

D'var Torah
Erev Rosh Hashanah
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Congregation Beth Israel,
Austin, Texas
"The Idols in Our Heads"
2017/5778

Dear Friends,

A man runs into an old friend in Warsaw before the war. “Mendel,” he cries, “It's so good to see you! But I can't believe how much you've changed!”

“But...”

“I mean, the last time we ran into each other, you had a full head of dark, curly hair, but now, your hair is thinning and flecked with gray!”

“But...”

“And Mendel, you were always thin and lanky, but now, well, you've got quite a *pupik* on you, it practically hangs over your belt!”

“But...”

“And Mendel, you were always such a snappy dresser, never a hair out of place, but now here you are, looking like you just rolled out of bed!”

The other fellow, now completely exasperated, interrupts and says, “But, that's what I've been trying to tell you: I'm *not* Mendel, I'm *Yossel!*”

“Oh my God – you've gone and *changed your name*, too!”

You know, I've been thinking a lot at this time of year about my father, Joe, who passed away this past April. I can picture him, in better times, laughing at a joke like the one I just told you. (Although my dad enjoyed hearing a good joke, he wasn't so good at telling them...) But I also remember that there were times, toward the end of his life, when he was feeling his age and grieving over some of the things he could no longer do, that he would express a sense of resignation: "Maybe it's time for God to take me." Or he would worry that he had become a burden to us. Sometimes in those moments, I would remind him what it was like when we stood together on the *bema* in the sanctuary last Yom Kippur, and sang together one of the old choir pieces that he, my brother Bob and I grew up singing in the High Holy Day choir in our Conservative synagogue in Philadelphia.

To be honest, I proposed we sing that duet largely to give him something to look forward to. That included what I hoped would be happy anticipation of not only our Yom Kippur, late afternoon "gig" itself, but also of the opportunity to rehearse together. Sometimes we practiced in the car on the way to a doctor's appointment – and if you've ever taken care of an elderly relative, then you know that there are *lots of* doctor's appointments. And sometimes we would sit at one of the little patio tables on the front porch of his assisted living place, and we would sing there, garnering a few strange looks as we did. At the age of 94 my dad still had a beautiful tenor voice. It made me very sad that his pitch had recently gotten a little

wobbly, since it had always been very precise, but I chalked that up to interference from his hearing aids.

When the last service of Yom Kippur last year finally rolled around, I admit to having experienced a lot of apprehension just before we started to sing. He was having trouble getting up out of his chair and onto his walker, and the thought flashed through my mind, “Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe this whole thing is just a sick, narcissistic need for attention that I'm foisting upon my poor congregation.”

A lot of you were there. At the age of 94, he slowly made his way up the ramp on his walker. I gave a little introduction about the hand signals that our Cantor, Lou Goldhirsch, used to employ in order to communicate with the choir in the choir loft. If the Cantor twirled his finger in the air like this, it meant, “They love this one! In fact, the people in the front row are weeping; let's sing it again!”

So, last Yom Kippur evening my father and I started to sing. “*El Melech Yoshev 'Al Kisay Rachamim*; God, The Sovereign, Seated on a Throne of Compassion.” Amazingly, it sounded pretty good. And then, when the last note had been sung, we heard laughter, and looked up, and a lot of people in the congregation were clapping and smiling and twirling *their* fingers in the air, as if to say, “do it again.” My father was completely caught off guard by the congregation's reaction that afternoon. He couldn't get over how much people got out of what he had done. And

so, in the weeks and months that followed, when he was feeling burdensome, sad and less than “useful,” I would remind him, “Dad, remember singing on Yom Kippur. Remember all the pleasure you gave all those people. You are not useless.” He was not Mendel, decrepit and forgotten. Even as an old man, Yossel (which was his Yiddish name) was still alive in there.

When the members of the congregation twirled their fingers in the air as if to say, “sing it again,” I joked, “From your mouth to God's ears – next year let's do it again.” But, alas, that was not to be.

On March 19th, we did get to celebrate his 95th birthday at our house with some family and close friends, and it was beautiful. In the name of fire safety, I put 9.5 candles on his cake and told him that he would need to mentally multiply it by 10 to represent the requisite number of birthdays.

Around three weeks later, he landed in the emergency room. Four days after that he was gone.

Two years ago, when my mother had passed away just a few months before Rosh Hashanah, I spoke on Rosh Hashanah eve about becoming a member of The International Federation of Grieving Children, a membership card that all of us receive sooner or later. Since my dad's passing, a number of you have said to me, “Now you know what it is to be an orphan.” And yes, I – like many of you, I know – am now a member of *that* club, as well.

I am grateful for the way that Judaism presents a roadmap for mourning, a stage by stage process, that urges us to take our time, feel our feelings and be compassionate with ourselves. I think it's especially important to have such a process in our time, since modern life cruelly assaults the fragile mourner with endless administrative tasks and paperwork to file when a loved one, especially a parent, passes away. And it's easy for the feelings of grief to be swept aside in all the busywork.

Additionally, beyond the paperwork, especially when it's your second parent, there is the task of going through your loved one's possessions, cleaning out their house or apartment, figuring out what to keep and what to give away. I began working on this task toward the end of April and didn't manage to finish until mid-August, and that was with *a lot* of help.

I was dreading the first time I had to visit my Dad's apartment after he died, thinking that being back in his home would be unbearably sad. But to my total surprise, I was overcome with a sense of comfort, even happiness. That space was so evocative of his presence, evocative in a way that brought solace.

There, on his dresser, were neat little piles of keychains, wallets and other items, a miniature art installation testifying to his love of and need for order and organization. There was his walker, exactly where we left it the day we took him to

the emergency room. There was the couch where he solved his daily Sudoku puzzles and watched TV.

For some time after that, I was mostly involved in making order out of stacks of bills, invoices, mail, sorting through what to keep for later – guessing what might be important. This was both satisfying and discouraging because in a major cleanup operation, things have a way of getting worse before they get better, especially when you are in the phase where you are sitting on the floor, surrounded by teetering stacks of sorted papers. Thank God Leslie Rosner, a member of our congregation who is also a professional organizer, and my brother Bob, who is an infinitely more organized person than I am, were there with love, support and skill at crucial moments to help me stay on task.

The paper culling and sorting part of the job was relatively easy. Things began to get more fraught and difficult when it came time to begin to decide what to keep and what to give or throw away. It's not just about “what do we want to keep, “but “what would he have *wanted us* to keep?”

The hardest part of this phase was going through my Dad's clothing – articles of clothing being so intimate and so evocative of someone's presence and physicality. “That red and white plaid shirt looks his hug. And that pink and white striped shirt is what he wore when he wanted to dress up.” Had I not been spurred on by not wanting to continue to pay rent on an apartment that he was no longer inhabiting

(something that my ever-frugal father would never have wanted) I think that the task of going through my father's clothing would have paralyzed me completely. My Mom and Dad were both children of the Great Depression, and like many of their generation, they never threw away anything that might later be useful. So let's just say that there was *a lot* to go through, that my fantasy of having this task completed by the end of July was never fulfilled, and that my expectation that “they had already downsized from a house to an apartment so this shouldn't take very long at all” was not even remotely realistic.

And then I came face-to-face with their “memorabilia.” My parents were not simply keepers of things that might later have utilitarian value. They were also very sentimental in what they held onto over the years.

There were many items that I knew my parents had kept but had not seen in a very long time: Mother's Day and Father's Day arts and crafts projects that my brother and I had made for them in elementary school. Two tiny boxes containing my brother's and my baby teeth (somehow both sweet and a little creepy at the same time). The electric Hanukkah menorah that we put in the window when we were kids, lest we burn the house down.

