

## FINISHING UNFINISHED BUSINESS

*Kol Nidre 5773 / 2012*  
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It was Tuesday, July 17. The temperature was 102 degrees. I was driving south along I-75 toward downtown Detroit with Ralph Zuckman. Although he and I are both of the class of '68, we'd never met before. He went to Ford. I went to Oak Park. It helped, however, that he knew some of my old friends from high school. And that made it easier asking him to open a door for me that seemed all but impossible just a few days earlier.

The *Beth Olem Cemetery* is located in Hamtramack. Hamtramack is actually a city within a city. Once the largest population of Poles in the world outside of Warsaw, it was also known as *Poletown*. When I was growing up in Detroit, Hamtramack was the place we'd go to have dinner before seeing the Red Wings play at the old *Olympia*. *Buddy's Pizza*, a deep-dish garlic based crust, was a local delicacy. Now there are 9 locations for *Buddy's Pizza* throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. The *Olympia* is gone. And Hamtramack looks more like an urban desert of empty buildings and vacant lots. It was cleaner than I had expected. But it also seemed completely devoid of life.

Mom used to say that Lorraine was buried in a very old cemetery in a very bad part of town. Of course, in Detroit that could have been almost anywhere. Dad said the cemetery was near downtown, near an auto plant. And that's about all I ever really knew about it. This was the first time I'd ever gone to *Beth Olem Cemetery*. In fact, it was probably the first time anyone in my family had been there in maybe as much as 50 years. They might have driven by it. Looked through the gate. But I doubt they would have gone inside. There hasn't been a burial in *Beth Olem* since right after World War II. And besides, no one really knew where Lorraine was buried.

That's why I was driving down there with Ralph.

I've often thought about what the day of his burial must have been like. No doubt it was cold. Probably overcast and damp. Typical wintery gray skies of December. There might even have been snow. Mid-December can be pretty gloomy in Michigan. Especially when you're accompanying your four-year-old son to the grave. December 16, 1903. It was the 5th day of Hanukkah.

Lorraine (I know, who names a boy "Lorraine"?) was named for the Lorraine Hotel in Indianapolis where he was born. He was the "apple" of my grandfather's eye. Only three photographs remain. Each of us – the grandchildren of Max and Emogene Edwards: my brother Larry, my cousin Lynn, and I – have the same picture of Lorraine. He's standing on a corner of two dirt streets in Buchanan, Michigan, where he lived. With his head tilted slightly, he's wearing a "Navy" outfit, complete with the cute little skirt and the cap with an anchor symbol on the front, and his hands are clasped

together in front. He's smiling for the camera. It was probably the last picture ever taken of him.

I don't really know what he died of. The newspaper clipping the family saved simply said: "Max Edwards came home Monday on account of the sickness and death of his little boy." Lorraine died on Tuesday. They probably took the train from Buchanan, a small town in southwestern Michigan, along the Michigan Central line to Detroit. And then, the day after they arrived, Lorraine's body was escorted to Hamtramack. The cemetery was called the *United Jewish Cemetery* then, probably because – despite all the differences of the various practices of Jews in turn-of-the-century Detroit – the community agreed that there should be one place where everyone could be buried. (I've often wondered if they knew that Lorraine's mother, my grandmother, was a Presbyterian?)

Today the cemetery looks probably not much different that it did then. It's a small rectangular plot of land enclosed within a red brick wall. The entrance is in the middle of one side, two iron gates underneath the words *Betholem* (spelled as one word), meaning "Eternal Home". The only difference is that now, 109 years later – and here's the amazing part of the story – the cemetery is trapped within the boundaries of the General Motors Cadillac Assembly Plant. Entry into the cemetery is restricted to two days a year, on the Sundays before Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. Unless, that is, you come with Ralph. He's the guy.

You first have to get past security. Sitting in Ralph's Buick, we waited for the guards to cut off the padlock of the truck in front us. While they were examining the truck's contents, one of the guards recognized Ralph and motioned for us to drive around and go on ahead. Turning to the left, with the plant on our right, you could see the cemetery off in the distance, at the end of the parking lot.

Driving up to the gates, Ralph got out and unlocked them. Much to his embarrassment, the grass had not been cut in several months. Even though there hasn't been a burial there since 1948, the grass is cut regularly during the spring and summer months (or at least that's what's supposed to happen). Ralph apologized profusely. But I didn't mind. Even though wading through nearly waist-high grass on a 102 degree afternoon – I'm wearing shorts, of course – was pretty uncomfortable, its overgrown, seemingly abandoned appearance added to the mystique. This was where Grandma and Grandpa walked behind as their son was being borne to his final resting place. Throughout my entire time traversing the high grass, meandering in and out of the cemetery's graves, I couldn't help but wonder what that day must have been like for them.

"He's probably back here," Ralph said, pointing to the northeast corner of the cemetery. "This is where they buried the children." Indeed. Grave after grave, some legible and some not, some majestic and some sunken into the earth, testified to the pain and tragedy of countless childhood deaths. I'm not unaccustomed to such places. This is what I do for a living. Every old Jewish cemetery has a "children's section". But this was different. This was my uncle. This was my mother's brother. Even though she never knew him – he died almost eight years before she was born – Lorraine had taken

on a kind of mythic status in the family. And here I was, more than a century later, completing the cycle.

It's not clear why they never put up a stone at his grave. Maybe it was just too expensive. Maybe it had something to do with Grandma not being Jewish. Maybe it was simply the trauma of his death, their absolute emotional devastation that stood in the way of going back in there and erecting a stone to Lorraine's memory. They still had his picture. They even kept a lock of his beautiful hair saved inside a small glass locket. Maybe by not placing a stone at his grave they were able to slightly lessen the unspeakable pain that would stay with them for the rest of their lives. All I can say with certainty is that somewhere along the way it became a matter of "unfinished business". I know this because just before my grandmother died my mother promised her that she would put up a stone. And I know this because my mom told me about her promise not long before she died. The thing is, she never got around to doing it either.

And that's what brought me to downtown Detroit on a Tuesday in July in 102-degree summer heat.

I'm a person who has a strong sense of obligation to his ancestors. I've always been this way. No doubt it accounts for my obsession with genealogy. As a kid I'd sit almost spellbound listening to the tales my aunts and uncles would recount about life in the old country. Or the stories my dad would tell about the early days of pro football when he was trainer of the Detroit Lions. And I know that I got this reverence for family history from my mother. She took great pride in being a member of the DAR (through her Presbyterian-born mother), a direct descendent of John Alden and Priscilla Mullin – the famous teenage Mayflower romance. I can vividly remember watching her transcribe a journal one of our ancestors kept from 1858 to 1865. It was something akin to a personal family Torah, even though it recorded – with the exception of the note that its author voted for Stephen Douglass in 1860 – not much more than daily weather reports and mundane accountings of chores. Still, this connection to ancient relatives took on a mystique that made them present in my life. It's almost as if, somehow, I feel as if I owe them. This has always been the case when it came to Lorraine. His death was the great tragedy of my family. The impact of his passing would be felt for generations.

For one, there was my uncle Ed. He was just a year and half old when Lorraine died. My cousin Lynn, Ed's daughter, says that he would walk around the house for days looking for his big brother. But Lorraine's passing would have more dire consequences for Ed. Whether real or simply perceived, it changed his relationship with his father for the remainder of their lives. They grew estranged from each other. In Eddie's mind, he felt he had become the "bad" son. The one who lived.

The impact for my grandmother was more profound. Although I wasn't old enough or sufficiently insightful to ask her while she was alive, the simple fact that she converted to Judaism exactly one year after Lorraine's death cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. I have absolutely no doubt that her decision to embrace Judaism was in

direct relation to the death of her son. Perhaps she wanted to make sure she'd be able to be buried next to him. Perhaps her "choosing" Judaism was a reaction to the compassion she experienced from the Detroit Jewish community in their days of grief. Whatever the case, it seems clear that her conversion, the first such public ceremony in Michigan Jewish history, on New Year's Day 1905 – one year and two weeks after Lorraine's funeral – would have consequences for years to come.

You see, my grandfather Max, her husband, had actually studied to be a Reform rabbi with Isaac Mayer Wise at the Hebrew Union College sometime in the 1890s. But he dropped out, probably because he fell in love with my non-Jewish grandmother. There's no way to know if their life would have been as Jewish had my grandmother not converted. But by the same token, had Lorraine not died they likely would have stayed in Buchanan (instead of moving to Detroit). Max would not have reunited with his Hebrew Union College classmate Leo M. Franklin, rabbi of Detroit's Temple Beth El. And the Edwards family would not have become active in the life of the Detroit Jewish community. And where would that have left us? Of course, it's all speculation, but on some level I have to believe that my brother's decision to become a rabbi, which was clearly influenced by our grandfather, and my choice of the rabbinate which was influenced by my brother's decision, and my niece Noa's career path in the rabbinate all derive – in some way – from the impact of the death of a little boy in December of 1903.

