

# Tzedakah (2011)

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Even all these years later, I can still see Ray Valensky's face the way it looked through the cut glass window in our front door as he stood outside and watched nervously as I walked down the hallway towards him.

Robbie Valensky was on the same Little League baseball team as our son Benjamin and their Lilly played soccer with our daughter Rebecca, so it was not *that* unusual for either of the Valensky parents to drop by the house unannounced to drop off something one of our kids had left behind or to retrieve something one of their kids had left at our place. But the evening Aaron died was certainly not the kind of night that anyone would just drop in for an unexpected visit no matter what anyone had left behind in someone else's home. For one thing, it had been snowing all day in Prestigunquit and the snow, which had been expected to taper off towards evening was, if anything, becoming worse. I myself had been home for hours, busying myself with house work and half expecting Aaron to phone at any moment to announce his intention to spend the night in Manhattan. If I force myself to try to remember, I think I must have been supposing that he was going to crash at his friend John's apartment in Soho rather than take a chance on the train. It would have made sense. I myself would have stayed over in town if I had a friend with an available sofa. But the bottom line, especially in retrospect, was that I hadn't heard from him. I had tried his number a few times, of course, but it had gone straight to voice mail. But even that hadn't struck me as especially ominous. It was snowing. Cell phone service this far out on the North Fork isn't great at the best of times. That I couldn't reach him by phone, therefore, didn't seem too worrisome. Frankly, even once the doorbell had rung and I knew that Ray Valensky had come around for *some* reason—I do distinctly remember looking out our bedroom window down at the street, still totally clueless, and seeing the cruiser parked at the curb—even when I saw the cruiser I *still* hadn't the faintest premonition of trouble to come. I vaguely recall thinking that if Ray had come out on a night like this to tell me in person that the girls' practice for that Sunday was cancelled due to the weather then he was even crazier than Aaron always said he was. Probably, I told myself far more rationally, Nancy just wanted him to borrow some eggs or a quart of milk. What else could have brought him out in person? Well, I told myself as I approached the door, I'd know soon enough. As it happened, I did have plenty of both in the house, more than enough to share.

He told me quickly and, unlike on television, without telling me first that he had something to tell me. When I finally registered what he was saying and asked what hospital Aaron was in, Ray answered simply that he was at Saint Vincent's. I guess it must have been obvious that I still hadn't really heard what it was he was trying to say, however, since that was when he took my hands in his and repeated himself even more clearly. "He's at Saint Vincent's, Sarah," he said softly. "But he's not a patient there. He was D.O.A. and it's his body that's in the hospital's morgue. I wish I could tell you to rush down there and to hope for the best, but there isn't any best to hope for. He's dead, Sarah. And they're waiting for someone to tell them what to do with the body. The normal procedure would be for an autopsy to happen almost automatically, but I think you can probably talk them out of it. Look, he was hit with one single bullet and the bullet was recovered at the scene. So what do they need to cut him open for? To find out that he was killed when somebody shot a bullet into his heart? I mean, they're *always* supposed to do an autopsy when the deceased is a victim of a violent crime, but I know they bend the rules sometimes. Just get every rabbi in the tri-state area to phone in and insist." He paused, then spoke again. "And you insist too, Sarah. They'll listen to you."

I was only vaguely listening to him. He was talking away. My hands were in his. The television was clearly audible from the den and the smell of roast chicken was wafting over our heads out onto the street. But I was a million miles away in a secret place, in *my* secret place, in the crawl space behind the eaves of my parents' house in Larchmont. That was my hiding place, the secret spot I could always run to when I was in trouble or scared. It was there, lying in that narrow space, that I had first read Anne Frank's diary as a girl. If only the Franks had had such a great place to hide in, I used to think.

When I looked up, Ray had finally stopped speaking. Later, he surprised me by commenting that I had a look on my face that he could only qualify as serene. (I wouldn't have thought Ray would even know the word, let alone be able to use it correctly in a sentence.) But I was wrong about that. I was, it turned out, wrong about a lot of things. And I'm willing to suppose that it may well have been obvious that there was a certain noticeable calm mixed in with the first stirrings of grief, a certain satisfaction borne of true love that can only have been flowing directly from the realization—it really is amazing how many different lines of thinking your brain can follow at once if the shock is sufficiently great—*directly* and *not illogically* from the realization that my dear Aaron was finally safe, that nothing could harm him or scare him ever again, that Aaron's life-long fears of dying in a pogrom or in a gas chamber or in a hastily dug execution ditch had come to nothing. He was gone, I was thinking, but he's finally free.