But there were also things that I didn't know existed: a long, narrow, green metal drawer – looking something like what you would slide out of the safe deposit box at the bank – a drawer which is crammed from front to back with black-and-white

photographs, hundreds of them, each one of them – God bless my father – dated by hand on the back. And there was the pitch pipe that my Dad would use to find the right musical key for that High Holy Day Choir that he, my brother and I sang in together when we were growing up. And this triangular, plastic thing that I figured out was the sunburn prevention nose guard that he would clip onto his sunglasses when they lived in Florida and he and my mom would walk the beach together. But of all these artifacts, the one that truly knocked me back on my heels was a small book, with a maroon, faux leather cover, about 5 x 7 in size, with the word “Autographs” embossed on the front cover. The first thing I noticed, thumbing through the pages, was that all the handwritten inscriptions were dated, and that most of the dates were for the years 1937 or 1938.

On the second, inside page of the book, was handwritten the following message: “January, 1938. This is the autograph book, that I shall always keep as my remembrance of Fitzsimons Junior High School.” It was signed, “Elaine Silberman.”

So, this was my mother's junior high school autograph book. I was holding in my hands something that she had acquired when she was 14 years old, a little younger than her youngest granddaughter is now. My grandparents were poor Russian immigrants, so I imagined my adolescent mother explaining to them what an autograph book was and why she *needed* one. Indeed, when I explained to Shira

what I had come across in going through her Zaida's things, she smiled and her eyes got wide. To me, holding that autograph book was like holding a moon rock, or one of the original Tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Nearly all of the writings are rendered in flowing, cursive script, testimony to the days when schools taught penmanship. There are a lot of pages that begin with “roses are red, violets are blue...” Stuck between two pages, there is a postage stamp sized, black-and-white photo of my teenage father, who was quite the hunk in his day. One of my mother's friends had even written her a poem in Yiddish. But my favorite spot in the book is where one of my mother's childhood friends had created a little flap on the page by dog-earing a corner. On the top of the little flap she had written, “this is only for *dirty people*.” And when you lift up the flap, it says, “use soap and water.” One can only surmise that this is what passed for risqué humor among the teenage children of immigrant Jews in Philadelphia in the 1930s.

That little book was more than an unexpected link to the past. It connected me to the reality that my elderly mother, who had died of Alzheimer's at the age of 92, had been a *teenager* once, a young girl with her entire life ahead of her, an eighth-grader, looking forward to heading off to Girls High School in Philadelphia, which was the equivalent of what we would today call an academic magnet school.

Although I of course knew in some abstract sense that my mother had once been a

teenager, and a little girl before that, I had in recent years forgotten that these things were once true. I had settled, instead, into the conception, the abstraction, that my mother was An Old Woman with Alzheimer's Disease.

During our visits in the memory care unit in which she lived out the last few years of her life, I had learned that if I started to mentally compare who she had become to the person she *used to be*, the comparison, and the futile wish that she could go back to being who she had been, was almost unbearably painful. But so long as I could be in the moment with her, as she was, I could enjoy and appreciate the time we had together in the here and now. I told myself at the time that this way of framing my mother's existence was healthy and in the service of being with her in the present moment. But I've also come to understand that pigeonholing my mother's existence in this way was an emotional defense mechanism.

Holding my mother's eighth grade autograph book in my hands thus reminded me that our *ideas* of who other people are, and this includes, perhaps *especially* the people *closest* to us, are only that – only ideas. Our conceptions of people, the way we pigeonhole them, the way we make sense of them, are merely crude sketches of their reality that our minds have created. Our ideas about other people aren't really who they are, but rather a story that we have made up about them.

We do this with strangers we don't know, creating an entire biography about the middle-aged guy with the "man bun" in the SXSW T-shirt in front of us in line at

the bank. And we create unfounded stories, as well, with the people closest to us, when we take their struggling with some inner pain personally, reading their struggle as stubbornness or hostility toward us.

