

My family and I spent a few days at Lake Tahoe over Labor Day weekend. I intended to detach from the news for that short time, and so I did not see the headlines announcing that six hostages had been murdered. I learned via a text message from my husband, who had driven up separately from me. Hersh and the beautiful 6 - gone. I was stunned. I think we were all stunned. Up there in Tahoe, we sat and rewatched Rachel Goldberg-Polin's first speech to the United Nations, tears streaming down my face.

But life goes on. The next day, my friend and I headed out for a quick overnight in the backcountry. About the time that they were burying the beautiful six in the earth of the Holy Land, I was looking out over an alpine lake, nestled against a granite wall. No one was nearby to hear me, and at the top of my lungs, I sang Hanah Senesh's poem, the Trek to Casarea – Eli, Eli. The wind and the lapping water were my accompaniment.

In the soup tureen of my emotions, Hanah Senesh's story blends with Hersh's. Senesh, after escaping Hungary and making a clandestine aliyah, willingly chose to parachute back into Nazi-occupied Europe in order to rescue more Jews. She was caught by the Nazis, tortured and killed - at exactly the same age that Hersh was killed - 23.

Hersh and Senesh will both remain, in Rachel Goldberg-Polin's words, "Forever young". He with his easy smile, who, in his mother's words, "charmed everyone (he) ever talked to, young or old." She, who left us that beautiful poem, about the sand and the sea and the rush of the waters. Hersh Goldberg-Polin and Hanah Senesh both seemed to embody the powerful beauty of life.

My friend Doody, whose life has been bitter and hard, said to me about the many young people who have been killed - why them? Why not me instead?

Stirred into my thoughts and emotions is another young woman who died in her early 20s, Talia Abramowitz Zwebner. I read about Talia in an article by her mother, Heddy Abramowitz, written for the Jerusalem Post. Talia was taken not by terrorists or by Nazis, but by cancer. She and her family fought for three nightmarish years, until she slipped away.

Heddy wrote: “Only in the last few days did my husband and I admit to each other that we had silently and separately offered to God that we would change places. Take me, not her.”

Heddy’s article was framed as a letter to Rachel Goldberg-Polin. She wrote: “I extend an empathetic hand as you join the world’s saddest “club.” No one clambers to get in, and you may feel strangely alone as you add this unwelcome and unsought role of bereaved mother.” Heddy continued later in the article. “Grief has its own pace; it can’t be rushed. It leaves its concealed mark on all; the bruises of having loved. Eventually, the purples give way to yellows and fade until unnoticeable. They remain tender and sore, hereafter your new normal.”

Almost exactly a month after the beautiful 6 were killed, my father-in-law died. He was 84 years old - certainly not OLD, but not young. He was already quite sick when we were up at Tahoe, and as I sang Hanah Senesh’s song and thought about Hersh, I also thought about Fred, Papa, Grandpa – and the difference between a life ripped away excruciatingly young, and a life lived out to fullness. I thought about how much impact Hanah Senesh had in her 23 years. I thought about living life to its fullest, no matter how many years we are given.

When I returned from Tahoe, I did not watch Hersh’s funeral. If our emotions are an unblended mix of many feelings, I was not ready for that intense vicarious pain to be drizzled in.

But I did read Rachel’s eulogy. She blows me away. Even on that terrible day, burying the son that she had been fighting for with all her might for the past 11 months, even then her words were touched with hope. The tears she provoked in me were not the dark, defeatist kind, but tears that cleanse and create a possibility of a future.

“Ok, sweet boy, go now on your journey, I hope it’s as good as the trips you dreamed about, because finally, my sweet sweet boy, finally, finally, finally, finally you are FREE!

I will love you and I will miss you every single day for the rest of my life. But you are right here. I know you are right here, I just have to teach myself to feel you in a new way.”

Today and tomorrow are the holiday of Shminit Atseret - an 8th and 9th day tacked on at the end of Sukkot. But in Israel, it's just an 8th day. Shminit Atseret is only one, intense day. That one day includes the energetic, joyous release of Simchat Torah, the solemnity of Yizkor, and the gravitas of Geshem, the prayer for rain. And now, we have one more to add. Shmini Atseret is also the yahrzeit of all who were martyred on October 7th.

And so in Israel and around the world, rabbis have been discussing how to do Simchat Torah this year. We cannot lose the joy of the holiday. We also cannot hide from the pain of October 7th. But we Jews are very experienced in holding complexly textured emotions. Here at CBJ, we will have 4 hakafot of energetic dancing. And will have three hakafot that dip into the sorrow and the as yet unanswered hopes. Like life itself, Simchat Torah is now a holiday of variegated emotions.

On the secular anniversary of October 7th, Rachel and Jon Polin gave their first interview since Hershe was killed. It was with Israel's channel 12. It is painful, but really worth watching. A few days after that, they spoke to CNN's Anderson Cooper. And about that time, I myself finally watched a recording of Rachel's eulogy.

The words that to me had seemed to suggest hope - you are finally FREE - sounded very different in her mouth than they do on paper. When she spoke them in front of the crowds who had come to mourn with her, her voice broke with desperation. She was trying to convince herself of something she was nowhere close to ready to feel on that day.

In the channel 12 interview, just over a month later, she said: "I'm afraid to figure out what forward looks like without Hershe in it. So I am very much trapped in the extreme present. How do I get through the day? And if I don't think I can do that, so how do I get through the next hour?"

But she also made it clear in that interview, and in the next interview a few days later with CNN, that she wants to figure this out. Here are her words: "We've really made the choice that we really would like to not just exist, but we want to live. We want to live for our girls. And the truth is, I want to live for Hershe. I want

to live the life that Hersh should have lived. And that's a life filled with love and happiness and light, and we will always have this deep void. But I think that it's still possible to have that void and to be happy and choose life.”

Kaddish, as many of you know, is not a prayer about death. It is a prayer exalting God, the source of all life. To live! Whether we are given 120 years, or 84 years, or 60, or 40, or 23 or less - to savor the moments we have. We do not need to stifle pain or sorrow, and nor dampen joy or hope. We can feel it all at once, or feel each emotion separately – but feel them all to their fullest. So long as there is breath in our lungs - כל הנשמה תהלל יה - every breath is praise.

We breathe also for all the people we have lost. Those whom we loved and whose souls are inextricable from ours. Those whom we knew only briefly, but had in some impactful interaction made their marks on our souls. And those whom we've never met, but whose stories heard second and third hand were profound enough to embed within us. We carry them all within ourselves. So long as we choose life, they live on, too.

Dear God, we ask that you remember as well the souls of the Bedouin and Druze and other citizens of Israel, and of the foreign workers who had come to sojourn for a time under the tent of our Jewish state, who became unwilling martyrs to a cause not their own. We ask that you remember as well the souls of the many Palestinian and Lebanese who did not choose violence, but have become its victims.