And then, reality set in. Aaron was dead. I was alone. And not *even* alone alone, which would have been bad enough, but alone with four children. Alone in a house that belonged to my husband's employers—or

rather to my *late* husband's *former* employers. Alone with no career, with no income, and with about twenty thousand dollars' worth of credit card debt. Alone in a cold doorway spending the first few minutes of the rest of my life with, of all people, Ray Valensky.

Even years later, I could never quite reconstruct the rest of that evening. I must have told the children. I must have phoned my parents. I must have been the one who phoned my in-laws' rabbi to ask him to go in person to their home to tell them their only son was dead. I know it was I who phoned Sam Ryback and asked him to arrange for Aaron's body to be retrieved from Saint Vincent's and brought back to the chapel out here that he and his family have owned and operated forever. And it was also I who opened the door when my in-laws arrived a few hours later, the pain on their faces so profound that the children actually cried when their grandparents entered the room in which we had all been sitting quietly and almost calmly in stunned disbelief. And then my parents also arrived too and there really was no more room at the inn.

Aaron was shot and killed on a Tuesday evening, but it was impractical to schedule the funeral until the question of an autopsy was settled one way or the other. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to care. And since the synagogue's lawyer was dealing with the autopsy situation and since she had assured me repeatedly that she'd call the moment it became clear that I was going to have to put my two cents in as well, I spend Wednesday running around doing a thousand errands in preparation for the week of mourning that would follow the funeral. I phoned the head of Aaron's rabbinical association and asked him to send out an e-mail announcing Aaron's death. I summoned Daisy Kogan to the house and asked her to lengthen the black dress I wanted to wear to the funeral and to let it out where it felt tight. I left the kids with their grandparents and went to the store on my own to pick up some groceries, but I had to return empty-handed once I realized that I could neither face encountering people who had heard the news nor dealing with people who hadn't. Nancy Valensky ended up doing my shopping for me, but the truth was that it was hardly necessary to purchase anything at all. By evening, the house was overflowing with more trays of food and cakes and baskets of fruit and cookies that we could have eaten in a dozen *shiva* weeks.

In the end, there was an autopsy. The New York County Medical Examiner insisted. I didn't have the strength to object. Almost to my surprise, I found that I didn't care, didn't even *want* to care. Some friendly officer from the N.Y.P.D. kept in touch until it became clear to both of us that Aaron's assailant, apparently a talentless mugger who probably shocked himself as much as Aaron by pulling the trigger on his Saturday night special and who ended up running off without even taking Aaron's wallet or wristwatch, was never going to be identified or located. I didn't much care about that either. I didn't really care about anything except my children. And their grandparents, all four of them, seemed to be

channelling their own misery into watching over my kids so intently and intensely that there really was nothing left for me to do.

Sam Ryback's people went into the city to retrieve Aaron's body. The funeral came and went. Because I insisted, my mother stayed at home with the children and I went to my husband's funeral in the company of my father and my in-laws. Over seven hundred people showed up. In retrospect, it seems like a reasonable number. But at the moment I was astounded by the size of the crowd. The funeral itself, I actually do remember quite well. The eulogy was spoken with surprising eloquence by Michael Pressburg, the rabbi of Prestigunquit's only other Jewish house of worship. Aaron hadn't really liked him at all, but he somehow managed effectively and eloquently to deliver a eulogy in the classical style Aaron had always admired so much. The cantors of his and our *shul* offered up a long, mournful setting of the Twenty-Third Psalm set as a duet. Aaron's Uncle Stanley, a self-trained and self-styled "cantor of the people," sang the memorial prayer with unexpected talent. Who knew he could sing at all? I remember thinking that it was too bad Aaron wasn't present to revise his opinion of his uncle's musical ability.

After the funeral, came the *shiva*. More like a week-long Roman circus than a traditional week of Jewish bereavement, the *shiva* was extraordinary even by Long Island standards. By the end of the week, there may well have been over twelve hundred people in the house and I am certain there were more than a thousand. I had enough cake in our (and our neighbors') freezers to open a bakery and enough cold cuts to open a delicatessen. If the house wasn't a total shambles, it was because we put in at least an hour every evening of the *shiva* week tidying up and trying to make the house look presentable for the next day's hordes.

