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### Remembering Ada Rapoport-Albert

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## Remembering Ada Rapoport-Albert

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NAOMI SEIDMAN

People say that there's something in human nature – maybe particularly in modernity – that makes it hard for us to see the truth of our own mortality, to face death straight on. I think that's true, also, for the deaths of others. Things get in the way. We get in the way. That's how it was for me in the first weeks after Ada died. It wasn't the sort of difficulty Freud talks about in his essay on mourning, the ambivalence or even hatred that so often shadows love, and makes mourning a complicated enterprise. It's easy to imagine that there would be ambivalence: Ada was extraordinarily beautiful, in a world in which beauty (especially female beauty) is often rewarded with unfair advantage. And we were both Jewish Studies professors, part of a culture full of petty or worthy professional rivalries, long-held grudges, perceived slights. But these were not the complications for me. Somehow, I managed easily and wholeheartedly to forgive Ada for being so beautiful, and I cannot remember ever feeling jealous, either, of her brilliance. The beauty was just too singular, too outside the usual measures; and as for intellectual rivalry, there was no malice within her in which my own pettiness might take root. I know I'm not alone in this. No one I know disliked her. Ada's warmth and generosity just ruled that out.

In those first weeks, what got in the way of feeling the loss more purely and generously, more lovingly, and in a way that was more about Ada than me were the other familiar complications of mourning: guilt and regret. Mostly regret, at least at first. What I kept revisiting in my mind was a minor social disaster of my relationship with Ada that could now never be reversed. The disaster was this: I had spent time with Ada at conferences, those usual watering holes for people of our type. I had spent time with Ada in Berkeley, and shared a meal or two with her in restaurants or a friend's home. But I had never been to her home, and she had never been to mine. I let her know, about ten or fifteen years ago, that my family and I were going to be in London for a few days, taking her up on her longstanding invitation to tell her if I came to town. And of course she invited us to dinner. But the email correspondence never included the crucial detail of her address (though I'd always loved to hear her say that she lived in

Islington, which captured for me the charm of London neighbourhood names), and I was just too shy and nervous to ask for it (if it isn't clear by now, I had a crush on Ada, as many people did and do). I waited until the very day of the invitation, but heard back only the next day. Ada had been cooking for our dinner, and had no computer or email at home. A screw-up, for which both of us were apologetic and forgiving. As I said, it isn't guilt but regret I'm feeling, that I missed the opportunity to move up in the ranks of Ada's social network, a little closer to the inner circle. We had talked so intimately about our families, but this would have been a chance for Ada to meet mine, and for me to see where she had raised her children. And now she had died and this had never happened, and my place in her ranks of colleagues and friends was forever frozen short of where I wanted it to be.

The first time I saw Ada Rapoport-Albert, after teaching her work for years, was at a conference, I forget now when or where. She was on a panel, and the room filled up when it was her turn to speak, and then emptied in that guilty way people sneak out of a panel when the person they want to hear is done. She spoke without notes, and with that beautiful, resonant, English-Israeli voice. It was a majestic, elegant, clear, and riveting talk, in which we were walked through her thought process, so that along with the pleasure of learning something, she also shared the pleasure of thought itself. I had never seen an academic woman with such command of a room, or such beauty and style. The beauty was rare enough, a willowy form, extraordinarily fine bones, intelligent eyes, but the style was absolutely unique: there may have been something hippie in the length of her hair and cut of her clothes, but it took a radical turn in Ada's case in the narrowness of her colour palette, and in the dark shade of her lipstick. Ada wore black and grey multilayered tunics and dresses drawn from an earlier time (where did she shop? no one else wore clothes like hers), an era of black-and-white photography, even a hint of the monk's robe. And then there was the smoking, reminiscent of the great (male) scholars of a previous generation. The effect framed Ada as someone with more personality than our timid academic culture allowed us, someone from a different era, before email was read and answered every seventeen minutes. And then there was her hair, sometimes braided like the schoolgirl you could still see in her, that told the story of the places and people she'd been in its length, in its shades of grey.

Now, as I write all this, what impedes my mourning is not simply regret

but also guilt, for not doing a better job, then or now, of distinguishing what Ada said from how she looked as she said it. Is it a sin to be captivated by a person's appearance? Does it make it better that I know I wasn't alone in this? I can recall Ada mesmerizing a full room (the room was always full when she spoke) at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where I was teaching at the time, on the subject of wife-swapping among the followers of Jacob Frank. Ada explained that we would be wrong to imagine such practices solely in terms of sexual licence: the women who participated in these orgies were fulfilling a religious obligation, in which pleasure was as irrelevant as it was for such other required Frankist transgressions as eating the tallow of an animal. This was the subject she presented to view, posing the conundrum in her own performance: listening to her speak clearly, beautifully, could we overcome our own fascination with her subject and her beauty, and hear something true beyond that? Can you ask an enraptured audience to rise enough above its own rapture to see it for what it is? We tried, I think, but we failed.

At dinner that evening, Ada laughed at her own pleasure at being flirted with by someone among the usual clutch of old Jewish men who spent their days at a café table in front of the French Hotel, where she was staying. "It was nice," she protested, "no one's done that for a while." I held back my surprise at that. And then she went on to say that it was mostly a relief, at her age, to put sex behind her. I thought, but didn't say, that if this is what she was like with sex behind her, I was glad to have missed the full force of Ada in her youth. We spoke of family and work, too, and I remember Ada praising her students for their brilliance and dedication, and worrying about their futures in an uncertain academic market. I had had similar conversations with others in the field, but what struck me was that Ada spoke of these students at the same intimate point in the conversation, and with the same concern and love, that she spoke of her own family.

I wrote the first draft of this essay in the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that speeded-up two-act drama that takes us from birth (*hayom harat olam*) to death (white shrouds) in the space of ten days, as if we need this compression to understand that we will die. This was a landscape that Ada, more than most people, seemed to live in, and it was part of what we saw in her, with the spectre of cancer hanging over her, and with the ever-present cigarette. The first time we ever really talked, I think, was at yet another academic event, where I joined her for a cigarette on a balcony overlooking the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University. I'd

stopped smoking years before, but I wasn't going to miss the opportunity to skip a speech and huddle over a lighter with Ada Rapoport-Albert, like high school seniors playing hooky.

So there you have it. We lost Ada, and it was the enormous loss of a human being of such singularity that she seems almost to represent and embody the singularity that is the most precious possession of every human being. And what has got in the way of my seeing Ada, of feeling the loss purely as loss, is not only my awkwardness and unfulfilled wish to be closer to her than I managed, but also my love – especially my love, complicated as it was by fascination, attraction, her blinding beauty, and stunning mind. So I will say, as clearly as I can, that even if I sometimes missed her soul, as pure as a child's, among the glitter and glamour, in truth I never missed her soul. And that was because of her, more than because of me, because that soul was always there, and in some part of me that was the best part of me, I felt it without impediment.

The regrets, I hope, will fade with time. But there is one thing I will never regret: that I took every opportunity that this mortal life presented to smoke a cigarette with Ada Rapoport-Albert, of blessed and eternal memory.