

## Billy Crystal's "I Already Know I Love You"

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Many of you know that humor happens to be a special interest of mine.

The very first time I discovered I could do impressions was when I was watching a commercial for Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, who was running for President in 1968. I will always remember sitting alone in the family den, and no sooner had he finished speaking, when suddenly, out of my mouth came the voice of Nelson Rockefeller.

Next thing I knew, I found that speaking like the other candidates running for President -- Bobby Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon was a good means of entertaining my family and of impressing and making new friends.

The next year, when I ran for a student council office in my school, Pikesville Senior High, I concluded my campaign speech with all of these guys endorsing me. I won by a landslide.

Later, in college, I wrote skits and performed in comedy clubs and coffee houses in the area. In rabbinical school, I wrote and emceed our annual Purim shpiels. My dream fantasy is to guest host Saturday Night Live, although I would happily settle for a supporting or even minor role in one of the skits.

I have always felt that my experience doing stand-up comedy was helpful in my training and eventual career path as a rabbi.

I mention this today because I have always loved and admired comedians, especially Jewish comedians. I believe that there is a distinct Jewish sense of humor and that their humor often reflects our outlook on the world. There are so many wonderful Jewish comedians – from Vaudeville and the early days of television right up to today. But of all these entertainers, I think the one I feel closest to, if it is possible to say so, the one I feel I would most like to share Passover seder with is Billy Crystal. He seems so hamishe.

In a recent interview with the *Jewish Forward*, he said, "If it wasn't for the laughs and loves of my relatives and friends when I was a little kid, I don't think I would have ended up being a comedian."

It might have been a typo, but the article did say "loves of my relatives and friends." The love of family and friends can be a significant influence on how a person turns out.

He has spoken about his family gatherings and the role that laughter played, and how he would crack up his family. I identify with this, because there were times I would play this role in my family. I still remember coming back from a Bill Cosby show and doing almost the whole thing verbatim and delighting my mother, grandmother, aunt and some

other relatives. At the time, I wasn't sure it was appropriate, as they were sitting shiva for my grandfather. But I came to understand that the laughter, coming on the last day of shiva was therapeutic, and helped them go on living and to return to their normal routines.

It may seem unusual to speak about a comedian and humor at a Yizkor Memorial Service, when we somberly remember those who have passed away. But I mention this today, because Billy Crystal, was recently blessed with the birth of his first grandchild, Ella. To commemorate the occasion, he wrote a children's picture book. Entitled, "I Already Know I Love You", it is not destined to be a classic, as it is not great, lasting literature. But the reason it is worth mentioning today is because as Crystal explained in his interview with the *Forward*, he wrote it because he wanted to impart some of the Jewish values he received from his parents and grandparents.

On one of the pages, of the relatively brief picture book, he writes something very profound. "I want to teach you about our family with pictures from long ago. You are the new twig on our tree, and I can't wait to watch you grow."

How beautiful a notion: recognizing that in order to nourish and nurture a child, it is necessary for this newest twig to know its roots. His goal was to do this by passing on the story of who and what preceded the child. Each of us here today is who we are by virtue of those who came before us.

Remembering our heritage and where we came from, of those who gave us life, and with whom we shared life, after all, is part of the significance and impact of this day, and this service. We gather together and acknowledge that we are part of all that came before us. We are all twigs. We come from a tree that was here long before us. To truly grow, we must be connected to our roots.

At Yizkor, a service devoted to evoking the memory of loved ones, and throughout the year, we recall laughter and tender moments shared and time spent together with loved ones who are no longer physically present. We remember the love, and the loves that we shared, and that was showered upon us by those who are now in our hearts and minds. We evoke the values our loved ones lived by, and what they sought to transmit to us. Through our devotion to the principles of our faith, we affirm that those who will follow us will be linked to those who came before us.

Part of the beauty and power of this service is that we acknowledge that life is not whole or complete. There are family members and friends who are no longer here.

Continuing with the theme of children's books, it calls to mind the Shel Silverstein book, "A Missing Piece." The story is about a wheel who finds that when it loses a part of it, it moves more slowly than when it was a perfectly round circle. It goes off in search of the missing piece, so that it would be complete again. As it hobbled along, it admired the flowers and butterflies. After trying many pieces, it finally found the right one, only now that it was perfect and complete once more, it moved too fast to notice the nature it had

so come to enjoy. So, after awhile the circle stopped and left the missing piece by the side of the road, and went on its way, once again, looking for the missing piece.

The lesson is that in some way, we are more whole when we are incomplete. Perhaps it is because when we are missing something we are more vulnerable and more sensitive to others, to their pain and loss. We become cognizant that something or someone they cherish may be absent or lacking in their lives as well. We all have gaps and missing pieces.

Crystal found out that he would be a grandfather on the first anniversary of his mother's death. He said, "The baby has filled up a great place for me that had been sad for some time because of the loss of my mom. When you see how life works – someone has to leave to make room for the new, it changes your whole point of view about life. I've been smiling ever since."

The child, Ella, is named for his mother Helen Eleanor.

May her memory be for a blessing, and may the memory of all those we remember at this sacred hour be for a blessing as well. May we continue to make them proud as we recall the loves we shared and the pieces that are missing in our lives.

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