

Eulogy for Dr. Marvin Baumol, נ"ה

Norman Lamm/October 27, 1998

When I last saw Muni some 48 hours ago--and I may have been the last of his family and friends to see him alive--I expressed my regret at having failed to get to know him during all these intervening years between his youth and his recent fatal illness. I acknowledge that regret now, publicly. Perhaps more of us should have paid more attention to him. For there was more to him than I imagined, and some incremental uncritical love might have salvaged more of his *neshamah* and given him a greater sense of fulfillment.

Like every other human being, Muni was possessed by both demons and angels. His demons were ordinary, unexceptional. His angels, however, were special.

The Israeli poet Natan Alterman, writing of Azriel Carlebach, said: יזכר נא ויוגד, כי "Let it be remembered and told that his faults were the common lot of many of us, whereas his virtues were his alone." In his weaknesses, Muni was a child of his times. But his qualities were indeed superb: a straight and undeviating decency, a ישרות; good natured; giving; forgiving to those who injured him; a loyal friend, almost to a fault; and a great lover of life--witness his heroic struggle for twelve years against the foul illness which ultimately triumphed over him.

Muni was so very grateful, even for the least difficult of favors performed for him. He was appreciative of any kindness extended to him. He was a sweet person, sometimes almost child-like in his devotion and הכרת הטוב. He gave himself a nick-name: *Drimmeleh*, Yiddish for a short nap. Perhaps he thought that that summarized his life: a short *drimmel*, and all is over...

Muni refused to burden anyone. He hated to impose on people. When I saw him this past Sunday evening, I recited וידוי with him and spent some time with him. I hated to leave, because I knew he was dying, but was unable to stay since I did not know when the hour of יציאת נשמה would take place. He recognized my dilemma and whispered to me, "Don't feel you have to stay. You've been here long enough. Go home now."

Permit me to speak openly about the spiritual dimension of Muni's life. I feel that he was always honest, perhaps painfully so, and it is appropriate and right to be open and honest about him.

Muni strayed from his ancestral heritage and the ways of his distinguished family. He was emotionally and religiously confused. The demons I spoke of were not full grown; they were underdeveloped, pre-adolescent demons--and they tormented him. But his angels were hewn from an ancient source, and they were glorious. They issued from deep within him, and bore traces of their hoary origin in the long line of saints and sages who preceded him. These Muni-angels resonated with an אמונה, a faith that he could never define. In that sense, Muni was a truly spiritual personality, something he himself probably failed to recognize. Let me reveal to you a startling conversation I had with him shortly before his demise, one that so impressed me that

I recorded it as soon as I came home. This occurred on Wednesday, September 23, the day before Rosh Hashanah.

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I visited him today in Calvary Hospital, and found him in expectedly poor condition. He is completely lucid, but somewhat depressed-- a normal response, considering his grave illness.

I told him that I wanted to talk with him about serious matters--matters of life and death, of destiny and purpose, etc. He told me immediately, "But I'm not religious." I said: so what, these are matters of ultimate concern and you can't just brush them off. He conceded that he was troubled by these questions for a long time, and tried several alternate routes--such as meditation--but none proved satisfactory, so he chucked the whole thing and stopped thinking about them.

I pressed him: now that you're in such grave situation, and you complain that life for months in the hospital is so boring--just eat and sleep--try thinking again about that which is beyond the physical and the emotional. Think of the spiritual--a whole realm of experience that is waiting to be summoned and tried.

He then confided in me about an experience he had some time ago--I do not know exactly when. It was a dream--he forgot the word for the experience, but I suspect he intended "a revelation"--that burns brightly in his mind. He was together with someone--he does not think it was anyone he knew--and he suddenly beheld a presence, not a clear figure, of intense brightness and purity, of unconditional love and beauty. It was overwhelming. "I knew that I was face to face with God--and He didn't ask to be praised or anything, He just radiated love, pure love and light and sweetness." Then the apparition vanished, and Muni has been trying to regain that experience and return to it since then--unsuccessfully. It is frustrating for him to the point of breaking his heart. His eyes gushed with tears while this narrative was being delivered. I had to leave the room while he composed himself.

When I returned, I told him, "And after this story you tell me you're not religious?!" I maintained that he could return to this high point of his spiritual life, that he was privileged by the נ"צ"ל to be granted such a defining experience, but that even in the spiritual life "there are no free lunches." He is fortunate that he was granted a חזון of such an uplifting experience--one which he told me was the true high point of all his years--but he should not expect a repeat performance just because he wanted it.

What, he asked, can I do while I'm bedridden? I told him that although he knows how critically ill he is, he should indulge himself in a creative fiction: act *as if* you're going to recover, and commit your self to Him that you will change for the better--whatever and however that is. (I purposely refrained from outlining a תשובה process...) . All I said that was openly and explicitly Jewish was that he might try saying וידוי and that while he felt he had no guidance as to what to do now, and he wanted to do things "my own way," I offered that 3500 years of experience should not be jettisoned without a second thought, and that this accumulated experience should be enormously valuable to him in re-contacting the epiphany that so moved him. He did not reply--neither accepting my suggestions nor rejecting them. He would think about it.

He was weary by the conversation and said it was getting "too heavy" for him. Several times--before, during, and after this dialogue--I told him I was not out to "convert" him or preach to him and that if he caught me doing so he should stop me at once. "If I wanted you to stop, I would tell you to bug off." That he did not do so is significant.

The next conversation took place five days later, the day before Erev Yom Kippur:

We talked about family--his, mine, ours--and I mentioned again how overwhelmed I was at what he told me concerning his "vision." I told him I was keeping notes on the conversation, and asked him if I was permitted to disclose the content of our talks at any appropriate occasion. His response was affirmative, almost enthusiastically so. He wanted it to be known by his family and his dear friends.

As we talked, he began to cry again and said that whenever he spoke with me, that was his reaction. I apologized to him for causing him grief and he said, No, these are not tears of sadness--and I expressed my appreciation. *The angels in him, angles latent in his soul for generations, angels marvelous and mysterious, were being miraculously evoked and came to life...*

I wished him well for Yom Kippur, and told him that he now can eat on the holy day without guilt feelings. I did not know what to expect, but his reaction was surprise that that was so, that he fully expected and even *wanted* to fast. However, I told him that he must get his doctor's approval and that it was a mitzvah for him to eat/drink if that was what the doctor ordered.

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This Shabbat we read of the first revelation to our Father Abraham, who was told to wander to an unknown destination, leaving behind his land, his birthplace, his family: לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך. The Sages of the Mishnah declared this commandment one of the ten great trials (עשרה נסיונות) to which he was subjected and which he withstood and emerged triumphant. If that is what the Sages said, we accept it. But I believe that great as the trial was for Abraham, it was a ten-fold more difficult test for those of his land and birthplace and family. Consider what *they* lost--a patriarch, a prophet, a man of God, a giant of history.

Muni's death is a נסיון for all of us. We shall miss him, perhaps mostly because we know we should have been closer to each other.

His was not an easy, luxurious, fulfilling life. What consolation can we possibly offer--even were it appropriate to offer condolence over his fresh casket--to his grieving father, his desperately sick mother, his only brother and sister? Only this: remember the angels, *his* angels. They are his legacy.

And may he and they be מליצי יושר, angels of mercy pleading before the divine Throne of Glory for the health and serenity of his parents, his siblings, and his family and friends.

תהא נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים