Commemorating
18 years of
Communal
Divrei Torah

Shaarei Torah

Congregation Shaarei Tefillah
Newton, Massachusetts
On Their Shoulders: The Professors, the Beginnings, and Beyond

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The idea that \textit{nitma'atu hadarot}, the generations diminish, is well established in our tradition. Of course, we have a spacious tradition, and there is also, particularly in the Yiddish stratum, an oily vein of schmaltzy sentimentality:

\textit{Oy vos iz geven iz geven iz sheyn mer nisht do.}

Ah that which was, isn't anymore.

But that is different. \textit{Nitma'atu hadarot} refers to something more basic, not to mention more astringent: the sense that, despite the best human efforts and the occasional exceptional personality, the trajectory of human spiritual attainment is one of inevitable decline, and this level gets lower the farther away one stands from the font and origin of revelation, at Har Sinai or even before. \textit{Chazal} had a poignant phrase for this: \textit{chaval al d'ovdin v'la mishtakechin}, alas for those who are gone and cannot be found.

To show how far back this idea goes and how deep it cuts, consider who the person was whose inadequate behavior evoked this lament: Moshe Rabbeinu himself! And what did he do to make us pine for his superior predecessors? As he stood before the \textit{sneb bo'er ba'esh}, the burning bush, hearing \textit{HaKadosh Barukh Hu} send him to the Jews in Egypt to promise redemption, Moshe asked, "When I speak to them and say the God of your fathers sent me to you, \textit{v'amru li mah sh'mo mah omar alehem}, when they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I tell them?"

Keep in mind that a name here is no mere arbitrary designation. The name is the essence, implying the qualities and attributes of that which is named. God sent all the animals to Adam, \textit{v'khol asher yikra lo ba'adam nefesh chaya hu sh'mo}, and Adam defined the nature of all the creatures by naming them. So when Moshe asked God for His name, he was really asking, What kind of God are You really? Can we rely on Your promises?

To this God replied, \textit{chaval al d'ovdin v'la mishtakechin}. When your forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov ran into difficulties, they didn't question My reliability. I promised Avraham, \textit{kum hitbalech ba'aretz l'orkah u'lerchabab}, traverse the land in all directions, \textit{ki lekha etnenuh}, because I shall

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give it to you. Yet when Avraham wanted to bury his wife Sarah, lo matza ad shekanah bedamim, he had to pay retail, v’lo birher acharnei midotai, but that didn’t cause him to question My attributes. The same was true of Yitzchak and Yaakov. V’ata tehillat sh’lichutu amarta li mah sh’mi, and now you, on the first day of your prophetic job, you ask Me, “Excuse me, what did You say Your name was?” Chaval al d’ovdin v’la mishtakehin!

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When this congregation was founded 18 years ago, the concept of mi’ut hadorot, generational decline, was much in the air — but with a twist. Mostly, this idea is bottom-up, the younger generation sighing, “How much greater were our forebears!” In our case, however, it was very much the opposite, with the older generation declaring, “These youngsters are useless!”

Our sins were many, and frequently cited. We were overeducated, we were elitist, we were too frum — you have to enjoy historical irony, yes? We were arrogant, ungrateful, parasitic upon existing institutions. Where were we, it was asked, when these institutions were founded? (In diapers, perhaps, or unborn, but never mind.) We took but didn’t give, carpied and complained but didn’t contribute. We were, in the considered words of a communal leader of the time, “not real balebatim.”

The Hebrew plural is ba’alei habayit. Batebatim is Yiddish, the plural of baalei — householder, burgher, bourgeois, solid, stolid, and sober member of society who is responsible for establishing and running the institutions which sustain society and civilization as we know it. All that, it was said, our generation was not.

I detail this indictment first because that’s what it was and also because this attitude of the older generation toward us should remind you of something from your own personal experience, the dynamic between adults and their adolescent children.

What is the usual complaint about adolescents? That they are smart-aleck know-it-alls, who take but don’t give, who are irresponsible and unappreciative. And there is more. Even the sympathetic parent casts a nervous glance at his adolescent progeny with their callow, unlined faces and mutters, “There is no way this kid is going to make it in the real world. He’s never met a payroll, he didn’t grow up on the mean streets of Brooklyn, she’s never rubbed her elbows on the sharp edges of reality. They didn’t go through what we went through, they don’t know what we know. Make it on their own, these guys? There is no chance!”

That’s what even sympathetic parents say, in private moments. In this way each generation consoles itself that its successor generation cannot possibly have what it takes to supersede it, though of course it will, before being superseded itself. Generations come and go, but the supply of real balebatim is somehow eternally renewed.

In the days preceding Wednesday September 21, 1983, the first night of Sukkot, all Newton was abuzz. Everybody was talking, whispering, gossiping. Lashon hara and rechilut were everywhere. There was going to be a rump minyan in the Hammers’ home on Homer Street, did you hear? Who was going to be there and what did that mean? Who was not going to be there, and what did that mean? People stood in little knots, wondering whether the other people in their little knots were planning or plotting, and if so against whom? It was wicked awesome!