So when I stood in the *Beth Olem Cemetery* this past July, walking around and wondering if this or that unmarked part of the cemetery is where he was buried, I knew that I felt more than a simple connection to Lorraine. I also felt a sense of obligation. And gratitude. I wanted him to know that he's not forgotten. I wanted him to know that his death impacted me, too.

Yet if there's a sense of obligation to be felt, then it must be for my grandparents – and especially my mother. Of course, I owe them my life. So much of who I am is because of choices they made. So much of what I value is but a reflection of their home and their lives. I am forever beholden to them as well a grandson and son should be. I'll put it to you directly: even though they're all gone now doesn't mean the mitzvah of *Kibud Av v'Em* – giving honor to one's mother and father – no longer applies. Maybe more than anything else, this is why I chose to spend one week of my summer vacation going back to a nearly forgotten cemetery inside an automobile plant on a miserably hot day to search for the grave of a little boy I never knew. To do for those who did so much for me. To fulfill the wish of a grandparent and the promise of her daughter.

Even though we will never know with certainty the exact location of Lorraine's grave – the records for burial location are too spotty (and believe me when I tell you we spent hours looking through old ledgers and disparate notes and cemetery maps) – I will keep my mother's pledge to her mother of putting up a stone with Lorraine's name on it somewhere in the northeastern section of the *Beth Olem Cemetery*. And more than just a sense of "somebody's got to do it," I make this decision out of love. My mother never asked for this to be done. She just said she regretted never being able to keep her word

to her mother. So I will do it for her. For me it is a privilege to address this sacred “unfinished business”.

And that brings me to tonight.

Tonight is *Kol Nidre*. By all accounts, it is the most sacred day of the Jewish year. That, in and of itself, is worth noting. This is, after all, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the day on which we do *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*, a personal accounting of our failures. It’s solemnity alone sets it apart as the holiest gathering our people knows. And this service in particular, *Kol Nidre*, has come to embody all that we value about this “Sabbath of the Soul”. But what I find odd is that this night, and the prayer that gives it its name – *Kol Nidre* – should distinguish it as being the holiest of the holy. Let’s be honest here. What is *Kol Nidre* but an absolution for all the vows we made but didn’t keep. It’s something akin to a religious “escape clause”. What’s so sacred about that? Sure, it’s necessary to move forward allowing us to live without perpetual guilt, to be able to let go of commitments we couldn’t live up to during the past year. Sure, it’s a kind of public self-forgiving, an acknowledgment that even the best of intentions sometimes don’t come to fruition. But what is it that sets this night so much apart that so many make such efforts to be here and stand for what seems like an eternity before the Torah scrolls and the open ark?

I think we are here less for ourselves than for our ancestors. I think it’s our parents and our grandparents and their parents who bring us here tonight (Jewish or not). I think the pull of the past, the silent but potent voices of those who came before us draw us here this evening. I think we come here to let them know they still speak to us. We come to meet them, to ask their forgiveness for choices we’ve made that we feel have let them down. And one more thing: I believe we are here less for absolution for the promises we didn’t keep but, on some deep and sacred level, in search of a way to fulfill the vows they couldn’t keep. It’s a kind of religious way of acknowledging that we’re in this with them. And they are in this with us.

I have often said that the reason the film *Casablanca* is so powerful, in addition to the charisma of Bogart and the beauty of Bergman, and yes, in addition to the great script, is the fact that in the end, Ilsa gets on that plane without Rick. It’s not your typical “Hollywood” ending where everyone gets to go home and feel good. Because this is the way life really is. We don’t always get whatever it is we want. We don’t always finish the work we’ve started. “Real” life isn’t scripted, it doesn’t always come with feel-good endings. We don’t ride off into the sunset. There’s no memorable score playing in the background. And for the same reason, that’s why Torah ends with Moses’ death, only to *look* at *Eretz Yisrael*, but never to step foot into it. We don’t get to do everything. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes we don’t keep our promises. Yet that doesn’t mean all is lost.

