Farewell to My Father

Eliezer Sobel

Kol ha'olam kulo...gesher tsar me'od... The whole world is a very narrow bridge... (Rabbi Nachman of Breslav)

In the last issue of this publication, I spoke of my family's experience with my 93-year-old mother's ongoing 17-year journey through the bewildering and heartbreaking, as well as unexpectedly heartwarming and healing, journey through the mental maze of Alzheimer's disease.



My father Max's role in that story was obviously a pivotal one; over the years, until he turned 90, he essentially served as full-time Administrator, Personnel Director, Driver, Head Chef and Chief Caregiver of a one-man nursing home for one patient, Manya, his wife of nearly 70 years.

I also described last time [see nsheichabadnewsletter.com] how all of that changed overnight when he fell down the stairs, landed on his head, and suffered a near-fatal Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), rendering him, like my mother, suddenly in need of full-time, 24/7 at-home care, and I found myself in the shocking position of needing to take over all of his responsibilities—to essentially become him!

My wife and I moved in with them that same day, and I began doing all the things he had been doing.

Part of it was an intricate puzzle for me to solve. For whatever reason, although he had done everything himself for the first seven years, by then the situation had evolved from him reluctantly allowing one aide in the house for a few hours each morning to having seven part-time hourly aides filling all waking time slots except lunch and dinner; he still insisted on at least a few hours of privacy at mealtimes, alone with my mother.

Each of the aides was working an odd, piecemeal and seemingly random schedule; each



Opposite: Max Sobel, World War II hero.
Left: Max Sobel, lighting the Chanukah menorah with his children, Harry (L) and Eliezer.
Above: Manya Sobel, young wife and mother.

had a different payday and a different hourly wage; and for no obvious rhyme or reason, he had been using four distinct checking accounts to pay them! The details of this intricate system, I was soon to discover, were mostly stored in his now-inaccessible head, as I searched his desk drawers and file cabinets for clues. It was both perplexing and amusing, but most of all, awe-inspiring. I simply couldn't believe what Dad was up to, all that he was overseeing on his own at age 90.

What followed was three years of my wife Shari and I managing both of their care, living with them for the first ten months, during which I found myself sleeping in my childhood bed again after more than three decades. (Same pictures on the wall!) We were thankful that although Mom continued on her slow but inexorable decline into the netherworld of Alzheimer's, my Dad's dementia was caused by an injury to the brain, not a disease, so there was some hope for improvement over time, although the doctors advised us to call hospice and say our good-byes.

Yet my father actually made a fairly remarkable comeback and recovered perhaps 75% of his mental/physical faculties, although he would never again be without an aide at his side 24 hours a day, a situation he objected to strenuously, but we had no choice; he was an extremely high

fall risk (a broken back from a bathroom fall preceded the stairs incident) and he was not the least bit aware that he couldn't simply get up and walk on his own without keeling over. He was actually kicked out of one rehab because he kept trying to get up on his own and scared the heck out of everyone there. They pleaded with us to take him home.

It was a difficult and trying transition. Imagine going from being the autonomous head of your household and caregiver for your wife to literally having *everything* done for you by someone else, in addition to having every move you make be monitored and joined by another. That would drive anyone batty. Then the final indignity of having to leave the bathroom door open enough so that someone can keep an eye on you and then help you in very intimate ways.

My father eventually settled into his new and sudden change of circumstances, and he actually began to really like and enjoy having the aides around, because when it was only him and Mom, he no longer had anyone to talk to at home. Most important, throughout his entire ordeal my Dad retained his sense of humor, and we enjoyed laughing together many times. Being a bit hard of hearing, coupled with his brain damage, it was usually very difficult for my father to fully comprehend what we were trying to say to him. Then one day we somehow stumbled onto a unique method: we discovered that he had no trouble understanding us if everyone spoke to him using an Italian accent—including our African-American, Jamaican, Serbian, Georgian and Polish aides!—and he responded in kind. One day as I helped him struggle to get up from a chair, I said, in my fluent Italian-Yiddish, "Oya gevalta!" and he responded, "Yes, ver *is* Valta? I'm looking for him too!"

When I would call out to my wife—"Shar?"—he would invariably hear it as "Dad?" and ask me what I wanted. I eventually tired of explaining I was calling Shari, not him, so I announced one morning that I would start using a pet name for Shari so that it would be more clear and distinct as to who I was calling. I decided on "Peaches" and tested the new system:

"Peaches?" I called out.

"Yes, darling?" my father replied immediately.

