

THE REDEMPTION OF OUR SOULS

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5763

It was the first live auction I had ever attended. A warm summer morning, cars with license plates from all up and down the northeast coast were pulling in and parking on what used to be a small growing field of the Spear family. One of down-east Maine's most honored family names. Ellis Spear had been a general in the civil war. A storied career. But now his descendants were auctioning off the items to which they felt least connected; the proceeds would enable them to restore the homestead to its original glory.

One day earlier Marilyn and I had walked through the house, to see what was. We bought a copy of the auction list, checked off a few items we thought would be fun to bid on. You know, the cheapies. But as we were driving to the auction the next morning I said, "It seems to me that to bid on these little things defeats the advantage of an auction. You'll probably end up paying more than you would in an antique shop. I think the key is to go for the big items, the things you couldn't otherwise afford. Maybe we'll get lucky." Marilyn says, "Well, what are you thinking of? Do you have anything in particular in mind?"

Knowing that Marilyn has always wanted an oil-on-canvas portrait, there was this one painting that I couldn't stop thinking about. It was from 1832, a somewhat two-dimensional, folk art style portrait of O. H. Hinckley by E.E. Finch. It just seemed so—*American*. (For those of you who don't know, twenty-five percent of my lineage is a direct line back to the Mayflower. I'm John Alden and Priscilla Mullen's great-grandson, fourteen generations removed. Remember them? The Mayflower romance? As they say at the D.A.R. meetings, I have *yichus*. My mother thinks the guy in the painting is a relative. But then again, she thinks we're related to everyone in America born before 1850.) So, with no illusions we went to the auction. There's no way we would get the thing. We were just going for the fun of it. The experience.

We got it. Either all the people bidding on artwork had already blown their budgets by the time they got to our item (number 126), or they knew something we didn't, but we won the auction at a price even lower than the figure we had agreed not to exceed. Better yet, it sold for 20% less than the low end of what the auction house had conservatively estimated its value. (This, of course, was my greatest sense of accomplishment.) Our hearts both beating well in excess of normal limits, Marilyn and I concluded we should leave. So we go to the payment desk, write a check, and they then promptly hand us this piece of American history. Almost three feet square, newly restored and framed, they hand me the painting. And I'm thinking, "What, no bag? Doesn't it come with a box?"

Well thank God we had the Jeep up there in Maine. And six inches of headroom to spare in the way-back. We bought some foam-core and bubble-wrap, laid it on top of our luggage and trained the kids to stick their hands up in the air whenever we would come to a sudden stop to prevent it from sliding onto their heads. Now it hangs impressively above the mantle in our living room. A 'perfect fit' my friends all say. And as for me, I just stand there looking at it. That's what you're supposed to do with art. You look at it. And I'm thinking, "Who is this guy?"

The way I look at it, pictures—whether they be oil on canvas or 400 speed color photos—are our attempt to fight off the Angel of Death. The Inevitable. A gesture to posterity, the images we make or take are, in the final analysis, an understandable but ultimately fruitless response to mortality. Those snapshots you just got back from *Moto Photo*, and the digital images you e-mailed to your relatives—like Mr. Hinckley's portrait—are our way of saying memory is not enough. The moment is insufficient. I want this to last. Especially when it comes to pictures of people.

A number of years ago one of our congregants had come to me worried about her young child. Her father-in-law had recently died and she had noticed that her son was becoming increasingly distressed. It seems that she had told him that as long as he remembered his grandfather in his heart he would remain alive. What she hadn't counted on was his taking her literally. So when the boy

could no longer remember the grandfather's face, he thought that he had—ostensibly—been responsible for his grandfather's death. The solution: A modification of the parent's notion of how to explain life-after-death accompanied by a photo of Grandpa on his nightstand.

But in time, even the image fails. It's inevitable. I have these photos I've inherited from nineteenth century Germany. They're delightful pictures of my great-grandmother's nieces. But alas, no one wrote their names on the back. They're just pictures. At least O. H. Hinckley had the foresight to write his name (although it would have been nice to know that the "O" stands for). His effort to hire somebody to preserve his image so we shouldn't forget what he looked like has met with undeniable success. 170 years later his face hangs in the home of a New Jersey rabbi. (We'll have to guess how that prospect might have been appreciated back in 1832 New England.) Still, he forgot to attach a biography. As if future generations would obviously know who he was and what he did. Or even care. But it doesn't work that way.

