

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2017 Sermon Slam
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Both of my parents are (b'h) alive and well, still living in the same house I grew up in many years ago in Peabody, on the North Shore of Boston. One of my earliest and most consistent memories of my mother was watching her read the newspaper; more often than not, the obituary pages. When I asked her over the years why she would read them, thinking it an unseemly preoccupation with death, she answered that it was to see if any of my optometrist father's patients had passed away (he practiced optometry until 1991), and since then to see if any of my brother's, who is also a dentist, patients have passed away. After all, you do not want to send a reminder notice for a 6 month check-up to a deceased patient; plus she likes sending condolence cards and donations to the families.

So, it was no surprise to me, when in April 2010, one day before she was going into the hospital for major surgery, she called me into her bedroom and asked me to write down the details of her obituary because she wanted to make sure we got it RIGHT. She told me to put down where she was born, went to high school, her parents' names, her husband and children, her sisters and brother-in-law—but that I did not need to list all the grandchildren's names (in order to save money!)

Fortunately, she came through surgery well, and is still here, still teaching me life lessons. My turning point with obituary reading came when she told me that you can actually learn a lot of history from reading them. And so several years ago, I too became an obituary reader. And yes, I have learned a lot of history reading them.

Apparently my mother and I are not alone. Several weeks ago a movie came out—and the critics are raving about it-- called "Obit", a documentary following several of the NYT writers responsible for writing death notices. Ty Burr, the Boston Globe arts critic wrote that "a well-turned obit can be a celebration of not only one life, but life itself"; and "Celebrating people in print isn't just about telling a good story about someone you'd never heard of; it prompts readers to seek and find the connections between everyone, known and unknown".

Those words resonated with me, because only a few days before I read them, I took a photo of a Boston Globe obituary for a woman I never knew and sent the photo to my daughters. The recently deceased woman was Deborah McGuire, of Revere,

MA, formerly of Newton, MA. What caught my eye and drew me to read the write-up was her maiden name, Monosson, because for many years while we were living in Israel, we belonged to a beautiful outdoor swimming pool in the lovely Tel Aviv suburb called Neve Monosson.

According to Wikipedia, “Neve Monosson was founded in 1953 by a group of families supported by Fred (Efraim) Monosson, a wealthy raincoat manufacturer and a leading Zionist from Boston, Massachusetts.” Deborah’s obituary did note that her sister, Carol Monosson Edan, is a resident of Neve Monosson, Israel. All of this was of great interest to me because some of my happiest memories in Israel are from the days my children were young and we enjoyed spending time with our friends at the Neve Monosson pool.

So what does any of this have to do with Torah?

To me, one could certainly view the Torah as the greatest collection of legacies ever written. And as we know we read and recite Torah every year. And the more years we read and listen to the words of the Torah; watch the movies; see the musicals, and, my personal favorite, dance to the words of Torah (two of my favorite Israeli dances are “Katonti”* and “Mini Kolech MiBechi”**), we keep enhancing our lives through the oral and written histories of our tradition.

*“Katonti”—music written and sung by Yonatan Raziell; dance choreographed by Oren Ashkenazi (2012); words found in Genesis 32; 11-12

**“Mini Kolech MiBechi”—music written and sung by Idan Raichel; dance choreographed by Gadi Bitton and Ohad Atiyah; song title and lyrics from Chapter 31 of Jeremiah, specifically G-d’s words of comfort to Rachel’s weeping (“Mini kolech mibechi v’eynayich mi’dima”). According to the website, www.Hebrewsongs.com, Composer Idan Reichel was inspired by a lecture by Rabbi Israel Lau about the Biblical figure Rachel, crying over her sons who have gone to war and haven't come back yet.

The song is dedicated to the young soldier Gil'ad Shalit who at the time of writing was still being held in captivity, since released. The words can be found in the Jewish New Year - Rosh Hashanah Machzor - Musaf Service - both days.