Initially Dad's swallow reflex was unreliable, and he needed to be on a pureed diet to prevent him from choking and aspirating his food. I remember well the Friday night we called him in for Sabbath dinner; we all had beautiful roast chicken platters set before us, and he had a plate containing what can only be described as three discreet piles of "glop" in varying hues of beige. We were praying that he was still sufficiently out of it and wouldn't notice. After helping him hobble on his walker over to his seat at the head of the table, he sat down, and following *Kiddush* and *Hamotzi,* he looked around the table very slowly, then looked down at his plate and up at us, and inquired in a conspiratorial whisper: "Who do you have to know to get a piece of chicken around here?"

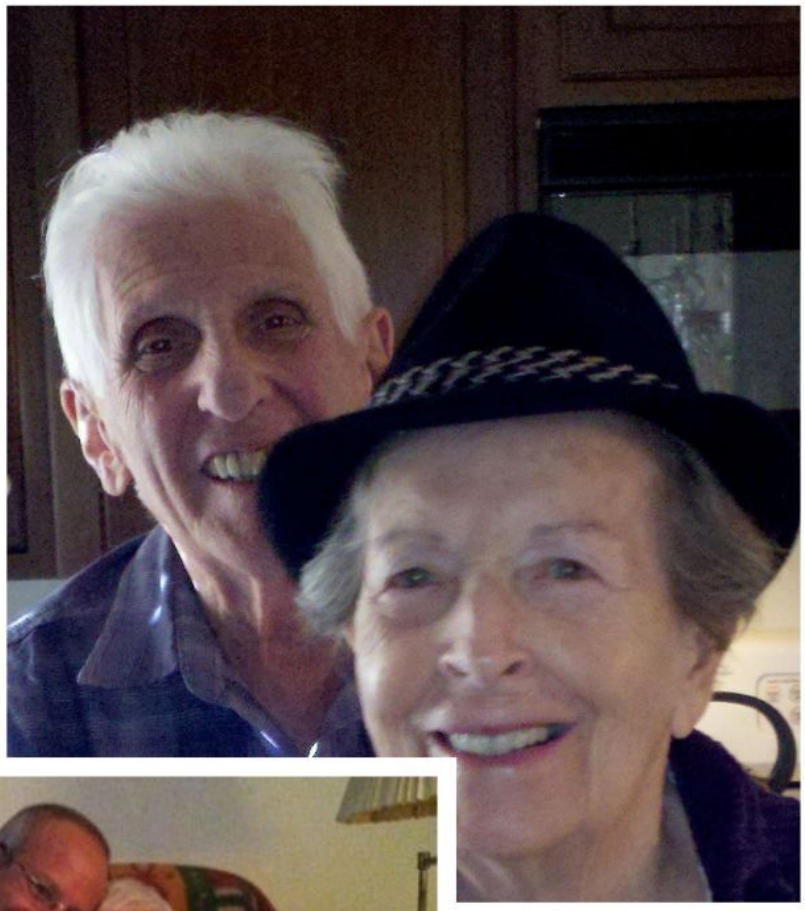
Dad was very attached to his calendar book as a way of keeping track of his life, to the point of obsession. He seemed desperate to grasp and hold on to precisely where he was situated in time, as each day dissolved into the next. Bear in mind that at the time of his injury, he informed the physicians that it was 1935, and Roosevelt was President. He was grief-stricken to learn that his brothers were deceased; they had died about 30 years earlier.

One day this conversation transpired: Dad: "What time is my appointment tomorrow?" Me, sitting next to him: "Two-thirty." Dad: "Well I guess I can call in the morning to double-check." Me: "Dad, you don't have to double-check. I made the appointment for you, and wrote it down right here in your appointment book." Dad: "Okay, well I guess I'll call tomorrow to verify it." Me, a bit flustered: "Why don't you just call ME to verify it???" Dad: "You? Oh, okay." And he picks up his cell phone, hits the speed-dial button, and my phone rings. I answer it, sitting less than four feet away from him. Me: "Hello?" Dad: "El? What time is my appointment tomorrow?" Me: "Two-thirty, Dad." Dad: "Oh, okay, thanks." He hangs up the phone, turns to me, and says, "You were right."

The one and only positive outcome of his brain injury was that he finally had to stop driving and we all breathed a deep sigh of relief.



Above: In retrospect, brothers Eliezer (L) and Harry Sobel call this picture "The Last Brisket," taken just six weeks before their father passed away.



Max and Manya Sobel in 2012.



Eliezer and Max in 2016.