Of course, the portrait is just an illustration. It's a picture of a man. Young. Maybe in his late twenties. Handsome. Dark hair (with a little curl hanging down by itself in the corner of his forehead). Well-dressed. A white silk blouse. A gold vest. A black overcoat. A small but elegant stick-pin up near his collar. His right hand slides at the Napoleonic 90-degree angle into his jacket. His left arm wrapped around the upper corner of his chair. (I've nicknamed him "Mr. Darcy".) No doubt, he was a gentleman of means. The poor could not afford such extravagances. But it's two-dimensionality, it's lack of identity other than the subject's name written on the back of the canvas is an even more instructive illustration as to the fragility of our personas. It doesn't take long before we are forgotten.

This is, at least for me, a sobering thought. Will my great-great grandchildren know my name? Will they know who I was and what I did? When they sort through those boxes of antique paper photographs and come across pictures of a bald guy with a beard, will they know it's me? (They might think it's Bob Adler!) Will they even know the name *Kushner*? Will they know what I liked? What I wanted? What I feared? Will they know *Me*? Is this our destiny? To live but ultimately to be forgotten? And if my final fate is to be forgotten, does my life truly have meaning at all? Am I, as the psalmist suggests, nothing more than a passing shadow? And if so, what's the point? Is remembering just an exercise in futility?

Welcome to, as Hannah Arendt termed it, "the human condition". Not that we are finite but that we *know* we are finite. This is what truly distinguishes us from all other life forms. Not our thumbs. Or our ability to walk upright. Or our articulate forms of communication. What makes us human, what makes us unique is that we are aware of our own existence. We are aware *that* we are aware. As Kierkegaard understood it, a life invariably filled with "fear and trembling unto death."

These are "Days of Awe" precisely because they beckon us to wonder how it is that we are. Not to find answers but to ask questions. *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are our exercise in human existence. They challenge us to think about ourselves in ways that are uncomfortable. Could it be that my life is just an accident? Am I nothing more than a consequence of chaos? Is there no purpose to my life? In the final analysis, there are but two choices: either life is random, a coincidence of atomic and molecular particles which happen to form *Me*, or that life is the consequence of design and mind. Either life is meaningless or meaningful. Either this is all just by accident or on purpose. But—and this I think is the key—it does matter which view you embrace. Because even though one might conclude that we can never know and so we have only to live our lives, I would contend that our frame of reference, our perspective as to the meaning or meaninglessness of our lives can have a profound influence as to *how* we live our lives. And that will make all the difference in the world. It matters if we think we matter.

I want to tell you a story about another picture. Perhaps the most famous photograph ever taken. This past summer I read James Bradley's "Flags Of Our Fathers". A remarkable and moving book. Mr. Bradley preserves for us the identities of the six boys (and they were boys, the oldest being just 24 years old) who put up the now infamous replacement flag atop Iwo Jima, undeniably World War II's most devastating battle. Their images, forever preserved in Joe Rosenthal's inspiring photo, are to

most of us anonymous. But they had names: Harlon Block, John Bradley, Rene Gagnon, Ira Hayes, Franklin Sousley and Mike Strank. Three of them died on Iwo Jima within hours after that picture was taken: Harlon Block, Franklin Sousley and Mike Strank, but only Sousley and Strank had been correctly identified. For over a year the “sixth” Marine was mistakenly thought to be Hank Hansen, yet Belle Block, Harlon’s mother, knew otherwise. Even though no faces could be seen, of Harlon—the one bending down, putting the flagpole into the ground, with his *butt* to the camera—his mother Belle would say, “I don’t care what the papers say. I know my boy.”

Of those six soldiers, clearly the most famous was Ira Hayes. Sadly however, it was for all the wrong reasons. He was a native American, a Pima Indian. But for that brief moment of glory, his life was notorious for drunkenness. In fact, Ira literally drank himself to death 10 years after raising the flag atop Mount Suribachi. He was 32 years old.

But what I want to share with you is not about Ira’s tragically short life, nor about his heroics in battle. Rather the story that I find so powerful Ira no doubt would have dismissed altogether. One year later—after the war’s end—in May of 1946, with virtually no money or any means of transportation, Ira left the Pima reservation just outside Phoenix and hitch-hiked more than thirteen-hundred miles in three days to Weslaco, Texas. That’s where Harlon Block had lived. He found Harlon’s father Ed working in the cotton field. In Ed’s words:

“He just walked up and started talking to me about Harlon, how they were good friends...He asked me if I knew Harlon was in the photo, the guy putting the pole in the ground. I told him we had suspected it...[And] once he knew that I knew Harlon was in the photo, he just said, ‘Okay, well, I guess I’ll be off.’ We shook hands and he walked out of the field.”

Ed Block would later lament that he never invited Ira to stay overnight, or even have lunch. Ira just came, told his version of the truth, and left.

