

I was 23, living in San Francisco, just beginning to make my way in the world when my dearest friend and then roommate asked me if I wanted to go hear a lecture on Judaism at UC Berkeley – “This guy my dad is really into is speaking, do you want to go?”

Back then I was non-observant, unaffiliated but interested, at least intellectually in Judaism. “Sure,” I said, “I’ll go”, and so we went to the lecture. I remember it was in a big hall, packed, hardly room to breath. There was a kind of electricity in the air; a chill ran down my spine as I wondered, “what am I doing here?” Next thing I know, David is speaking.

A shortish man, with thick, frizzy grey hair, a large forehead, and piercing blue eyes, a little disheveled as if to say, “the things of this world just don’t matter that much.” David seized the lectern and boomed into the microphone. That’s when I realized David was no ordinary man, rabbi, or philosopher. No, this guy, David Hartman was a force of nature that demanded a response. He certainly had my attention.

His topic that night was the tension between the universal and the particular in Judaism as reflected in two medieval giants of Jewish thought: Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides) and Rabbi Yehudah Halevi. If I hadn’t studied some philosophy in college I would have been completely lost not least because David used lots of Hebrew and Yiddish terms that were totally foreign to me. But, I got the gist of his remarks and I was carried away by his intensity and enthusiasm.

David was so alive and I was, in truth, pretty numb, working a job I disliked, searching but not finding much meaning in my day-to-day existence. David woke me up, pulled me out of my slumber and made me aware of my deep yearning to be, and not just to exist.

It wasn’t Rosh Hashannah but it could have been, because David’s presence that evening was like a big shofar blast for me. About the shofar, Maimonides writes:

“Awake, you sleepers from your sleep. Arouse you slumberers from your slumber and ponder your deeds; remember your Creator and return to God.... Do not be like those who miss the truth in pursuit of shadows and waste their years seeking vanity. Look well to your souls and consider your deeds...”

It would be another 4 years before I entered rabbinical school but in retrospect, my journey from a secular, unaffiliated Jewish salesman to rabbi started that evening, the night Rabbi David Hartman woke me up.

Why am I telling you this? Dr., Rabbi David Hartman died this past February and ever since his death,

I have been remembering and appreciating how important and influential he was to me and countless others. The renowned scholar Yossi Klien Halevi described David as, “perhaps the greatest Jewish philosopher of our time.” The institute he founded in Jerusalem is filled with some of the top Jewish scholars of today, rabbis from all the movement and from all over the world study there. He published a number of highly acclaimed books and was the recipient of various prestigious awards. He was, in other words, a g’dolim, one of the “great ones” of our time. And, he was also my rabbi, really the first rabbi I ever knew, not in a pastoral sense – he was not a great pastor – but as inspiration and goad to be somebody, and to make a difference. Simply put, I wouldn’t be here tonight if it weren’t for him. And so, on this day we call, in addition to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembrance, I hope to use some of what David taught as a way to bring blessings to us all in the New Year.

Reflecting on that first night I heard David speak, I’ve come to realize how comfortably numb we can be, sleep walking through our lives, rarely fully engaged. I am not the only person aware of the impulse to go numb rather than live fully. The social scientist, Brene Brown writes in her book, *Daring Greatly* that, “Americans today are more debt ridden, obese, medicated and addicted than we ever have been.” In fact, for the first time since the CDC has been keeping statistics, the leading cause of accidental deaths in America is not car accidents but drug overdoses, and not from street drugs but rather from prescription drugs! (pg.138)

David challenged all those around him to wake up. He was a shofar always “going off”. David didn’t just lecture, he roared. “Give me a reason to get up in the morning,” he would shout. Give me a reason to believe!”

In what ways are you sleep walking through life? Bored at work? Alienated at home? Disconnected from your self? Teshuvah, the watchword of these Yamim Noraim is best translated as “return to who you really are, your best, most alive self.” David’s point was we should never, never settle for anything less.

So, after that first encounter I started corresponding with Rabbi Hartman, and he actually wrote back. He suggested some books for me to read and directed my exploration in other ways, but the most important thing he did, the biggest gift he gave me was encouragement and affirmation. He did not judge.

Another name for Rosh Hashannah is Yom Hadin, Day of Judgment. It’s the time, according to tradition that God, as it were, sits on His throne, opens the sefer hayyim v’mavet/the book of life and

death, and passes judgment on “who shall live and who shall die.” I reject this image of God and I know David did as well. I do believe that we bare responsibility for our actions and in that sense, we write in the book how we shall live or die. I also know that life is fragile, precarious and uncertain; some of us won’t be here next year and the list of ways we may suffer is sobering... This is what it means to be human. I am not sure it has much to do with God and I am certain it is a reason to be humble and not judgmental.

Along with Yom Hadin/the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashannah is also called, Yom Harat Olam, the day the world was created. Celebrating the birthday of the world moves us away from judgment to creation, new beginnings and renewal!

“Ki kol shanah hi y’chidah meyuchedet b’briah ha-olam m’chadesh/For each year is a singular and unique creation, creating the world anew.”

