a piece of her jewelry. Even some of her *chotchkes* that I used to tease her about and suggest she stop collecting took on new meaning. As I looked at each one, trying to decide what to do with it, I came to appreciate the workmanship that had gone into many of them. There really were some beautiful pieces. I could see why she had liked them, and I surprised myself by keeping more of them than I ever thought I would.

When she had been physically present, none of these things interested me or spoke to me. But now that she was gone, they were a tie of sorts to her and to the home I had known all my life. It was one thing to have a life stripped of all these things while she was still alive and living her life that included them. It was quite another to leave them all permanently behind. I wasn't ready to do that. I realized that in this realm, too, I was incorporating aspects of my mother into myself.