By the last days of *shiva*, I had had enough. Enough of crying. Enough of being consoled with. Enough of being spoken kindly to. Enough of everything. The week had been deeply emotional in its own way, though, and I recognized the usefulness of that kind of intense catharsis for someone trying to deal with the sudden, brutal death of a loved one—but I also knew that I would explode if one single person brought me one single cup more of tepid tea and told me that he or she wanted to be there for me. For their part, the directors of the synagogue had politely informed me that I was not even to think of vacating the manse until I was ready, as they put it, "to move on." They hadn't even begun the search process for a new rabbi, they observed oh-so delicately, and the whole procedure could conceivably take an entire year. They had put it semi-kindly, but I hadn't needed to listen too closely to get the message all too clearly: I had less than a year to get out of my home and on with my life.

My parents had been almost completely useless during the *shiva*, sitting like lumps of solidified misery on the living room couch as they accepted the condolences of scores of people who took them for Aaron's

parents. My in-laws, on the other hand, were anything but inert. Perhaps because their grief was so much the harder to bear, they threw themselves into the rhythm of the *shiva* with something approaching gusto, staying seated on their mourning stools as little as possible and insisting on looking after the baby almost to the exclusion of any of our neighbors or friends. Almost as though they could keep their only child from being dead by refusing to accept any words of consolation on his passing, they scurried around the house endlessly, straightening up the kitchen, keeping a careful inventory of supplies, making sure the coffee urns were all relatively full and fresh and, above all else, looking after Levi.

The children were in their own world of disconnectedness. Too stunned to express—or even really to acknowledge—their grief, they perceived themselves as bored rather than dazed and spent most of the week hiding in their rooms playing Nintendo. This, I told myself, was probably all for the best. And, honestly speaking, how could it have been otherwise? Benjamin himself, our oldest, was all of nine during his father's *shiva* week. And the others, even younger, were that much less able than he to take in what had befallen them.

Eventually, the *shiva* week ended. In retrospect, I suppose I must still have been in shock. Indeed, as the delegation of rabbis from the Suffolk County Rabbinical Association appeared on the last morning of the *shiva* week to escort us on the traditional walk around the block that concludes the week of heavy bereavement, I could hardly believe that I was going to return twenty minutes later to a widow's house. Later that day, my parents finally agreed to go home. My in-laws, on the other hand, simply refused to leave and insisted that they be allowed to stay on just a little while longer "to help out with the children." More than aware of the fact that I might never get rid of the elder Rakmans if I didn't push them out the door before they really settled in, I *still* couldn't find the energy to insist.

*Shiva* ended on Wednesday morning, but I refused to take the children to school that same afternoon. But Benjamin, Rebecca and Nathan were all up by seven o'clock the next morning, fully dressed and sitting at the kitchen table waiting for breakfast. Seeing them all together, I realized that I had no choice. Screwing up my courage, therefore, I awakened my father-in-law and asked him to drive them to school. Strangely overwhelmed with the excitement of finding himself needed (and their decision not to go home immediately therefore at least slightly validated), he agreed almost before I had the words out of my mouth.

By ten past eight, the children and their grandfather were gone. My mother-in-law had yet to emerge from the guest bedroom. Levi was playing in his crib with a plastic horse that someone had brought over as a gift. The house was reasonably neat. I resolved to have the carpets cleaned before the weekend, but found even that much decision-making tiring and unexpectedly upsetting. I found the carpet cleaners' number,

then stuck it on the refrigerator with a magnet for future reference rather than calling to see if they were open yet. I made a pot of coffee. I retrieved the newspaper from the front lawn. I put some bread in the toaster, then spent a ridiculous amount of time foraging in the pantry for some jam. For the first time since the funeral, I felt my face wet with tears. As I reached for a paper napkin to dry my eyes, though, I was visited neither by grief nor by self-pity, but by the sudden realization that I was alone in the world, that I was a single mother of four with no income and enough insurance money to keep things going for somewhere between a year and eighteen months. And then I heard the door to the guest room open and close. So much, I thought, for any private time to think things through.

"You're up." Esther was barely up herself, the after-effects of her sleeping pill both audible in her voice and visible on her face, but at least she was mostly dressed.

"I guess." I was hardly in the mood to face my mother-in-law, but I felt I had no choice but to respond somehow to what had clearly been more of a question than a simple observation.

"The children?"

"Gone to school. Max drove them."

"You woke him up?"

"I knocked on the door gently and he came right out. He must have been up."

"He doesn't sleep."

"No one sleeps."

"Only my Aaron," Esther groaned. "Only my little boy sleeps forever."

