

Rabbi Steve Sager / HaRav Yisrael Gadol ben Yitzhak Reuven u'Batya

May 15, 2022 / 15 Iyar, 5782

Steven Gary Sager was born in Takoma Park, MD on June 29, 1951. As big brother to David and Barry, Steve took care to show them significant things: how trees grew, how music worked. He was a comforting presence during their parents' divorce. Steve's deep love of Judaism came not from his parents – neither of whom were religious – but from listening to Kiddush sung by his grandfather, Jacob or “Jack” Sperling and walking to shul with him whenever he could. He was a record breaking swimmer, an all-State trombonist – he seemed good at everything, “a wonder to me,” said his younger brother, David. “I was in awe of him.”

At the University of Maryland, everyone was afraid of Dr. Ivri – literally, “Dr. Hebrew” ☺, a renowned professor of Hebrew language and literature, but Steve walked alone into his foreboding office and ask him a rather sophisticated question to which Dr. Ivri responded: Such a sophisticated question. “You're a baby. Why aren't you taking my classes? You have to take my classes!” Steve became his star pupil; Ivri his mentor, giving him the intellectual foundations upon which he would build a lifetime of scholarship and fascination with Hebrew language and literature.

Back in high school at a summer USY summer program, Sabina saw a gorgeous guy with a great voice do the haftarah and said, “Ooh, who's that guy?” In December of senior year, each of them broke up with their respective girlfriend/boyfriend and they went on their first date to the Silver Spring in Maryland. Steve magically took out a penny from his pocket and told Sabina to make a wish. She was smitten. They attended Maryland together and were married in 1973 right after graduation.

Steve graduated the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and while Beth El Synagogue is 135 years old, the synagogue as it is today – participatory, interactive, intellectual – owes its identity to Rabbi Sager. Among other things, it was witnessing bar mitzvah Zach Balleisen have a conversation with Rabbi Sager, rather than give a speech, that drew me to this extraordinary community. While here, Steve studied for a PhD in Rabbinic Literature with Eric Meyers, taught at his alma mater, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Duke Divinity School, the University of North Carolina, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he was a long-time Senior Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and loved wandering in the streets of Old and New Jerusalem for hours and hours. He corresponded with modern Israeli Hebrew poets, translating and teaching their works; on the Sicha website built with Sabina, there are hundreds of translated poems juxtaposed with rabbinic texts in essays that are a unique intellectual contribution to the Jewish world. A few years ago, in what feels like an eternity ago, a group of families surprised Rabbi Sager with a festive dinner celebrating that Beth El's Beit Midrash would be named in Rabbi Sager's honor.

As an abba, Steve was an unending fount of creative storytelling. When the kids went to a restaurant, he would always ask: “Wanna go on an adventure”? Wanna go ‘xploring?” and, while they waited for food to arrive, they would wander into the parking lot to see a tree or a dumpster or whatever mysteries awaited in the mysterious world of Steve's imagination. Steve and Sabina are parents to Ariele and Avrami, Jacob and Ali, and Noah and Allie. Steve was a saba to Maya, Daniel, Gefen, Yehuda, Zoe, Sasha, and Georgia (of blessed memory). He loved them with an everlasting love.

A little over 2 years ago, Sabina called me on Friday afternoon from the emergency room. I asked her if Steve wanted me to come and she said, “No, but I do.” I drove right over. Sabina and I shared a long, tearful hug, the first of many we have shared along the way. And then I was printed a visitor’s pass and allowed to pass through the emergency room doors – like entering a king’s chamber or the Holy Temple – back to one of those exam rooms where they hold you forever until a hospital room comes available. I gave Steve a hug; we sat in silence for a while, and then he said, “It’s so interesting. When I put on these clothes this morning, I didn’t imagine I’d be wearing them here. It’s so extraordinary how life and perspective can change so quickly.” I look back on that moment with awe, and as so quintessentially Rabbi Sager. In the midst of the white hot crisis of a raw, devastating moment – literally in the ER exam room with the words pancreatic cancer still echoing in the air, Steve was so fully inside the moment and, at the same time, able to observe the moment with awe, fascination, and even love. Micah Goodman says that in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides says that a philosopher with the most evolved of souls is able to “refocus our desires from satisfying our worldly wants” – such as wanting to understand why good people get pancreatic cancer – to “attaining knowledge of God by means of understanding the world. The urge to consume the world,” writes Goodman, “causes suffering; the desire to understand the world brings happiness.” I believe I was witness to Steve’s very high soul in that moment – he had no real interest in worldly wants, other than to understand, to think and ponder, and ask and answer, to observe and offer insight and presence and love.

There were so many people who cared for Steve on this last journey. And he was so grateful. A few weeks ago, his eyes welled up with tears as he told me about how Avrami and Eddie so calmly helped him after he had fallen. His body had lost its power, but he was not angry or bitter at the indignity; he was grateful and even awestruck, overcome by what he called “a conspiracy of hesed.” He was transitioning from this world; seeing more and more light. Just a few days ago at his last Shabbat dinner, he enjoyed some yummy brisket and a pretty good size piece of a flourless chocolate cake my wife, Jen, made for Sabina’s birthday. But he wouldn’t eat until he knew Elijee had taken some food. Yes – these past few weeks, the favorite among the many caretakers was, of course, named Elijee – or as we call him, “Elijah” ☺ And as Elijee prepared to leave, Steve called out weakly in some of the last words he spoke in the world, “Take some food.” He just wanted to participate in the conspiracy of hesed, of lovingkindness.