For Rick and Captain Renault, it was the beginning of “a beautiful friendship.” For Moses, it was allowing Joshua to continue on in his footsteps. And while we may enter this room with unfulfilled expectations, while we may have failed in the promises we

made to ourselves and those we love, the fact that dreams and vows go uncompleted does not mean that they are for naught. Put another way, Rabbi Tarfon's teaching that while we may not be able to complete the task doesn't mean we shouldn't start it, also implies that someone else will pick up where we left off. Or as is now popular jargon in football locker rooms, we are each that "Next Man Up".

*L'dor va-Dor*. From generation to generation. Usually we invoke this phrase when considering that which our ancestors have bequeathed to us, or that which we are handing down to the next generation. We call it "continuity". But can we speak of continuity only in terms of what we get or of what we give? Is our sense of connectedness to our ancestors (or our descendants for that matter) based only on the successes? What of the failures? What of our parents dreams that never came to pass? What of the promises our grandparents made but were unable to keep? Are we to simply write them off to the margins of history? If we are willing to inherit what they succeeded in transmitting to us, should we not also try to embrace those things they failed to hand down? Maybe we would do well to look at those who gave us life and wonder – if they could speak to us – what would they want us to carry on *for* them? What "ball" would they want us to pick up that they dropped?

No doubt most of you are familiar with the story of Abraham smashing the idols of his father Terach. What you may not know, however, is that that story never appears in the Torah. It's from the Midrash. And it's odd, because there's absolutely nothing in the Torah that would suggest that Terach was an idolater. Nothing except the fact that the verses immediately before God commands Abraham to – *Lekh-Lekha* – leave the home of his father and "go to the land that I will show you," Torah tells us that Terach had left his home of Ur and, in the words of Torah, "...when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there." The rabbis deduce that Terach could not make the break with the only culture that he knew, the world of idolatry. So they imagined a story of Terach owning an idol shop. But they were wrong.

The midrash, I believe, misses the point that Torah is trying to impress upon us. Because it's not simply that Terach got waylaid in Haran, it's more than him ultimately not being able to leave his world (all of which may have been true). What the midrash misses is that just before Torah tells us that Terach got stuck in Haran, Torah notes: "Terach took his son Avram, his grandson Lot...and his daughter-in-law Sarai...and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans *for the land of Canaan...*" In other words, the great journey of the Jewish people that Abraham begins in chapter 12 of Genesis, the epic odyssey that seemingly commences with God's command to Avram "*Lekh-Lekha*" ("Get yourself up and going to the land that I will show you"), in fact began in the previous chapter without God commanding anything. And it started with Avram's dad, Terach, going to that land *all on his own*. It was Terach who started this journey we are all on, but for some reason he stopped. And Abraham stopped with him. Until God called out to him saying: "*Lekh-Lekha*". "Get going." Or maybe better yet, "Continue on..."

And maybe, therefore, those words "*Lekh-Lekha*" – the first words God ever addresses to the Jewish people – are addressed not just to Abraham. And maybe the Torah's

ending with Joshua continuing on for Moses is actually the Torah's "bookend" paralleling Abraham continuing on the journey began by his father. And thus, maybe those words "*Lekh-Lekha*" are not for Abraham alone, but for all those who read the story. Maybe it is the primal message of Torah: We are all on this journey together, and that each generation is commanded to finish what our forbears could not.

It is an easy decision for me to put up a stone at the *Beth Olem Cemetery* in Hamtramack for Lorraine, because my mother told me of her failure to fulfill her promise to her mother. She basically spelled it out for me. It's a lot harder to try and figure out what it is our ancestors would have wanted us to do for them. But don't you think they deserve at least our wondering about it? Even more, maybe we should also be thinking about what is it *we* will want our grandchildren to do for us? What dreams do we have, real dreams, aspirations that we fear we will not be able to realize in our lifetimes? What footsteps would we hope our descendants will follow in?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions. But just because we can't ultimately know the answers doesn't mean we shouldn't be asking the questions. *Kol Nidre* is the night we start wondering where "I" fit on this continuum.

But not to worry. Because if somehow we fail in all of this, if somehow we drop the ball – as *Kol Nidre* assumes we might – there's still the hope that someone else will love us enough to pick up that ball and finish what we hoped we might do ourselves. Then again, maybe we won't fail at all. Maybe we *are* that future generation.