

## Shoftim/Elul      Friday, Sept. 2, 2011 CBS

Today is my cousin's 38<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Growing up, I admired my first cousin, Andrea, because she was so smart and compassionate and, even though she was much older than me, (I was 11 the year she got married), she still had time to be my pen pal. She even kept my letters, and recently sent me one that I had written to her many years ago. I quote, "Dear Cousin Andy: How are you? I didn't answer you sooner but I have been so busy with flute lessons, school, homework and girl scouts, and to top that off, I didn't have any stationery! (Oh, those good old days before email!) It's taffy apple day at school and I have to bring money. I just bought another Partridge Family Album. Now I have all three albums that they cut! (Oh, those good old days before CD's. Although my daughter Emily informs me that records are cool again)

I'll spare you the rest, but it sure took me back. I don't remember much about being 11, but seeing that letter again, I remember how much I loved that yellow stationery with the big white flowers, and how carefully I wrote in cursive. And I remember that Partridge family album, and those cool velvet costumes they wore on the cover, and how excited I was that Danny Bonaduce's birthday was the same day as mine. Re-reading that letter again, I also recalled how much I loved hearing about Andrea's exciting college life, her fiancé Arnold, and their upcoming wedding. And in that moment it suddenly hit me: I still owed them a gift!

As some of you know, we had planned to move this summer, which forced me to clean out and organize my house, in preparation for downsizing to a much smaller apartment. As it turns out, that won't be happening, and we will be staying put (trust me, you don't want to know!), but I'm still very happy that I was forced to engage in the challenging task of decluttering. Among the items that I found was a

wedding present that I had been working on for Andrea and Arnie, but never quite completed. It was shoved into a bag and put into my storage closet and forgotten for 38 years. I was really into needlepointing back then, and I had designed and started a pillow with their names on it. And here it is, the definition of “unfinished business.” (show it) Why had I felt the need to save it all these years? Why had I never finished it in the first place? I’m sure I had every intention of doing so. And even though I can remember agonizing over the color choice of thread, I have no idea what caused me to put this project aside.

We have just ushered in the month of Elul, when we once again begin the task of engaging in important spiritual homework before the Holy Days are upon us. It’s a month of self-review, as we reflect on how we’ve lived our lives during the past year, and envision how we’d like to see things unfold in the year to come. And I think it’s ironic that the Torah Portion that we will be reading tomorrow, Shoftim, means “judges.” Moses tells the people that, once settled in the land, they must appoint judges and officials that will govern fairly. During this month, however, we must take on the responsibility of judging ourselves. Elul marks the time when G-d is especially close to us, waiting to see how we will prepare ourselves for the ultimate day of judgement, Rosh Hashanah, and the day of atonement, Yom Kippur.

I’ve spoken before about Rabbi Stuart Gershon’s three-step guide to help us with this important challenge. It involves making a detailed account of the past year, engaging in “Cheshbon HaNefesh” or personal soul-seaching, and ultimately making the effort to forgive ourselves and each other. We are forced to ask ourselves some hard questions: what were our proudest moments? Our most difficult? Who are we at this moment in our lives? What do we hope to become? Are we living a life of goodness and purpose and what does that even mean? Are we living a life of holiness, and what does that even look like? These are all

important questions, ones that can take a lifetime, let alone a month, to explore. But tonight, I want to hone in on one specific, perhaps more basic question that I'd like you to ponder, and it brings me back to my lovely, half-completed pillow: What is your "unfinished business?" I challenge you to identify one uncompleted task, figure out why it still remains incomplete, and decide what you are going to do about it. It's wonderful to set new goals for the new year, but tonight I want us to think about finishing the old ones. As William James once said, "Nothing is as fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task."

I am currently going through orientation training at Harris Hospital in FW, and we have been assigned a very long series of "tasks," (mostly online courses) that we must complete before we can officially begin our jobs. We simply can't proceed until we finish the task we've started. If only life were like that! In the real world, there are just too many loopholes, too many ways of avoiding difficult situations that in the long run might have actually helped make our lives easier. Perhaps it's a simplistic comparison, but taking an elevator is always easier than climbing the stairs. But climbing has its benefits too. It's much better for your heart. And although it takes longer to get where you're going, it certainly gives you more time to think about the journey.

So identify one thing you've set aside for whatever reason, and revisit it. Perhaps it's being one credit shy of getting that degree; or adding the final touches to the garden you started planting; or refurbishing the deck, or repairing a broken relationship. Maybe it's as simple as writing that thank-you note that you owe someone, or finishing a pillow which was started, with all best intentions, 38 years ago.

It's also important to determine not only why that business was left unfinished, but whether it's worth spending any more time on it at all. If we are hanging on to something that no longer is important to us, or

no longer has any relevance in our lives, than perhaps it's time to finally let go. And in letting go we are, after all, finishing the task.

But what if, like me, you decide that you need to invest more time into your unfinished project? That doesn't mean that it needs to be completed tomorrow, or next month, or even next year. The important thing is that it has been transformed from unfinished business to a work in progress. In my opinion, it's all about the journey. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon in Avot 2:21, "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it." In my case, my new goal date for finishing Andrea and Arnold's pillow is now September 2, 2013. I think it would make a wonderful 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gift.

Shabbat Shalom