

WILLIAM FRANK

In the words of Job (3:25): "The one thing which I did fear is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of hath overtaken me."

All of us knew that sooner or later this would happen. Yet, the anticipation is no consolation, the pain is no less sharp, the bereavement no less grievous.

On the contrary, we all feel devastated. The Talmud taught that if one of a group dies, the other members of the group worry. Indeed, if such is the lot of one so strong, so vital, so superior, how secure can the rest of us be? We know now that we live our lives on the thin rim of the deep abyss, suspended by gossamer threads of unknown durability.

Our first reaction to the death of Zev Frank -- or, as he was known to us in our youth, as Willy -- was: what a waste! What great achievements could have been his in the world of mathematics and science, what glory he could have shed upon our people! And indeed it is a tragic waste. Yet, let us by no means overstate it. For although Willy passed away young, at the age of 46, he used his few years creatively, constructively, and productively -- in his research, in the enlightenment he brought to others, in the joy he spread around him, and above all in the beautiful family he leaves behind.

This day, the day that Willy Frank expired and returned his soul to his Maker, is the last day of the Hebrew month of Tevet. Tomorrow is the first day of a new month -- Rosh Hodesh Shevat. The first day of Shevat is mentioned once in the Torah. In the beginning of Deuteronomy, we learn that Moses had already finished giving the Torah and he now begins to repeat and to review it. "... In the eleventh month, on the first day of the month (i.e., Rosh Hodesh Shevat)... Moses began to expound this Torah" (Deut. 1:3,5). First he gave the Torah, and then he commenced its elaboration -- the Mishneh Torah.

The living Torah of Willy is done. Now we shall begin the Mishneh Torah of his life. Now we shall not only not forget him, Heaven forbid, but we shall begin to review and assess and ponder and contemplate and interpret and comment

on the Torah of his life. Now we shall have to digest the meaning he had for us, and of which we were neither completely aware nor sufficiently appreciative while he walked amongst us. My few words today are but the first meager attempt to sketch a tentative outline of this Mishneh Torah of his life.

All of us know that Willy was brilliant. I wonder if we appreciate the extent of his genius, or how early it began to manifest itself. I first met him when we both lived in Williamsburg. I was 16 and he was a bit under 14. He took me to his home on Wilson Street, and there showed me two papers which he had written over a year earlier. I still remember the childish scrawl in which they were written. One was his analysis of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity and the other was a running commentary on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason -- all this, before his Bar Mitzvah! As he grew up, he expanded the areas of his interest, and made a virtue of virtuosity. He excelled, of course, in mathematics and physics, but he was no stranger to language, to philosophy, to music, to history. Of course, he loved Tenakh -- which he knew exceedingly well -- and he was an astute student of Rabbi Soleveichik in Talmud. Whichever school he attended -- from Torah Vodaath to Chofetz Chaim, from Yeshiva University to MIT, he won the admiration of his peers and the respect of his teachers. I do not think that he ever bothered to take a single note during his entire college career. I can still remember how he walked in, sleepy and late, into a class in advanced physics, and the professor -- a distinguished physicist -- began to tremble and repeatedly inquire, "Mr. Frank, am I right? Do you agree? Have I made a mistake?"

What did he mean to me and to his other friends? How did we react to the presence of this superior mind in our midst?

He was, above all, a source of inspiration. We admired his mind, but we never begrudged Willy the respect it brought him. There was no trace of rivalry, certainly not of enmity, because he was simply too lovable for that. He softened the statement of the Sages (B.B. 21a) that "The jealousy of scholars



increaseth wisdom." He helped us increase our wisdom without forcing us to resort to collegial jealousy and the envy of contemporaries. In a group of people all of whom aspired to intellectual eminence, his preeminence was for us a source not of competition but of pride. Despite the fact that we were all about the same age, we simply derived "nachas" from his achievements and his yet greater promise.

It could not be otherwise, for he was a man of utter goodness. It was not uncommon for him to stay up a whole night in order to help some fellow student to prepare for his examinations. He would not know how to hurt anyone even if he would want to, and it would never occur to him to want to do so. He was a genuinely pious, God-fearing Jew. He had a special charm, which was probably the result of his transparent and buoyant boyishness, which continued undiminished even as he became an adult -- a boyishness which was clean and good and benevolent.

He brought to life, and to his environment, an irrepressible sense of humor. He was uproarious in his use of intricate and outrageous, but always scintillatingly brilliant, puns -- a symptom of how his incisive mind was keenly aware of the disjunctiveness of existence and the pretentiousness of people, and also of the novelty and surprise and openness of life itself. If we had to choose a slogan for Willy's youth, it would have been: LEARN AND LAUGH!

To this we may add, as he grew up, a third element, Love. How genuinely happy he was when he met and then married Ruth! What a great dimension in added to his life! It truly fulfilled him. And how happy were we, his friends, at this fabulous match. We knew that great things were in store for them, and we knew too that the children of such a couple were destined for greatness.

But Willy was also subject to suffering. His life was not easy. He came from a family of extremely modest circumstances. His father, for whose health and consolation we all pray, was a very hard-working man. Willy's mother died in his infancy, and he was raised by an equally hard-working, deeply devoted and loving step-mother.

He was close to his parents, as he was to his brother Irving, his sister Ida, and his niece Ivriah. But his brilliance was such that it was not always appreciated by his elders. His room, which was always filled with laughter, the clash of ideas, and a sense of purpose, could not by any stretch of the imagination be called luxurious. He endured early poverty, adolescent confusion -- and then this dreadful illness to which he finally succumbed. Yet, until this last dreadful attack upon his body and his emotions and his mind, Willy emerged with his faith intact.

Perhaps it is most appropriate to apply to him the words he used in describing Father Abraham. In an essay about Abraham which we hope to publish in the near future, Willy wrote:

Uprooted many times, threatened with the loss of his loved ones or their patronage, the emotional and spiritual *raison d'etre* of Abraham was not negated by such reverses. The combination of his ideological commitment and his tenacity, his ability to affirm the worthiness and purpose of life under every kind of personal reversal, were the qualities which recommended Abraham as God's Chosen One. They were also the attributes of His Chosen People whom He would generate from the loins of Abraham and the womb of Sarah.

What sustained him during these last terrible six to seven years? And what, during the nine or ten years before that, gave him a heightened sense of purpose, fulfillment, and resoluteness? There is only one answer: Ruth, in her quiet and matter-of-fact heroism. I will say this in Ruth's presence, although I fear it may offend her sense of modesty and propriety, because I feel that it is important for the rest of us. She taught all of us something about heroism without dramatics. She taught us all about loyalty in the face of superhuman -- and inhuman -- challenges. She told us something about the devotion of a wife who, during these last seven or eight months, would visit Willy in the nursing home daily, and walk many miles on Shabbat, even while she kept up fully her role as a mother, giving her children all the advantages of normalcy, practicing hospitality and keeping an open home -- and continuing to work and to teach! She taught those of us who may be more simplistic in our religious conceptions, that angels do not have to have wings. And she



taught those of us who pretend to more sophistication, that angels do not have to be pure spirit, that they can take on flesh and blood, the form of a young woman going about her daily activities with patience and humor.

One of the greatest Kabbalists of all time, Rabbi Isaac Luria, of blessed memory, taught that just as the body has specific organs, so does the soul have the same number of organs. There are evarei ha-nefesh corresponding to the evarei ha-guf. The latter, the physical organs, may not survive, but the former always do.

Now, Willy's physical organs have all given out. It was a slow and torturous process. His eyes gave, his voice... and now he has succumbed entirely. But his spiritual gestalt will endure for all time, and the organs of his soul will forever remain healthy and strong and vital.

I cannot conclude without addressing a few words, publicly, to his three very lovely children, to Naavah and Avital and Deborah. All that I have said is really directed to you. As one who knew your father for so much longer than you did, permit me the privilege of saying this to you: your father, as you have known him for the last six years, is not really the way you should remember him. As you grow older and begin to ponder the man he was and might have been, as you read what he wrote and hear from others the creative insights of his genius and the incidents of his remarkable goodness, you will come to appreciate a different kind of William Frank. The real William Frank, the enduring picture of your father that should always be with you, was that of a great, warm, intimate, lovable, vital, powerful man, a father with a brilliant mind and a great heart and a wonderful soul, a moral and intellectual giant. That is the father whom you will regain as, in the course of the years, the picture of your healthy and happy father will overcome the memories of the last few and bitter years.

In the words of the Prophet in tomorrow's Hafotrah: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and in Jerusalem will you be comforted" (Isaiah 66:13).