

Rabbi Mickey Rosen

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week is the secular date of my younger brother's death. Sibling rivalry goes all the way back to Cain and Abel. As a two-year-old, I resented the arrival of my brother Michael, Mickey, as a rival for our parents' love. Now, Mickey turned out to be such a goodnatured, honest child that the only way I felt I could get anyone's attention was by being very, very naughty. And the naughtier I became, the sweeter and kinder and better Mickey became. We got on alright. I don't think I ever took it out on him. But I soon learnt not to try competing with him in any area. He was good at chess; I refused to play. He was a natural, skillful, goalscoring soccer player; I was a badass, brute midfielder. I was 10 when my second brother, David, arrived, so there was no rivalry there, and 16 when my sister, Angela, entered this world. I was 19 when our father died. From that time onwards our lives took on their own paths and momentum. I was away at yeshiva in Israel and then at Cambridge. Mickey was at Jews College in London and then Israel, but at different times than me.

After the shock of our father's early death in 1962, my mother had to rebuild her life. Her world had descended from a state of bliss to a battle to survive and move forward. She had been crucial in helping our father build his dream, his school, Carmel College. She had initially done much of the administration, helped supervise the kitchens and domestic arrangements. Her partnership was so significant that she was involved in the plans our father had towards the end of his life both to build a school for girls and to open a branch in Israel. It was the girls' school that really caught her imagination. She had already begun to gather a team around her when our father died.

She went back to school. She read Semitics at Oxford while Mickey was at Jews College, and they both had to study and grapple with the Book of Job. They delighted in analyzing the unusual and obscure words and their possible meanings, but more significantly dealing with the awesome issues of why tragedies occur, why lives and dreams are cut short in such inexplicable and irrational ways, with no reference to goodness or merit. People who witnessed their complete involvement in the text together always commented on what an amazing sight it was to behold. That relationship, at that moment, was so significant, so powerful, it was unique. Our mother loved us all, of course, and made us feel that love. But I think there was a special bond between her and Mickey.

Then her world was destroyed for a second time. Because of internal politics at Carmel, the dream she had of creating a girls' school was taken away from her. She was excluded and later evicted from Carmel College, despite having raised the money for the school, masterminded the plans, and started employing staff. I was away in yeshiva again in Israel at the time and then in my first rabbinic position in Glasgow. So it fell to Mickey as well as David and Angela to provide her with the loving compensation she needed.

Mickey went into the rabbinate. His first position was in Sale, a suburb of Manchester. But he had a dream of setting up his own center for studying Torah in a traditional but creative, spiritual, and socially responsible atmosphere. That was why he established YAKAR, an acronym of our father's Hebrew name—Yaakov Kopul Rosen—that he himself had used as an occasional columnist for the Jewish Chronicle. Initially in Stanmore, Yakar later moved to Hendon, eventually to Jerusalem, and then added a branch in Tel Aviv. Yakar was his life. He succeeded in passing on his spirituality, his scholarship, his individuality, and his charisma to his children, who, together with his wife Gilla, are carrying on his work in different ways.

Mickey died prematurely in 2008. Thus it is that when someone dies, cut off too soon, it is the family that provides the primary comfort and urge to continue the legacy, if not the answers.

Our father's relationship with Mickey ended far too early. But he always said what a good soul Mickey was; he even liked to call him a *Tsaddik*, a saint. If occasionally he got a little frustrated, it was only that he thought Mickey was far too stubborn in holding onto his opinions long after our father thought he had demolished them. But Mickey's faults that later might have alienated some actually turned to his advantage. It was that stubbornness, that determination to stick to his guns regardless of other opinions that enabled Mickey to achieve all that he did.

When our father died, I was angry with the world, with those who had stood aside as he struggled to keep his dream alive and had not supported him as they could have, yet now in death were all coming forward to claim such close friendship and involvement. I have no doubt they had their regrets, but I found the desire to compensate after it was in many ways too late and the need of others to create my father in their image, according to the way they wanted to remember him, very hard to cope with. Perhaps because Mickey was younger, he did not have the anger I did. Instead he channeled his grief and love for our father in other, productive ways.

Now in my more advanced age, I have jettisoned my anger. When it came to mourning Mickey, despite the sense of loss and pain, I felt joy and pride, which is precisely what the rituals of mourning are for. I realized that Mickey's death was not just a loss to the family but to the Jewish and non-Jewish community too.

Mourners ought to discipline ourselves to listen, to be polite, and to be generous enough to recognize that the one we loved was loved by others and played important parts in other lives too. That is the other aspect of pain, being able to share. That is what we simply should do as human beings. Recognizing that we are more than just self-centered organisms.

Each one of us siblings found different and personal ways of continuing our parents' legacy. Mickey's was through Yakar, which was built and expanded in his image. He drew on the inspiration of our parents, but he created his own institution and his own methods and dealt with the issues of his day and his place. And so it is with Mickey's family, all six of them now with families of their own. Whatever it is that they choose, if they follow the words of

Job, they will know that they are continuing Mickey's legacy:

"For there was no one on earth like him, a pure and straight man, respecting God and avoiding sin." Job 1:1 & 2:3

Whenever I read these lines I think of Mickey. It is such an appropriate epitaph, but not just because he was as close as it gets to being such a person. It is because these words, these characteristics were precisely what Mickey aspired to. They apply even more appropriately to our mother. She was spared long enough to participate in Mickey's success, and yet, thankfully, not to see his premature death. The epitaph on my father's grave is a quote from the Book of Psalms, that applies to his wife and son too:

"The good person will be like a tree planted by streams of water that gives its fruit at the right time, its leaves do not wither, and whatever he does succeeds." Psalms 1:3

And the commentator says that the leaves refer to the pupils and those that carry on that person's teachings and values.