

FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH - 3 OCTOBER 2016

LESSONS FROM MY GRANDFATHER

To address at the outset the metaphorical “elephant in the room:” In case you have been wondering:

Yes: it is hard to wake up on Rosh Hashanah morning and realize that this will be one of the last opportunities that I have to address a very large cross-section of our B'nai Israel community which I cherish so dearly . . .

Yes, I am working on my list of what I would like to do after June 30, 2017 . . .

Yes, I expect to be very actively engaged at B'nai Israel in my responsibilities until then . . .

and

Yes, Beverly and I look forward to remaining in our home and as a presence at B'nai Israel in the future.

Full disclosure and as no surprise: For most congregational rabbis, the High Holy Days are always daunting – and for me this year, especially so.

Why? Because I really want your experience here in our Synagogue to be helpful and uplifting amid the challenges and stresses that every one of us encounters. On the High Holy Days, I am sharing with you in a very special, distinctive partnership – my hope being that I might be able to offer a spark of insight, a reflection or a new perspective for you – even ideally to touch your soul -- and so, the pressure is really on. About a month before the High Holy Days, I begin waking up every morning at 3 am. Believe me, I figured out the reason a very long time ago.

By the count, this is my 28th High Holy Day season at B'nai Israel. In Hebrew, the number 28 is designated by the letters kaf and het. Those two letters – when put together – form the word “koach” – which means “strength” or “vigor.” Please wish “koach” for me – physical, spiritual, intellectual – as I surely wish “koach” for each of you.

While most of my rabbinic years have been here at B'nai Israel, my endeavors on the High Holy Days stretch back to 1970, when I was a 22-year old student at our Jewish Theological Seminary. Out of curiosity, I recently pulled out the sermon that I gave on Rosh Hashanah in 1970. Like most sermons, it mirrors its era. In 1970, long before I came to B'nai Israel, I was actually in Washington quite frequently – at rallies on the Mall and pacing the halls of Congress along with many others – as we protested the horrors of the Viet Nam War and the invasion of Cambodia. As I re-read that Rosh Hashanah sermon of 1970, I was struck that although influenced by those events, it was really about our core human values – about our Jewish identity on the American landscape – about making a difference in our world – inherently all the same themes about which I have spoken so often and passionately on Rosh Hashanah year after year. Plus ça change – plus c'est la même chose . . . the more things change, the more they are the same.

In a pithy tongue-in-cheek column in the Forward, Jay Michaelson urges Jews to stay away from Synagogues on the High Holy Days . . . the services are kitschy, too long, the rabbis pontificate too much, the parking lots are too crowded, the entire experience has an artificial character – and Jews would be better served being elsewhere. Respectfully, I totally disagree. I, for one, am thrilled that you are here at B'nai Israel today – that you have chosen to celebrate in the setting of our community – and that for a myriad of reasons, whatever they are, you are directing your time, effort and energy for that purpose. It is therefore my privilege to once again offer a verbal “jump-start” for the new year ahead.

Simply put: our world is a mess. It would be understandable to look at the problems surrounding us and despair: our American political landscape divided by a vitriolic Presidential campaign frightening in its over-the-top rhetoric and intensity – the surge in racial tensions boiling over in almost every corner of our country – the ongoing congressional stalemate -- a gridlock which precludes the passage of reasonable anti-gun legislation – the dangers of global warming – and the suffering of millions displaced by war and turmoil from their countries of origin – wandering the globe – with very few welcoming mats extended to them.

I would be derelict in my responsibilities as your rabbi if on Rosh Hashanah, I ignored these issues altogether. As Jews, ours is an exceptionally strong and vibrant tradition of activism – and now, more than ever, we must continue to be engaged in these concerns. But I want to move from the macro-agenda to a more personal tale – to a story about human values – to my mind, the most compelling message of all for Rosh Hashanah.

As some of you may know, our son, David, got married this past May 29th to Claire Bergeron, whom he had met while they were both students at Georgetown Law School. We adore Claire and are elated that she is now part of our family. When I was preparing to fill in the data for Claire's and David's ketuba – their Jewish marriage document – I made a startling discovery. The Hebrew date of their wedding was the 21st of the month of Iyar. The 21st of Iyar happens to be the *yahrzeit* – the anniversary of the death – of my grandfather, who had an exceptionally powerful influence on me. As it turned out, Claire and David got married exactly 50 years to the day after my grandfather's death on our Jewish calendar. Could there be a stronger testament to the idea of *Dor l'Dor* – the continuity of family across the generations?

That coincidence of the *yahrzeit* and the wedding on the exact same day triggered a veritable avalanche of my memories and images of my maternal grandfather. His name was Dr. Max Maier.

When I was a child growing up in Montclair, New Jersey, there was a Thursday night ritual: I would pull out a roll-away bed from a closet in my room and make it up with sheets and blankets in anticipation of my grandfather's arrival on Friday afternoon to spend Shabbat with our family. We had no separate guest quarters – my grandfather stayed in my room. He became – as it were – a third parent to me. Because he enjoyed walking, on most Shabbat afternoons, we would traverse the lovely tree-lined streets of Montclair together – as we talked, and as he imparted to me the essence of his life-journey and his considerable wisdom. It is a gift which I think it has taken me 50 years to fully appreciate and understand.