That was enough. I needed strength, not pity, if I was somehow going to get my life back on track—and endless references to Aaron sleeping forever in the earth were the very last thing I wanted to hear now that I was finally finding the courage to face the future. Wiping my eyes with vigorous efforts more appropriate for removing make-up than for drying tears, I waited until I calmed down a bit. And then, after a long while, I began the conversation I knew I was eventually going to have to have with my mother-in-law.

"I've been thinking about things," I began.

"So who hasn't?"

"And I've been thinking...."

"I can't stop thinking."

"I've been thinking about going back to..."

"To where?"

I fought down the impulse to tell my mother-in-law to shut up long enough to hear me out. "To school, Esther," I said calmly.

"To school?"

"You make it sound like I'm thinking of joining the circus. I liked nursing school when I started and I wouldn't have left if I hadn't gotten pregnant. And now I need a profession and I think maybe I'd like to be a nurse. That was Plan A, after all...."

"A nurse? Nurses make *bubkes*."

"I could specialize."

"There's such a thing?"

"Yes," I said, "there's such a thing." I sat down at the kitchen table.

"Doctors do better. A lot better."

"They do," I agreed. "But I don't have the science to apply to medical school and I'm not going back to take undergraduate science courses on the chance I might get into medical school after that."

"You're plenty smart enough."

"I think so too," I answered immediately, warming to my mother-in-law's unexpected confidence in my abilities. "But I don't have the time to pursue that kind of long-term plan. I'd need a year or two of undergraduate work. Then I'd have to apply to medical schools. And then, if I somehow did manage to get in, I'd need to spend four years in school. And then there would be years of training on top of that. The whole thing is just too impractical—it would be almost a decade before I would be earning a living—and nursing isn't just for people who can't get into medical school, you know. There's something that calls me to nursing, something about the whole concept of working as a nurse. I think I might like to do psychiatric nursing, to tell you the truth. Or else maybe Emergency Room work. Look, I did good work that first

year. If I can get some nursing school down here to count it, I think I could probably be working in eighteen months. And then maybe I can continue my training while I'm already working."

"Eighteen months is a long time."

"Yes and no. I think I can stay here until at least next summer."

"They wouldn't dare throw you out."

"It's not like that. This is their house, not ours. The new rabbi will almost definitely want to live here. And they'll want him to live here too. Look, that's just how things are. But if the new guy starts next fall and we don't have to move until June or July, then I think Aaron's insurance money will last long enough for me to get out of school and start earning a living as a nurse. Look, we won't starve. And I think I still qualify to borrow the tuition money if it comes to that."

Esther Rakman looked directly into my eyes. "You're going to borrow money? Not as long as your father-in-law and I are alive, you're not. We had one son and he was our sole heir. Now your children are going to be our heirs and, as far as we're both concerned, you can have the money now if that's what you think best. What do we need? We own our home. We have the clothing we need. I need more jewellery? I wish I could get rid of what I have. All we want is for the children to grow up well and happy. Whatever comes, we'll be there for you as long as either of us is alive. And whatever we have left when we die will be for you and the children anyway. Look, darling, you're not alone in this. For as long as we breathe, we're in it with you and we'll do what you say you want. Whatever it is, we'll do it if we can afford it. And if we can't afford it, we'll just do it anyway. And if you decide that you really do want medical school, not nursing school—we'll just write a bigger check, that's all."

I was too amazed to speak. Truth be told, I had always found my mother-in-law irritating to the point almost of being grating. She was always pushing Aaron to negotiate harder, to demand more money from the *shul* than he was getting paid, to insist on them being more generous with us or giving us more vacation time or doing more in the house or the garden. She must have told him a million times not to let them bully him around. That was her favorite expression to use in this regard, in fact, but the irony was that it wasn't they who were bullying us, it was she who was bullying him. She was the one who was never satisfied with anything Aaron did or accomplished, the one who never gave him a break, who could never be unambiguously proud of any of his successes. And she wasn't above criticizing me either, including in the children's presence. I suppose I always imagined that she thought that Aaron could have done better, that she always wished I was prettier or smarter, or that my parents were richer, or that I was a better, more devoted wife to her perfect son. (I had a miscarriage after we were married for just eighteen

months and she actually had the nerve to tell Aaron not to feel bad, that it wasn't *his* fault. And just whose fault did that imply it was? She didn't need to say!) But now that she was saying precisely what I had hoped she would *eventually* realize needed to be said I found myself overcome by emotion. "Thank you," I said softly, trying to keep my voice level.

"You're welcome," came the choked reply. And then the dam burst open and we both simply sat opposite each other at the kitchen table and cried until neither of us had any tears left.