I had called him one afternoon and heard him fumbling around with his flip phone for several minutes and then finally I got a distracted "Hello?" He was *driving*. Thank G-d he never learned how to text. He said,

"Hold on, El," and I heard him in the background, saying,

"What's that? Oh, okay, thank you!"

"Who was that, Dad?"

"Oh nobody, it was just some pedestrian telling me I was driving on the sidewalk."

One day he apparently *did* drive up the curb, across a wide sidewalk and stopped short just in front of the Kosher Nosh restaurant's plate-glass window, behind which sat an elderly couple who nearly had their last corned beef on rye. Dad said, "I really have to get these brakes fixed."

The aides ratted him out to us about his smashing into a mailbox and getting a rush repair job to replace his front bumper before any of us would visit and notice the damage to his Lexus. The aides, meanwhile, kept parking further and further away from our driveway after Dad hit one of their cars when backing out.

Max and Manya Sobel on their wedding day 70 years ago



Dr. Max A. Sobel was quite famous in his field of math education, having published over 60 textbooks, many of them translated into multiple languages, and he lectured widely around the country to standing-room-only gatherings of professors and educators anxious to hear him speak. His talks and teaching methods were legendary for their creativity and originality, and often included magic tricks, humor, and special effects.

I myself had him for 9th grade Algebra, and I will never forget the day he filled the blackboard with figures and equations as he unraveled the Quadratic Formula, and when he finally arrived at the stunning conclusion, he exclaimed, "EUREKA!" and at that moment a loud explosion caused us all to leap from our seats, forever embedding the Quadratic Equation deep inside the core of our limbic systems, never to be forgotten. (I'm lying; I no longer have the remotest idea what the Quadratic Equation is.) He had arranged for a colleague to surreptitiously enter through the door in the back of the classroom and set off a firecracker in a tin wastebasket at the moment he proclaimed "Eureka!" How many kids do *you* know who come home excited about the fireworks in their Algebra class?

We actually used one of his textbooks in that class, and I would be tickled when we got to the verbal problems because they always used the names of family members: "If Elliot [me] leaves Chicago at 7 a.m. on a train heading toward New York going 90 miles per hour, and Harry [my brother] leaves New York…" and so forth.

I grew up and finished school and began dating, but he kept writing books. So he made a point to include the girls I was dating in his books, and because I was a serial monogamist during my single days, he would have to update the name in those problems for each new edition of a book: Karen became Sharon became Fran became Jan and so on.

By the time I finally met my wife, Shari, I

was 44, and Dad had just retired from writing textbooks, so, sadly, it looked like Shari wasn't going to make it into a verbal problem. Then, in a moment of what was surely Divine Providence, his publisher called and begged him to do one last edition of a book, so in the final hour, I'm delighted to report, Shari made the cut! (Her train was leaving San Francisco, and heading south.)

My father was everyone's all-time favorite teacher, and I was continuously amazed by the number of handwritten letters and then emails that would periodically show up from students he had taught some 30, 40, even 50 years ago, wanting to express to him their gratitude for inspiring them and changing their lives forever. It was quite remarkable.

Alas, *kol ha-olam kulo, gesher tsar me'od.*

Max Sobel, our beloved father, passed away at home six months later, in his own bedroom of 60 years, with my brother and me at his side. We wheeled my mother to his bedside on the chance that it might register in some deeply unconscious and obscure corner of her soul that she was saying good-bye to her soulmate of 70 years. He was just shy of his 93rd birthday, and it was Veteran's Day, which seemed fitting, as he had served as Sergeant in combat in World War II, returning with a Purple Heart and a personal shrapnel collection.

His funeral and *shivah* were in many ways joyous celebrations of a well-lived and well-loved life, and again I was astonished as person after person—complete strangers to me, former students and colleagues—greeted me with nearly the identical sentiment: "Your father changed my life forever." *Yehi zichro baruch.*

In the six months leading up to my father's passing, I had read the following headline in the paper, and I didn't find it particularly comforting: **"Medical Errors 3rd Leading Cause of Death."** But I *did* find it very easy to believe. We had brought Dad to the ER with a chronic, nighttime, wheezing cough, barely able to come up for air, and a very assuring cardiologist informed us with great confidence and authority, "I am one-hundred percent certain that this is not a cardiac issue."

Later, following a clear chest x-ray and an unremarkable C-T scan of his lungs, the head pulmonologist informed us, with equal certainty, "This has *nothing* to do with his lungs; it's *definitely* a cardiac problem."

Great. Anyone have any other ideas?

His primary care physician conjectured that he had a sudden case, at 92, of GERD—acid reflux—and prescribed Nexium.

The hospital speech therapist administered a swallow test and concluded he was most likely aspirating food, causing the cough, just not enough to show up as aspirational pneumonia on the scans.

A second cardiologist declared he most likely had had a "silent heart attack"— the kind that doesn't make any noise, I guess—several months previous. When I told him that his colleague was "one-hundred percent certain this wasn't a cardiac issue," he responded with a roll of his eyes, and said, "Well, I would be considerably less certain than that."

A third member of the cardiology team, who we later learned was a "Fellow"—and a jolly good one, at that—spent 40 minutes enthusiastically, even gleefully, describing the procedure he intended to perform the next morning, coming up through Dad's groin with a catheter, merely to look around inside his heart, possibly to install a stent if he discovered any blockages, but mostly to scout the terrain for a valve replacement to follow several weeks later.

"Fellows" need to practice their surgical skills and gain experience, so tend to push for these "opportunities." Fortunately, the more he spoke, the more he observed Dad coughing his head off in the bed, while also growing belligerent and angry because everyone was ignoring his request to help him get to the bathroom.

"Of course," the Fellow remarked, changing his tone from eager to hesitant, "your father would have to be able to lie flat, cooperate, and not cough for several hours." Oops.

We were being advised to approve a procedure that we later learned carried the considerably high risk of stroke, heart attack

and death (little details the Fellow neglected to mention). In addition to which, my father had suffered from a TBI, a mini-stroke and a major seizure in the prior three years, and we knew that even a minor cold had a noticeable and rather instant impact on his cognitive status and confusion levels. Imagine what a surgical procedure would do to a 92-year-old with those conditions? We said no.

Thank G-d, the older/wiser head of cardiology came to meet us and, to our surprise and relief, totally agreed with our decision not to do any invasive procedures, for all of the above reasons, in addition to the following, which was rather eye opening:

"We really have no idea if his heart has *anything* to do with his coughing fits, nor if the procedure would help in the slightest."

Hmmm…now that was *really* food for thought.

We noticed that when the EMTs had arrived at the house at one in the morning, they had immediately placed an oxygen mask on my father and his five-hour coughing fit had stopped instantly. We concluded that getting discharged with at-home oxygen might be a good idea.

Easier said than done. His saturation levels in the hospital, having been on oxygen non-stop for several days, were well above the levels that would qualify him for at-home oxygen. Fortunately we had discovered a little-known secret about most hospitals and doctors, from our own experience as patients: they will essentially do *anything* you ask, relieving them of the burden of making recommendations and decisions. (I have literally been my own chief prescriber of medications for years.)

In this case, my brother, a Ph.D. in psychology, had earlier made a phone call to the attending physician on my father's floor—a man we had met for all of 30 seconds the previous day and never laid eyes on again—and said, "This is Dr. Harry Sobel, I would like to order an IV antibiotic for my father in Room 4487," to which the attending responded, "Yes, yes, right away, I will call it in immediately."

Harry then proceeded to be creative with my Dad's oxygen numbers such that we were able to get him discharged with the oxygen approved. But the real kicker was when he approached the nursing station to make a simple request about getting Dad cleaned up and changed, and was informed that,

"There is no Max Sobel registered on this floor. He is not here."

My brother replied,

"My father is two doors down, in Room 4487."

The nurse said,

"No I'm very sorry, sir, but your father is definitely not on this floor."

Interesting. So who *was* that guy in our father's bed? He was a dead ringer for our Dad. Meanwhile, we wondered what other medications we could order for this non-existent patient while we had access. Perhaps I could score some oxycodone?

Thankfully, we got Dad home in one piece, with oxygen and some new medications, and his symptoms abated. They were now calling it congestive heart failure and only treating the symptoms.

"Medical Errors Are 3rd Leading Cause of Death"?

Really? What a shocker.

We love you so much, Dad, and will miss you forever, though daily I feel the truth of the cliché—"They live on in your heart"— because it sure seems to me as if you're still right here with me, in my heart.

(Oh, and by the way, you were summoned to jury duty yesterday; if I were you, I would just blow it off.)

Eliezer Sobel *is the author of* L'Chaim! Pictures to Evoke Memories of Jewish Life, *the first book ever designed specifically for Jewish people with memory loss. He is also the author of five other books, including a prize-winning novel,* Minyan: Ten Jewish Men in a World That is Heartbroken. *All are available at eliezersobel.com or on AMAZON.*