Sabina – I said he wasn’t angry or bitter; and that was true, a lot of the time. But as rabbis’ families know all too well, it wasn’t true all the time. Steve was a source of Torah and comfort to so many, but he was only able to do that because of you – with you he was a person like the rest of us. There were moments of anger and being short, and you took the brunt of those moments, but you created that conspiracy of hesed that surrounded him, and he loved you with an everlasting love. And we do too, and will be with you, and your family in the weeks and months and years to come.

I wrote a book a few years ago about losing friends. I hate this. But I would not trade my and Steve’s friendship to avoid this pain, because to love and be loved is a blessing, and it hurts so much because the love was so real. Over and over again, I will choose a painful, vulnerable, connected life over one of isolation and one free from pain. And while I will miss מורי וחברי my

friend and teacher, Rabbi Steve Sager, he taught me that the eternal part of him remains – in the Torah, in the harmonies, and, of course, in the poetry.

As we prepared for this day, I told him I needed an Amichai poem. The question lingered for several months, as if perhaps to put it off might buy us some more time, but after his stay in the hospital earlier this year, I asked him again and he gave an answer. “Not like a Cypress.” He said that some people thought that the poem was Amichai’s description of himself and his poetry. Steve said, I’d like to think it describes me as well. I tried not to teach all at once – just a little at a time.

As you listen to the poem he suggested for today, I invite you to carry Rabbi Sager’s legacy forward by continuing to learn midrash and poetry, to dare place a tallit over your head and play in the world of prayer, to continue to find your Rabbi Sager in blades of grass, or drops of rain, in heartbeats and in tapping on small windows and at side entrances, in wisps of smoke and grains of dust – in small things. Not all at once, but over and over and over again.

<p>Not like a cypress, not at once, not all of me, but like the grass, in thousands of cautious green exits, to be hiding like many children while one of them seeks.</p> <p>And not like the single man, like Saul, whom the multitude found and made king. But like the rain in many places from many clouds, to be absorbed, to be drunk by many mouths, to be breathed in like the air all year long and scattered like blossoming in springtime.</p> <p>Not the sharp ring that wakes up the doctor on call, but with tapping, on many small windows at side entrances, with many heartbeats.</p> <p>And afterward the quiet exit, like smoke without shofar-blasts, a statesman resigning, children tired from play, a stone as it almost stops rolling</p>	<p>לֹא כַבְרוֹשׁ, לֹא בְּבַת אַחַת, לֹא כְּלִי אֶלָּא כְּדִשָּׂא, בְּאַלְפֵי יְצִיאוֹת זְהִירוֹת- יִרְקוֹת, לְהִיּוֹת מְסַתֵּר כְּהַרְבֵּה יְלָדִים בְּמִשְׁחָק וְאַחַד מִחֲפָשׁ.</p> <p>וְלֹא כְּגִבֹר הַיְחִיד כְּבֶן-קִישׁ, שֶׁמְצֹאֵהוּ רַבִּים וְעָשׂוֹ אוֹתוֹ לְמֶלֶךְ. אֶלָּא כְּגִשֵׁם בְּהַרְבֵּה מְקוֹמוֹת מְעַנְנִים רַבִּים, לְהִתְחַלְחֵל, לְהִיּוֹת שְׂתוּי פִּיּוֹת רַבִּים, לְהִיּוֹת גָּשׁוּם כְּאוֹיֵר בִּשְׁנָה וּמְפֹנֵר כְּפָרִיחָה בְּאֲבִיב לֹא הַצֵּלְצוּל הַחֵד, הַמְעוֹרֵר בְּשַׁעַר הָרוּפָא הַתּוֹרֵן אֶלָּא בְּדַפִּיקוֹת, בְּהַרְבֵּה אֲשַׁנְבִּים בְּכַנִּיסוֹת צְדָדִיּוֹת, בְּהַרְבֵּה דַפִּיקוֹת לֵב וְאַחַר-כֵּן הַיְצִיאָה הַשְּׂקֵטָה, כְּעֵשֶׂן כְּלִי תְרוּעָה, שֶׁר מִתְפַּטֵּר יְלָדִים עֵינַיִם מִמִּשְׁחָק אֶבֶן בְּגִלְגוּלִים הָאֲחֵרוּנִים</p>
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<p>down the steep hill, in the place where the plain of great renunciation begins, from which, like prayers that are answered, dust rises in many myriads of grains.</p>	<p>לְאַחַר הַמּוֹרָד הַתְּלוּל, בְּמִקּוֹם שְׂמֵת־חֵייל מִיִּשּׁוּר הַתּוֹתוֹר הַגָּדוֹל, אֲשֶׁר מִמֶּנּוּ בְּתַפְלוֹת הַמִּתְקַבְּלוֹת עוֹלָה אֲבָק בְּהֶרְבֵּה רַבּוּא גַרְגִּירִים.</p>
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Rabbi Steve Sager, Moreinu Rabeinu – our teacher our Rabbi, HaRav Yisrael Gadai ben Yitzhak Reuven u'Batya, died on Sunday evening, May 15, 2022, the 15th of Iyar, 5782, the 30th day of the Omer. “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” Your memory is a blessing, and let us say, Amen.