

## Yizkor 2018/5779

Any tour of Florence, Italy is not complete without a visit to the Accademia—the famous, yet tiny museum of renaissance art. The star of the space, towering beneath the naturally lit cupola, is Michelangelo's David, sling at the ready, outsized head and hands reflecting the power of reason and action.

But you are missing something remarkable if your head is down reading your Rick Steve's tour guide as you approach David at the end of the hall. In some ways, the statues lining the hallway *on the way* to David are as stunning and awe-inspiring as the master's masterpiece.

There are a series of figures called The Prisoners. They are unfinished works, liminal

**creatures caught between the base blocks of Carrera marble they were, and the sublime craftsmanship of the artist's intent they are becoming. They literally look imprisoned—as if they are living beings, violently pulling themselves out of the cold stone. Chisel marks are the only sign that a skilled hand produced such a paradoxical sight.**

**But perhaps what we see most clearly in these works is the power of potential. How something seemingly modest or ordinary could, with the right effort, opportunity, talent and fortune, grow into another thing entirely—majestic, inspiring, even evocative of faith in a higher power.**

**These images, these impressions, these lessons have come painfully to my mind over the past few months as I've faced the untimely and horrific loss of two people. And though I've officiated at hundreds of funerals and counseled hundreds of families through crisis and grief, these two recent deaths have struck me to my core—for they try the faith of any who mourn such lost potential.**

**In May, my close friend for over 30 years, my colleague, and the President of our movement's seminary, Rabbi Aaron D. Panken, died in the crash of a small plane he was piloting. To this moment, I still am having trouble reconciling this new reality of a world without him. My mind races to what could have been, for Aaron had really just**

**settled into this relatively new position, poised to take his institution, and our movement as a whole, in innovative, vibrant, and transformative directions. What an unconscionable squander of such a rare and impactful life.**

**And of course, because we were at the same stage in life, with secure marriages and young adult children, I lament all the simchas he'll miss and the generations to come for whom he will be but a memory and an image.**

**A few weeks ago, as many of you know, an emerging young man, a mere 12 years old, Max Cohen, perished in a car accident. He had just returned from Camp Kalsman and a remarkable trip abroad with his family. He was hot in preparation for his upcoming Bar Mitzvah in**

**March. He left the house, as he always had, to go on the kind of day trip we always take, and he never returned.**

**My friend and brother Aaron died, as did his biblical namesake, at the top of the mountain of his life—accomplished, fulfilled and influential. This boy-becoming-man was on the cusp of his wondrous journey into adulthood. And yet, even in just a few short years, Max impressed himself onto so many lives. Now, he will forever be frozen into adolescence, as we imagine who he might have become as the milestones pass in the coming years.**

**In the face of these inconceivable, ineffable tragedies, our first response is often denial, in that they were *just with us*—how could they now**

**be gone? Then, when the immensity of the loss sinks in, we feel despair, our faith and trust in a predictable, just world order shaken to its foundations, threatening all we've taken for granted as safe and secure. And then, there is often rage—at the wanton waste of such lost potential, seeking someone or something to blame for something that, more often than not, is but a random act of fate in our fragile, vulnerable existence.**

**But we hope and pray, with time and perspective, with the support of friends and counsel of confidantes, to arrive at a place of legacy. More than mere remembrance, we seek a way to extend their vision, continue their work, realize their longings, mark their lives by indelibly**

**marking the lives of others for good. And in this desire, there is balm and healing for all of us who have loved and lost.**

**For my friend Aaron, funds are being raised to endow professorships in his name at the 4 campuses of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Thousands of future rabbis and Jewish professionals will prepare to serve our people in Aaron's name.**

**For Max, funds are accruing for some kind of commemoration at Camp Kalsman, perhaps a facility for the Israeli Dodgeball-like game of Gaga, something that he enjoyed immensely. And when countless young people play on that court amidst the verdant trees and immersive Jewish**

**life of camp, Max's name will, indeed, be for blessing.**

**For Aaron and Max, their potential for good, and fun and hope and righteousness will never be truly lost, nor will the imprint of all of our loved ones who have passed to the next stage, as long as our lives are lived in tribute to them, as long as our being reflects the breadth of their brief time with us. Amen.**