To put it another way, we are all too often convinced by the stories in our heads that we are talking to Mendel, when in fact, standing before us, is Yossel. Yes, the thoughts in our heads can be very seductive. As the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism taught, "In a place where someone sits in thought, there they are completely."¹

And so my mother's life was infinitely richer and greater and happier and sadder than the stories I had made up in recent years to help me cope with her decline. She had also been an infant, a teenager, a daughter. Alzheimer's did not define her entire life – it was only part of the final chapter.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater in his first book about Judaism and mindfulness teaches that in any given moment of experience, we are presented with a choice between staying with the truth of our experience or telling ourselves a story about it. And it is our inability to get beyond those stories, to see them for the fictions that they are, to connect directly to what our eyes and ears are telling us, that trips us up and causes us and others so much unnecessary suffering. How much of the high-

¹ Found in *Keter Shem Tov*, an anthology of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings by his disciple, Jacob Joseph of Polnoye.

volume shouting and conflict in our civic life is a result of our clinging to ideologies and preconceived notions that don't fit current reality? How many times have you found yourself arguing, not with the person in front of you, but with some fantasy of who you believe they *ought* to be?

It reminds me of a Hasidic Torah commentary on a verse from Leviticus, chapter 19, a text that we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon. The Torah text says, “Do not turn to idols.” Our teacher, a sage known as the *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, understands this to mean, “do not turn to what you have made up in your own mind.”

Now this seems awfully harsh, this assertion that getting lost in the stories in my head is a kind of idolatry. Plus, in 21st-century America, what does idolatry even mean? In a now famous commencement address delivered by the late novelist David Foster Wallace, the author spoke these words to the graduating seniors: “[H]ere's something... that's weird but true: in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough...

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are our default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.”²

We cheat ourselves out of so much when we are imprisoned in our own heads, locked in our habitual but very human stories of fear, annoyance, avoidance and self-justification. The actual world outside our interior monologue is great enough and rich enough to make the heart burst, beautiful enough and miraculous enough that the *Shehecheyanu* blessing – “thank You for enabling me to live in this moment” – seems to be the only adequate response. Life is also painful enough and unjust enough that the only awakened, decent response is “*Hineni*,” here I am, ready to make sacrifices, to do what is needed, to give of myself to others, and to extend lovingkindness to myself and to other people.

This is a great truth, the truth about life that many have sought to express.

Our Hasidic teacher puts it this way:

² <http://www.metastatic.org/text/This%20is%20Water.pdf>

“Anyone who serves God in all his ways... will [seek to] do everything mindfully. Eating, drinking, sleeping, engaging in conversation in order to bring others closer to God, or to help dispel their sadness, or to help them in their business to sustain them so that they may devote more time to serving God – if even these (worldly) activities are done [with deep awareness], then everything [we do becomes a kind of prayer], *avodah*.”³

David Foster Wallace continues:

“If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider [ways of understanding your experience] that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience [standing in line in a] crowded, hot, slow, [supermarket] situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it... You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.”⁴

³ *Degel Machaneh Efraim, Kedoshim, “'Al tifnu el ha-elilim.”*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Friends, nearly every aspect of Jewish life and practice, but especially Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the days in between, are geared toward drawing us out of ourselves, out of our stories, out of what David Foster Wallace calls “our default setting” and what the *Degel Machaneh Efraim* called “the idolatry of our ideas,” into a deeper and more loving connection to life, to those around us, to ourselves and to God. This time of year can teach us how to speak sensitively and compassionately to the Yossel that stands before us, even when we would rather scream at Mendel. This time of year can be an opportunity to wake up to the truth, as Maimonides teaches us about the sound of the shofar blasts:

“Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers, out of your slumber! Examine your deeds, and... [r]emember your Creator, you who are caught up in your daily routine, losing sight of eternal truth...”⁵

Our ancestors have bequeathed this season, these words, this music, as to us, to lead us on the path of waking up and recognizing the truth of our lives. May this be so for all of us, now and in the New Year that begins tonight. Amen.

⁵ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Teshuvah 3:4.*