

A Dying Mother's Gift to Her Son

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Rosh Hashana Evening
September 4, 2013*

This being the 25th anniversary of the founding of our synagogue, I was tempted to ask congregants to vote for their favorite sermon I have given over the years and then give the ones that got the most votes. It would be hard for me to choose, for each one is like a child, and I have a special feeling for each. One of my personal favorite high holiday sermons was from 16 years ago, Rosh Hashana of 1997, based on the beautiful and powerful story by the great Yiddish writer, I.L. Peretz, entitled "Three Gifts."

The story is predicated on one of the concepts of this season: that our souls are judged based on the deeds we perform. In Peretz' story a man died and appeared before the heavenly tribunal for final judgment. When his deeds were measured, it was found that the amount of *mitzvot*, good deeds he performed and his *averot*, his sins were in perfect equilibrium. The soul is sent back to wander on earth to bring back three gifts so that a final judgment can be made to determine his fate.

I thought about the beautiful story, one of Peretz's finest, when earlier this summer a young man came to see me and asked me to say a blessing for him. Actually, not for him, but for three things he brought with him. He wanted me to bless three gifts his mother gave to him before she passed away of cancer while he was in high school.

The first time I was asked to say a blessing for someone in a hospital I was a rabbinical student, not yet a rabbi. I felt uncomfortable and uneasy and wasn't sure what to say. I wondered with some humility, who am I to offer a blessing on behalf of someone else. From a theological perspective I was not too comfortable with the concept of praying on behalf of another person. Nevertheless, I overcame all those initial feelings and misgivings and said a prayer at the bedside of the patient.

Since that first time, I have learned to feel comfortable with the concept and believe that there is power in the act of praying on behalf of another. Those tender moments with congregants at various times and in various places and settings are among the most spiritually fulfilling aspects of my calling as a rabbi. I have on occasion prayed in front of the open ark in the sanctuary with them. I have been moved by how emotionally powerful and uplifting these experiences have been, and how fortunate and blessed I am to share these intimate moments with congregants.

I now know prayers I did not know when I was just studying to become a rabbi. I now have the words and the tools to express the ancient prayers and psalms, as well as to compose my own thoughts in the language and voice of our tradition and sages. I am no longer queasy about the efficacy of saying a prayer for another person. Although I still do not like to think of God as a dispenser of wishes we turn to when we want something, I understand and believe that prayer is potent because it connects us to the Divine within each of us and beyond any of us, as well as to each other.

But this time I was being asked to do something different, to bless objects. The young man thrust in front of me a large Jewish Bible, with a black cover, like the one I had in my home when I was growing up, a mezuzah and a keepah. All three he said, were gifts his mother gave to him shortly before she died.

I knew that this was not the time to engage in a philosophical or theological conversation about the appropriateness of what he was asking me to do. There was a strong emotional attachment to these things, and although I knew that he was not living a very Jewish life, they were precious and obviously meant something to him, as well as to his mother, of blessed memory. I thought of the Peretz story which I love so much, and how the three gifts offered by the forlorn soul were so meaningful to the Heavenly Tribunal they had a favorable impact on his fate.

I placed my hand on each of the objects, closed my eyes for a moment to collect my thoughts, and said something along the lines of the following.

I began with the Tanach, the oversized Bible and told him it symbolizes the centrality of Torah to us, and that it is something that has been treasured by Jews throughout the ages. It contains the eternal wisdom and message of God and of our attempt to understand and discern how we should live in the world. As such it is our ongoing dialogue with the Almighty and contains the essence of our responsibility to bring the message of Torah, of God's concern for all mankind to the world.

Holding the mezuzah I explained that it is what we place on our doorposts and thus represents a Jewish home and his mother's wish that he have a Jewish home. I referred to the importance of having Jewish objects and symbols in one's home and that celebrating Jewish holidays and the Sabbath are essential aspects of being Jewish.

I suggested that the keepah should remind him about the importance of Jewish ritual, of observing the mitzvot and minhagim, the customs and practices of our faith and traditions. It also is a reminder that there is a God who cares about how we live our lives.

I concluded with some words of blessing tying these themes together. The specifics of what I said were less important than what I wanted to convey – to think about what his mother had left him and the message and messages that could be found in these gifts -- an attachment to our people, tradition, heritage and God. I told him that each and every time he used these objects he made them a part of his life, thereby honoring and sanctifying the memory of his mother.

The encounter led me to think about the focus of our attention and the themes of this time of year. Too often in our predominantly secular world we focus on the wrong things. Too much of our energy goes into providing for our own material comforts. Rosh Hashanah comes to give us an annual tuneup, alignment and course adjustment and to refocus on the issues that should matter the most to us. That is why it is called Aseret Ymei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Return.

And so tonight, on this eve of a new year, I ask you to reflect on these questions: What was given to you by those who came before you? What have you done to perpetuate that legacy? What have you given to your children to express your beliefs and your convictions, to convey what is important to you? What are the values you strive to live by and that guide the choices you make? What are the gifts you want to pass on, and what are you doing to convey them?

My son, Ezra told me that when he was studying in Israel this summer the rabbi teaching a class asked the participants to think about what they are willing to die for.

When he told me about the question I couldn't help but wonder how in our materialistic society we would respond, and if we are even capable of responding. Do we have any principles, beliefs, or ideals that are so central to who we are that we would be willing to die for them?

The rabbi followed up his question by telling the students, whatever it is that you are willing to die for, this then is what you should live for. Now go and live your life accordingly.

As we face the new year, and wish each other a happy new year, we say the traditional Hebrew greeting, *L'shana tovah tikateevu, vetehatemu*, which literally means, "May you be written and inscribed for a good year," referring to being written in the Book of Life, which is an open, clean slate. We often shorten the salutation to *shana tovah*, which literally means: A good year. Since it may sound a little awkward to say in English, "a good year," we adopt the secular phrasing and say, "Happy new year, or have a happy new year."

But in reality, it is appropriate to wish each other not just a happy year, but a *shana tovah*, a good year. My wish for you is that this be a good year, a year of blessing. May you hold close those whom you cherish and realize that all that we have is lent to us by God. As you reflect in these upcoming days about what matters to you, may you then act in the new year in a way that will perpetuate the ideals and gifts you value the most.

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