What an optimistic, life affirming perspective! Everything is new, the world, humanity, all of us. We may not feel it, but within us are the seeds of rebirth and renewal. This was another one of David’s teachings, that the gates of teshuvah are always open, that there is no point of no return, no eternal damnation. As David would say, “the promise of the future is real, waiting for you!” In other words, we are not trapped by our past, not bound to schlep our own painful, personal baggage into the future.

Leave it! Drop that hot coal that is burning in your hand. Let the statute of limitations run out on the family grudge or parental hurt. We really can be better, healthier, happier people in the New Year.

If we are to be judged let it be on our future and whether we tried to be the person we were created to be. You know the saying of Reb Zuzia that when he dies and goes to the olam habah, “God will not ask him why he was not like Moshe Rabbenu? No, God will ask him why he wasn’t like Zeb Zuzia!”

This was David’s message, what he affirmed in me, the gift that changed my life, the new years present we can give ourselves and each other as well; to affirm and not judge, to believe in who we can be and encourage the seeking, the stretch, the climb to higher ground.

Another David story. My first year of rabbinical school was in Jerusalem where David lived and I arranged for him to come and speak at the seminary. It was a big deal. I remember shaking with stage fright as I struggled to give the formal words of introduction to his talk. David did not judge me but David was an equal opportunity critic of the Jewish people

That day, David challenged us to see beyond the labels, “Reform”, “Conservative”, ‘Orthodox”. He criticized every movement. He ruttled out and exposed complacency and mediocrity everywhere he went; Judaism was too important and the needs of the hour were too great to expect nothing but the best from everyone. He also poked fun at some of the stereotypes of Reform rabbis. “Being a rabbi is more than wearing a robe and saying “please rise” and “you may be seated”. We laughed a little bit, and we also got the message that we were entering something much bigger than the confines of the seminary or the choreography of the service. But that wasn’t the “kicker” of that day. What got to us all was his story of ordination.

He studied with perhaps the greatest Orthodox thinker of the 20th century, Rav Soloveitchik. One day, according to David, Soloveitchik laid his hands on him and, in affect said, “you’re now a rabbi.” What did he do? Have a party? Look for work? No, he studied for another 10 years earning a PHD in philosophy at Fordham University in Canada among other things. Books, Books! Books! He boomed. What’s the hurry? Stop worrying about being a rabbi, he said and learn how to be a Jew!

That was hard for us to hear. We were anxious to get on with our lives, get through and out of school and find a good pulpit somewhere. David reminded us of the true nature of our calling; that the learning makes the rabbi not the other way around. That’s a lesson I have never forgotten and I am so grateful to you, Shomrei Torah for supporting me in every enrichment program, retreat or seminar I have attended.

I would be doing David’s memory a disservice if you think I am implying that you are off the hook just because I get to learn! Jews, not just rabbis pray through the use of our minds. We believe that God’s love is in part expressed through the gift of intellect and our ability to use it to know God in the broadest sense of the word. Books, books BOOKS!

Here we are about to start a New Year and a great question to add to the list is how will we be challenged intellectually in the coming year? What books will we read, what classes will we take? As you leave tonight, check out our new program guide. Don’t just flip through the pages, and look at the pretty pictures. Start with the rabbi’s message... then use the highlighter we are giving you and mark the classes and other programs you are going to attend in the New Year. You will also find a short bibliography of recommended books to read as well.

Finally, one can’t remember Rabbi David Hartman without reflecting on Israel in all its complexity. David made aliya with his family in the response to the 6 Day War. He believed that it was one thing to be the spokespeople for the oppressed when we were oppressed; it was quite another when we were in power. Having sat on the sidelines of history for almost 2,000

years, Israel offered us the opportunity to fully live as Jews and to fully develop what it means to be a Jew.

The hard realities of Israeli life took their toll on David. He lost a son in the first Lebanon War. He was an advocate for the peace process before most others and was deeply disappointed when it collapsed. Perhaps even more painful was the fact that the Israeli Orthodox establishment rejected him and his pluralistic approach to Judaism and Jewish life.

David loved Am Yisrael (Jewish People) and Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel) but he could be quite critical of Medinat Yisrael (State of Israel). In an interview with the Israeli paper Yedioth Achronot in honor of his 80th birthday, R. Hartman said that whenever he spoke with IDF soldiers, he told them that “I teach: Love of Israel is not love of the land; it’s love of the people living in the land... “I understand the need to belong to the land, but that doesn't make you a Jew. What makes you a Jew is how you behave on that land.”

The American Jewish communities growing apathy and disengagement with Israel troubled David. “Have a lovers quarrel with us,” he would say, “but don’t turn your back on us.”

Two thousand years ago, a rabbi recalled the breadth and depth of what his teacher had given him. Yohanan ben Zakkai remembered his teacher Hillel saying: If all the heavens were parchments and all the trees quills and all the seas were ink, it would still be impossible to write down even a part of what I learned from my teacher (Sofrim 16:6).

That is R. David Hartman to me and so many others. May his memory be for a blessing in the New Year and for years to come.