

## **WHERE IS MY LIGHT?**

### AN ESSAY BY ERIC BARR

In December, 1995, I flew home From Southern California to snowy Detroit to celebrate my father's 80th birthday.

The Party was at my brother's house and my visit was to be a surprise for him and we all hoped that the shock of my presence would not kill him.

Early in the evening my two brothers and I gathered in the dining room for a toast while we waited for the guest of honor. When our parents came through the front door I moved into the living room so I could see my dad and he could see me. When I was in his line of sight I shouted "Happy Birthday." And raised my glass toward him. He looked at me and a primal howl came out of his mouth and he started to cry, my mother put her arm around his shoulder and guided him into the family room where she helped him to compose himself. Now this was a man who did not cry-- ever -- and he did not frighten. My brothers and I exchanged bewildered glances and I sank into the sofa feeling that I had ruined the party, his birthday, and perhaps whatever time he had left.

A couple of years later, my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. After that I began to fly home more regularly to help out with my father's care, but my visits were never a surprise. And even though my father did not know who I was he always welcomed me as a Friend.

The last time I saw him, he didn't speak. I was told, he had stopped talking months before unless he was speaking a Russian sounding gibberish which he could speak emphatically and eloquently. When I arrived at my folks' apartment, he always seemed to recognize me but didn't know my name. He spent most of his time sitting on the sofa, watching TV. On rare occasions he would pick up his violin, which surprisingly, he could still play, and he'd fiddle around, playing bits and pieces of songs and compositions that he knew long ago by heart. At night he would sit on the sofa and watch television with my mother, but he would always have a flashlight in his lap, which he would flick on from time to time. When he wandered their apartment, or went to the bathroom, he would guide his way with the flashlight, even if the hall lights were on. Sometimes when he returned to the sofa, he seemed agitated. My mother explained that he had left his flashlight in another room. She would go and find it. Once it was back in his lap. He relaxed and seemed content. But he had to have his flashlight or he would get very upset. This in turn upset my mother who was constantly searching the apartment for his lost light. Prior to his Alzheimer's disease, he didn't have a fixation on flashlights, but he certainly developed one. He could not relax at night unless the flashlight was in his hand or within arm's reach. Before going to bed, he would stand at the front door of the apartment and shine the light up and down the space between the door and the door jamb to make sure that

the dead bolt was in place. Then he'd head to bed, only to return 5 minutes later to recheck the deadbolt, often repeating this ritual several times before settling in bed with his flashlight on his bed stand. His obsession with flashlights would have been funny except for how upset he became when he left it somewhere he wasn't. His flashlight got him through the night. Sometimes from the guest room I could see that he was waving the light around his darkened bedroom. What he was looking for he could not say.

His new love of flashlights had one upside. It made buying him a birthday or father's day gift easier. He needed nothing and with the dementia he didn't seem to want anything.

About 10 years after he died I had series of strokes that damaged both sides of my brain. I lost the ability to speak and my left side was paralyzed. After 6 months in the hospital and rehab centers I was finally able to go home. It took some time but I finally became comfortable at home; in my old recliner, on my side of the bed, and at my desk. Once I was able to go shopping with my wife I bought a flashlight for each of the places where I parked myself. I am not sure why I did that but I felt the need to have emergency light sources despite all the lamps and natural light. At first I used them only when the power went out. But then I started to flick them on and off in the dark and in the light. Sometimes I would shine them under the furniture or into the dark corners of the room. What I was looking for I cannot say because I don't know. Nothing special. I, like my father, had developed a love and fixation on flashlights and being able to light up the dark. As a dentist my father had spent most of his life shining a bright light into his patients' mouths so he could see, diagnose, and fix their problems and as a theatre director I had spent years in darkened theatres urging lighting designers to tweak their lights to remove the shadows on stage and to light up the actors' faces. It has been suggested that perhaps the dementia and strokes left both my father and I feeling vulnerable and that the flashlights helped with that. However I don't think that fear of the dark was the problem, I think the issue was more complex. I believe that both my father and I were using the flashlights to light up dark corners of the room and by proxy, dark corners of our brains.

Where both our minds had been supple and agile, they were now slow and plodding; Simple problems and tasks became impossible for us. It was as if the electricity had been turned off and, in our illnesses, our brains had ground to a halt.

After my strokes the doctors would never show me the CT scans of the damage to my brain. They were afraid, I think, that the images and the amount of damage would depress me and slow my recovery. However my wife saw them and after constant urging she explained to me that the small stroke to the left side of my brain, which wiped out my ability to speak, looked like a white dot floating on a gray surface. The larger stroke that paralyzed my left side lit up the entire right side of my brain. I had assumed that the damaged areas would be dark and the healthy brain matter light but it was just the opposite; the damaged part of the brain showed up as light while the healthy brain showed up as darkness

Most nights now, like you could find my father checking the deadbolt with his flashlight, you can find me at the front door checking the solar powered spotlight that lights the front porch step. I find it most comforting to know that the step is illuminated and clearly visible.

I know where all my flashlights are at all times but if I misplace one I will pester my wife, "Where is my flashlight?" Or perhaps I am really asking what other new unknowns are lurking in the dark?

When I have told people about this flashlight fixation, many have laughed And thought I was making it up. But this affliction is real and contagious. My wife now scours supermarkets and drugstores for her own growing collection of flashlights. You have been exposed and warned. May you find peace in the light and find a flashlight that suits your needs.

Where is my light? My light is in me.

Where is my hope? My hope is in me.

Where is my strength? My strength is in me.

And in you.

Reading by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine