



Afterward:

## To the Fire on the Mountain

This chapter was written by the author's family in 2008, upon the publication of the Hebrew translation of the book. The chapter was translated into English by Ed Levin.

This chapter shouldn't have been written, and we certainly wish it did not have to be written. But this was the will of the Master of all souls, and the book's author, Rabbi David Zeller, was taken from us prematurely, before seeing his book translated into Hebrew.

Although the book describes David's meetings with remarkable people, and the light and wisdom that he absorbed from them, between the lines, the unique character of the author himself is revealed. Now that the book is available to both English and Hebrew readerships, it assumes a new, and unplanned, significance, that of a rich and fascinating spiritual autobiography, of an author we sorely miss.

We will try to relate the events of the year and a half that passed between the publication of the English edition and his death - a period that we now see as a summation of his life's work.

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After he finished writing *The Soul of the Story*, David began to explore new directions of professional

development. A number of factors led him to engage in a relatively new field in Israel, that has become more prominent in recent years: chaplaincy, spiritual caregiving for the sick. Someone suffering from a severe illness, whether chronic or terminal, needs medical counseling, which he should receive from the doctors and nurses treating him. He also needs assistance in overcoming the bureaucratic obstacles that often hinder his receiving the full rights to which he is entitled, which is the realm of social workers and other professionals. But what about his emotional and spiritual coping with his illness? Who will stand by him, as he faces penetrating questions such as the essence of life, the meaning of suffering, loss, and death? Who will aid the family and those close to him, who, too, experience such intense spiritual distress? Another type of professional is needed here to accompany the patient and the family: the chaplain, who will give the patient and his family the tools necessary to confront suffering from within their own spiritual world, along with the ways to discover the wellsprings of empowerment and healing hidden within that very same world.

Chaplaincy has been in existence in the United States for quite a few years, but its emergence in Israel is a recent development. David contributed significantly to building bridges between the Israeli and American societies, with both of which he was familiar, and in both of which he was comfortable. He was also active in establishing the Israel branch of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains. A broad range of people from different parts of the country, with no

common professional background, and who were previously unacquainted with each other, came to the first meetings held in Israel. It was only natural that many of the participants did not immediately feel at ease with each other and cooperate. David was blessed with the special ability to accept every person for who he is, without blurring differences, but nevertheless demonstrating the shared desire felt by all, and to connect them all to a single hope. He would take the stage and begin to sing, to play, or just talk, and suddenly the atmosphere became more relaxed, more together, more accepting.

Spiritual caregiving for the ill was not new to him. During the time of his first wife Ilana's illness, and even more so at the time of her death, David learned, from his personal and family experience, the great power of song, the great force of a melody. The music albums that he created (he recorded a total of five albums) are characterized by their quiet and meditative style and by David's unique voice. Many people have used these albums to give their ill relatives moments of repose and sweetness on the way to recovery, or in order to alleviate the suffering of the transition to the world beyond, for those who are facing the worst of all. One of the many patients whom he helped over the course of years was 19 year old Dassi Rabinowitz, a resident of Efrat, whom her brave struggle against cancer touched the hearts of many. Bruriah, Dassi's mother, wrote to him:

Our daughter Dassi invited you, David, to come to us with your guitar: "Come at four in the afternoon," she said. "My mother will already

have finished her preparations for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year holiday), and we will prepare ourselves spiritually."

You came with your guitar as she requested, and for two hours we sat around Dassi's bed and sang. You sang and played, and we with you.

I remember you with your silent, delicate, pleasant, gentle singing, that penetrates the chambers of the heart, shakes the soul, infuses the entire body and transforms it into spirit. Song that sounds like a pure prayer, and that expresses humility and acceptance to Heaven.

Dassi closed her eyes and said: "David, when you sing, I hear the angels."

A few hours later, Dassi returned her soul to her maker, with that song ringing in her ears.

When the time came to establish the field of chaplaincy in Israel, David had the knowledge and experience of many years to contribute to this effort, and he was an unfailing source of information and advice for his colleagues. He took part in the writing of instruction programs for chaplains and treatment plans for patients, led workshops, gave lectures, and laid the foundations for a program of chaplain training, that is planned to bear his name. To a great degree, David was one of the founding fathers of the field in Israel.

Chaplaincy also aspires to influence medical staff, and impart the tools needed by health professionals to ease the patient's distress. David was able to encourage the physicians not to forget their humanity, not to forgo

their compassion, even when they wear their white cloaks.

David himself was the first chaplain in the experimental program developed at the time in the Herzog Hospital in Jerusalem. The hospital cares for terminal patients, those with brain injuries, and patients suffering from severe chronic diseases, as well as the mentally ill. He would sit next to the patient as he played and sang. Music was the bridge to the hearts of the patients and their families, but it was followed by words. Consoling, encouraging, and strengthening words. He talked about the healing powers of a smile, and the importance of joy. What he said came from the heart, and the hearts that knew suffering, even the most inflexible, willingly opened to him. He also listened - to grief and pain, to spiritual questioning, and to psychological distress. Sometimes, he was the first person who had really listened to the patient. He succeeded in touching patients of fading consciousness and the weary of the soul. No one could remain indifferent to him. He appealed to all - to the religious and the nonreligious, Jews and non-Jews - and always found the way to touch the individual, from within that person's own private spiritual world.

David assisted in planning weekends meant to enable couples to contend with the challenges to intimacy and family life posed by the incurable illness of one of the spouses. In the fall of 2006, while planning one of these weekends, David's own illness was diagnosed, and he participated in that weekend in Ein Gedi as a chaplain - but also as someone receiving. The transition was not easy, but he succeeded, with all his being, to be on both

sides: he was able to receive, but this did not detract from his ability and will to give. Needless to say, his special situation intensified everyone's experience that weekend, that will never be forgotten by the participants.

The first conference of the *Life's Door-Tishkofet* chaplaincy organization was to be held in the spring of 2007. The conference organizers wanted to honor a central figure in this field, and quite naturally chose David, unanimously. He was happy to attend the conference, and the participants attest that, despite his grave illness, he literally beamed with life and vitality. He spoke, and of course played and sang, with everyone singing with him. No one could imagine that only a few weeks later he would be gone.

The field of chaplaincy has made great strides in Israel since 2007. Chaplains are active in various hospitals; the medical and social-work establishment is becoming increasingly aware of its importance; an umbrella organization has been established to coordinate the activities of the different chaplaincy organizations. Among all this activity, David will always be remembered for having laid the groundwork for, and raising the flag of, chaplaincy.

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In June 2006 an important milestone stood before David: he was about to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. His relatives and friends felt that this was a wonderful opportunity to give back some of the outpouring of love and giving that he always imparted to all. The idea was simple yet special: to produce a book that would be

a response to his book. Since David called his book *The Soul of the Story: Meetings with Remarkable People*, the new book would be called *The Story of a Soul: Meetings with a Remarkable Person*. And who would write it? His family, friends, and anyone who knew him. We copied his personal address book (without him knowing) and we sent a request to hundreds of the people he knew, to write about their acquaintanceship with David, about something special they learned from him, and so on. We expected a few dozen responses, but within a month no less than 120 people had written for the book, and their contributions filled 240 pages!

People wrote warmly, with joy, and with gratitude. His nephews described the special attention he paid them, far beyond what they expected of an uncle. His students told how he, quite literally, opened the door to spirituality, and how much they learned from his own practices, that for him were simple and taken for granted. The newly observant explained why it was his way, specifically, that enabled them to draw closer to God. Many, many recalled his pleasant voice, that was an anchor for them in moments of difficulty and despair, and a source of tranquility and joy within life's turmoil. Some were happy to share something he had said to them, and that had profoundly influenced them. Several told how David's singing and personal attention had aided their recovery from serious illnesses, or eased their beloved relative's passage to the next world.

What a range of people! Jews and non-Jews, of all types, from the world over, and from all types of spiritual

traditions. This was a rich and colorful mosaic of love and gratitude.

We published the book in a limited number of copies, and it came off the press just in time for the surprise party. Marty (may he be speedily healed) and Havi Lee, friends of the family, graciously offered to hold the party in their home in Jerusalem, and gave a splendid party. They asked him to come and lead an evening of study and song, and so they ensured that he would bring his guitar.

When David took the book in his hands, he would later relate, he read the title on the cover, and thought to himself, "How nice! They prepared an album with empty pages, so that everyone at the party could write several words," but he flipped and flipped through the book, and there just weren't any blank pages. The book made him very happy, but we didn't know whose joy was greater: his, or that of everyone who knew and appreciated him, for having been given the opportunity to thank him in such a special way. (The book is available for download on our website, [www.DavidZeller.org](http://www.DavidZeller.org).)

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The last year of David's life was not at all easy. But it also revealed exceptional powers, even for him. His mother Lore died that June, and a few weeks later his mother-in-law Beulah, Hannah Sara's mother, also passed away. Both were over ninety years old, with full, rich lives behind them, but loss is always hard. Within this period of loss the strange symptoms of physical weakness, that he had never known, kept

intensifying. The first symptom was damage to his vocal chords, which was expressed in continuing hoarseness. He had to undergo a comprehensive and exhausting series of tests, and it was only months later that his doctors succeeded in diagnosing an illness by the frightening name of "Amyloidosis," that originated in a rare bone marrow defect, that strikes only eight out of a million people ("I told you I'm something special!" he would joke), and was therefore difficult to diagnose. Medicine knows of no remedy for the disease, but there are ways to retard its further progress.

David launched a frontal assault on his illness. It seemed that this was the test for which he had prepared his entire life. He mobilized all the "heavy artillery" he knew and all his knowledge of the relationship between body-mind-soul. He spent long hours in meditation, using various imagery for recovery and healing. He went for treatment to experts in the connections between illnesses and the soul. On doctors' orders, he underwent chemotherapy. He turned to rabbis and Kabbalists. He added a name that expressed his longing for healing, and from then on he was called "Raphael David." He tried different types of diets, began to eat only organic food, and even dared to try food that he hadn't eaten for forty years: on the advice of Rabbi Scheinberger, he began to eat meat - which he did with complete simplicity, without complaining about his being forced to "betray" vegetarianism. He used the medicinal herbs sent to him by his friends from all over the world. He went to workshops and participated in weekends, trying a broad spectrum of methods to cleanse the body and restore its systems. He said, in

perfect humility: "I'm trying everything. Whatever they suggest - I'll take." He didn't check first if it corresponded with his "agenda." He thought nothing of prestige or consistency.

David took pains to find sparks of light in his illness. "This is meant to help me with chaplaincy for the sick," he said. "This is how I'll know the meaning of chemotherapy and endless tests and treatments, and I'll be able to talk with the sick from a place of identification."

Every once in a while there would be some improvement that raised everyone's hopes, but the general direction was one of increasing weakness. On occasion he had to be hospitalized for a few days for treatments and tests, but even when he was at home, he had difficulty in acting regularly, with the same energy that was always his mark.

In the fall of 2006 a special world prayer was conducted for his recovery. Before the prayer, David asked that a message be sent to all those praying. First, he wanted to mention the names of additional people in need of such assistance, and he requested that everyone add the names of their acquaintances and relatives. Additionally, he asked that we add the following to the announcement:

Be sure your prayers and visualizations are positive. Do not focus on the dis-ease with your wrinkled forehead and tightly closed eyes. Dance and sing for joy with full healing in your mind, heart and soul.

When people came to the Ba'al Shem Tov for healing, he would not focus on the sick individual. He regarded the person as a sign that the Shechina, HaShem's own Mystical Feminine Dimension, was out of harmony - in dis-ease. He would pray for the healing of the Shechina, and the healing would come down into the world and restore the health of the ailing individuals.

The prayer service was held simultaneously in Efrat, New York, and Los Angeles, and concluded with singing and dancing. Once again, this time in less joyous circumstances, we saw in just how many peoples' lives David played a very significant role. Wishes for recovery, blessings, and words of love streamed to him incessantly, and some also offered material aid.

In the spring a new album of his work appeared, *Aliveness*, from a live performance of his a couple of years previously. In contrast with his earlier albums, in which he sang mainly Reb Shlomo's melodies, this album consisted exclusively of his original compositions. The theme song of the album is called "*Chai Ani*," based on a teaching by Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, the author of *Meor Einayim*: when a person's spirit falls to the depths of despair, he must think: "Why, I am alive - *chai ani*! And who is this aliveness I am? Is it not the Holy Blessed One!" These words captured David's heart, and when he gave over this teaching of the *Meor Einayim*, you could really feel how he was filled with vitality by the very knowledge that it is the Creator, the Holy Blessed One, who fills him with life force.

Despite his grave illness, David did not lose interest in his surroundings. He continued to be concerned about those he knew and their lives. He didn't "escape" from talking about himself, but his visitors frequently discovered that they were talking mostly about themselves....

He continued to teach in Jerusalem and in Efrat, to the extent that his condition allowed this, and even when his body weakened, his soul continued to shine with its sweet light.

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The last week of David's life was full of upheavals. On Sunday we received the results of the tests showing that the chemotherapy that he had received had had no effect. On the one hand, of course, this was very disappointing, but, on the other, David saw this as a possible opening for beginning innovative alternative treatments, that could not be administered during the chemotherapy regimen, or, alternatively, for a new series of experimental, and expensive, chemotherapy treatments. He began to examine different options, and he spoke with a number of people. All of them expressed their desire to help as much as possible, and this deeply touched him.

His spirit soared on the Shavuot holiday, on the Wednesday of that week. His physical condition improved a bit, but it was mainly his inner feeling that thrived. He said that he felt as if he was immersed in light, and that he didn't have the tools to take in all the *chesed* (lovingkindness) that poured down on him from above, and from his friends. His friends who studied

with him that night insisted that they were not teaching him - the three learned together. During the course of the holiday he sang, over and over, the song "*Shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid*" (I see God equally before me always) in his special melody. Everyone around him was very happy. We wondered: were we witnessing a turning point?

This was indeed a turning point, but not of the type we hoped for. Friday morning, 8 Sivan 5767 (May 25, 2007), David did not wake up. The doctor who was called to the house could only pronounce his death. The Rabbis say (BT Ketubot 103b): "Dying on the eve of the Sabbath is a fine sign for a person," because he immediately enters the Sabbath that is observed in Heaven.

Thousands participated in the funeral, even though it was held only a few hours before the Sabbath. His *talit*-covered body lay before the Shirat Shlomo synagogue that David had founded. In his eulogy Shlomo Riskin, the rabbi of Efrat, said: "There are many rabbis in Efrat, many Torah scholars, many righteous, but there is only one angel."

David was buried in the Kfar Etzion cemetery. During the funeral procession we sang the songs that he would sing with his special, angelic voice, the voice that was now silenced forever. And in Heaven a special Kabbalat Shabbat must have been held for him, with Reb Shlomo and Reb Gedaliah, with Reb David in the center, and they must have sung in his melody, "And who is this aliveness I am? Is it not the Holy Blessed One!"

During the *shivah* mourning week, the house teemed with people. Friends, students, and relatives came especially from the United States; rabbis and public figures came to honor his memory; his students and friends, stunned and hurting, told of his matchless contribution to their lives; here and there, people came whom we had never met before, who told us how David was to thank for all their Jewishness and their connection to God and their soul, how this was due to his teachings, his willingness to give performances and speak anywhere, and his ability to find the path to every person's heart.

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David's voice was stilled before he reached the age of sixty-one, but his life song continues to resonate in our hearts. Happy are we for having merited such a husband, such a father, such a rabbi. May it be His will that we are worthy of continuing the journey on the path of the heart, to continue to march to the fire on the mountain.

And may it be His will that for every measure that God measures out for us, that we learn, like David, to give thanks to Him very, very much.

[a photo gallery of many of the remarkable people mentioned on this book, and of David at various stops along his spritual path is available at [www.davidzeller.org/book](http://www.davidzeller.org/book)]