My grandfather was born in 1884 in a small Bavarian village called Fischach – not far from Augsburg. Jews had lived there from the 16th century onward – in relative harmony with the local residents. Beverly and I visited Fischach some years ago. While there is a large plaque in the central square noting the Jewish history of Fischach and while the Jewish cemetery is kept in pristine condition, there is not even one Jew in Fischach today.

My grandfather was a bright kid – the educational opportunities in Fischach were limited – and so he was sent off to an autocratic German Gymnasium in a distant city. The curriculum was heavily classical: 7 years of Latin, 9 years of Greek, some French – the only phrase of which he could muster in later years being: “*l'avenir, l'avenir c'est a moi* – the future, the future it is mine.” My grandfather detested the rigidity of that gymnasium education. His favorite day of the year, he told me, was July 14 – when school was over and he could return to the rural beauty of Fischach.

My grandfather's childhood was marred by the death of his mother when he was only 10. His father re-married, but the father died soon thereafter, just 4 weeks before my grandfather's Bar Mitzvah.

Nevertheless, it was back to the gymnasium – and eventually matriculation at the University of Munich, where my grandfather studied medicine – always proud that one of his teachers and a signatory on his diploma was Professor Wilhelm Roentgen, the discoverer of x-rays.

Medical residencies in Berlin and Strasbourg followed – with my grandfather finally settling in Frankfurt and affiliating with the highly-regarded Jewish hospital there. But World War I soon intervened – with my grandfather serving the Fatherland for 4 years as a medical officer in the endlessly muddy trenches of France. He never spoke about what he must have witnessed there.

At war's end, my grandfather returned to Frankfurt, resumed his medical practice, married and became a father twice-over-all in fairly rapid succession. The Weimar Republic period brought at least some brief stability to Germany, and my grandfather's career soared. He felt honored to be part of Frankfurt's distinguished Jewish community, and his family was thriving.

Of course, you can anticipate what happened next. After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, one restriction after another was imposed on German Jews. I have a piece of my grandfather's stationery from that period. At the top, there is a Star of David – followed by the words: “Dr. Max Maier – practice restricted by the authorities only to Jews.”

On Kristallnacht in November 1938 with the synagogues of Frankfurt burning around him, my grandfather was arrested and sent to Buchenwald. I really do not know what he encountered there – that conversation was “off limits.”

Only on Seder evenings, during the passage of the Haggadah which speaks of “God pouring out wrath on the nations” – only then could I detect through his tone a little hint of Buchenwald.

My grandfather’s family – by the grace of God and the sponsorship of relatives in Connecticut – managed to leave Germany at the last possible moment. After a brief stay in London, they traversed the torpedo-strewn Atlantic and arrived in New York in December 1939. My grandfather now 55 was virtually penniless – without an American medical license – and desperately trying to learn English.

True to form, my grandfather studied ferociously, passed the medical boards, established a practice on New York’s Upper West Side and managed to master English well enough to read the New York Times cover-to-cover each day. On two afternoons a week, he would take the subway to Harlem, where he cared for African Americans at a New York City Department of Health Chest Clinic – the compensation modest in the extreme.

But tragedy continued to stalk my grandfather. Many of his loved ones could not escape Germany and perished. His younger daughter died in 1949 at age 23 after battling a very virulent cancer – and his wife, my grandmother, died a few years later.

But here is what was utterly remarkable about my grandfather. He could have been entitled at various moments in his life to pull the covers over his head and say “enough.” But he never did.

I am certain that my grandfather had his share of foibles and inadequacies – who doesn’t – and I do recall some of them – but overwhelmingly he shaped his life with: courage – integrity – resilience – love for his family – compassion for his patients – responsibility for his community – hope for the future – gratitude for the blessings he did have – and faith in the framework of Judaism – its theology, rituals, ideals and imperatives – as a resource for the challenges of each day.

In an ethical will which he authored at age 80 and directed to my sister and to me, my grandfather noted in his eminently charming English style: “If I were a VIP (a very important person) in public life like Eisenhower or Truman, some reporter would ask me now: “Hashalom lach – Are you at peace with yourself? How do you look at your future?” And I would answer: for as long as I am walking in this world, I will try to be happy and at peace with myself. ... No human being knows the time allotted to him ... But as long as I have a clear mind, I will certainly never fail to appreciate and even enjoy the positive assets still allotted to me. ...”

Friends: why have I told you this story? I want you to own it, because for each of us, life is inevitably an amalgam of the sweet and the painful – the predictable and the un-anticipated – with each chapter requiring our personal moral compass.

To be sure, everyone’s life-journey is different –

But as we embark on a New Year together: courage – integrity – resilience – love – compassion – responsibility for community – hope – gratitude – and faith in Judaism – each of these can propel us forward – and all of them together can become a mighty force in shaping a life that matters, a life that assumes consequence – a life that truly makes a difference.

Isn’t the real purpose of Rosh Hashanah to help each of us to grow, change and empower ourselves?

Yes, a New Year now stretches ahead with infinite potential and promise for each of us. Isn’t that the gift awaiting our activation?