That’s it. That’s the story I wanted to tell you. And that’s how we should remember Ira Hayes. Not as a drunk. Not as a Marine. Not even as one of the faceless men who shoved that flag into the ground atop Mount Suribachi. But as a human being who cared enough about another person and the memory of that person to travel a thousand miles just to tell a father, “...that was your son in that picture.” He did not do it for fame or recognition. He asked for nothing for himself.

When I read that story I immediately thought of the *Ish*, the nameless man in Genesis whom Joseph encounters in search of his brothers. Joseph asks, “Have you seen my brothers?” The man responds, “I heard they were in the area of Dotan.” That’s it. The man with no name tells Joseph how to find his brothers even though Joseph never identifies himself or his brothers. The commentaries are unanimous. The *Ish*, the nameless man, is actually a messenger of God. For if Joseph does not find his brothers then they do not beat him up and throw him into the pit, he’s not taken down to Egypt, so that when there’s a famine in the land and the family goes to Egypt to procure rations they don’t stay because Joseph isn’t there to protect them, so there can be no enslavement, no exodus, no Torah. Everything that we are as a people is because of one man whose name is not remembered.

We are all that man. We are each that man. Like Ira Hayes, we are messengers of the Most High. And not only will we be destined to oblivion, we won’t even know what the purpose of our lives is when we’re doing it. Thus, all we can do is act *as if* we are messengers of God. We must act *as if* our lives have purpose, *as if* God wants us here for a reason. And the way in which we do that is not by affirming ourselves, not by thinking *we* are important, but actually by thinking that *others* are important. Put another way, the extent to which we will be redeemed is determined not by how well we are remembered but by how well we remember others. In the same context as this morning’s Torah reading, *Adonai pakad et Sarah*—which literally means “God visited Sarah” but is usually rendered “God remembered or took note of Sarah,” the act of *remembering* is not so much one of memory as it is of consciousness. And therefore, if to be human is our ability to be aware of our awareness, then God’s challenge to rise above our humanity toward our divine potential is determined by how we transcend ourselves in the service of others. As simple as “taking note” of them. This is why we do family histories. This is why we tell stories. This is why we take pictures. And paint portraits.

Last Sukkot I took Aviva out of school to do down to Ground Zero. Most of the smoke had cleared by then. But there was still enough residue, enough of that acrid taste in the air that she would be able to remember—first hand—what the devastation looked and felt like. Through the canyons of still standing buildings you could catch a glimpse of what remained. The skeleton of the World Trade Center's trademark exterior, now a ragged criss-crossing of steel that once had been windows, stood defiantly. Store windows and building facades retained the dust of what and who had been. People walked slowly along lower Broadway, respectfully and reverentially. But what was most compelling, not merely to Aviva and me but to all who came to see were the tributes, and flowers, and messages. And the photos.

Everywhere we went that day there were photos. Not to diminish the messages. The poetry. The tributes. All reflected the anguish and love of the survivors. But the photos were sacred. They reflected not the dead but those who had been alive. They were not statistics but people. Young and old. Mothers and fathers. Brothers and sisters. Children and parents. Friends and colleagues. Smiling. They were lives. And they were everywhere. In front of the church. And the firehouse. And the bus terminal. And it was clear, a name was insufficient. An image was needed. Visible proof, tangible evidence. Remembering is what gives meaning to our lives. Not *being* remembered, but performing the *mitzvah* of remembering.

Have you ever seen the movie *Logan's Run*? It's a futuristic film of how humanity is forced to go underground. And because space is so limited, people are euthanized while still young. But Logan and his friend, Jessica, escape to the "outside" world where they find a sole survivor, a hermit. In learning about what life was like before people went underground, they are mystified by the presence of a cemetery and the odd phrase on the tombstones, *Beloved Father* or *Beloved Mother*. After the hermit explains, Jessica concludes, "So people stay together for this feeling of love. They would live, and raise children—and be remembered." But the hermit agitates, who will remember him? Who will bury him? And the answer is implied in Jessica's comment "...and raise children." An essential part of the cycle of life necessitates others who will do the remembering. That task is ours.

Did you know that the original name for *Rosh Hashanah* is *Yom HaZikkaron*? It means the Day of Remembering. For on it we ask God to remember us. Of course, because we know that—in time—we will not be remembered. God will remember us because, as King David taught, God has taken note of us. But what I also believe is that as God takes note of us, ours is to take note of each other. Remembering is a sacred act. In the words of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, "*Zechirah hi sha'ar ge'ulah*—Remembering is the gateway to redemption."