Richie Wilgoren, who always does things in grand style, was in charge of setting up the minyan in the Hammers’ Homer home. He rented chairs, borrowed Torahs, purchased flower arrangements for the mehitza. These were adequate, because this was a temporary sanctuary for what was supposed to be a temporary minyan.

When Yom Tov began and those of us who came showed up, the room exploded with enthusiasm. Our usually tepid singing reverberated off the low ceilings in the sun room. We spent a lot of time in the Hammers’ home that fall and winter, returning to use their basement for several months when we outgrew the various living rooms to which at first we trekked week-to-week. But even if you wangle an invitation to 101 Homer Street, you won’t see what it looked like. For some reason Michael and Phyllis seem to consider their home not as a historical shrine but as a place where they live and can renovate anytime they want. Those Hammers!

At Kabbalat Shabbat near the end of the holiday, we sang lekha dodi likrat kallab to a lively tune. Just another niggun, you think? Not at all — that was our niggun! One of the issues which exercised us at the time was our being forced to sing lekha dodi to what we considered a “dirgelike” melody. Being free to use our own song was so liberating that we did it as though we were bellowing, “On, Wisconsin!” before 100,000 screaming fans, with an enthusiasm unmatched before, or since.

On Yom Tov itself the ba’al tefillah on several occasions was Laurence Begner, Marvin and June Fox’s son-in-law. In addition to being a London solicitor, Laurence has a rich, rolling baritone. Each time he finished kedushah he intoned:

Ledor vador, ledor vador, ledor vador nagid godlekhah

And we responded lustily.

Ledor vador, ledor vador!
It was liberating. It was wonderful. You just had to be there.
And then there were the drashot. The speaker on the first day was Professor Alexander Altmann; on the second it was Professor Marvin Fox. I don't remember exactly what Professor Altmann said, but it was eloquent, and included a reference to an unfamiliar source from the 13th century.
Most of us did not know much about the professors. We knew they sat together in what people called the Professors' Row, spoke with each other about professorial things, and were trotted out for ceremonial occasions. About their personal lives we knew little, but were pleased and excited to see them join us.
Professor Alexander Altmann was the elder statesman among them, at that time 77 years old and retired from his position at Brandeis though still active in study and writing. He was born in Germany to a prominent rabbinic family originally from Hungary. He studied the thought of Nachman of Bratslav and traced part of his ancestry to Sanzer Chasidim, but there was nothing chasidic about Professor Altmann. One was to learn that his German formality and courtly, Old World manners were considered anachronistic even by his contemporaries.
He took a rabbinical position in Berlin as a young man during the 1930s. He tried to keep up the spirit of his congregants during those dark times. He told us how he used the image of Jacob's ladder, v'binei malakkei Elokim olim v'yordim bo, to signal his listeners that what goes up must come down, that the Nazis had risen to power and would fall from it. He had to speak in code because Nazi censors were present in shul.
By 1938 it was clear that to save his family, he needed to leave. Professor Altmann was invited to apply for a position as Chief Rabbi of Manchester, England; such acceptance contingent upon his delivering a satisfactory sermon. This doesn't sound too daunting, expect for one thing: at that time he didn't know a word of English. He therefore wrote the sermon in German, from which it was both translated and transliterated for delivery.
What makes this so remarkable is that those of us who heard Professor Altmann speak recall that he didn't merely know English; he was nobly eloquent in a way which makes it hard to believe that well into adult life he didn't know a word. I cite this not because Professor Altmann needs my or anyone else's baskamah as to his capacities, but only as an example of his remarkable powers whose appreciation is accessible to the non-specialist.
Professor Altmann studied at the Hildesheimer Academy in Berlin in the 1920s. Berlin in the '20s — what an exciting decade. Gershom Scholem, Rav Yohe Ber Soloveitchik, so many of the figures who shaped the modern Jewish world studied there then. Imagine having someone who was among them giving you a drashah. If that's not impressive enough, imagine such a person coming to your shul meetings and rising to make motions!
As Yom Tov drew to a close and we made plans to make our temporary minyan ongoing, I met with Professor Altmann. "I am very pleased with what you young people are doing," he said. "Unfortunately I cannot join you."
"But why not?" I asked.
"Because," he said, "my tallis is in the other building."
I was momentarily nonplussed, until I realized the limitations of not being raised to German propriety. Quickly I responded, "I will get it for you."
Professor Altmann looked at me with incredulity and a little relief. "You would do that?" he asked.
I would. And I did. Under cover of night I rummaged among the talliszekchach, identified the proper one, and made off with it. In this way I gave the world another little spin.
After Yom Tov we postponed our revolution for one week until after Parshat Noach while we celebrated the bar mitzvah of a young man who now has three children of his own and is a Rosb Yeshiva in Ramat Bet Shemesh. The following week, Parshat Lekh Lekha, was our first official week as the Newton Minyan.
Shabbat morning I was hurrying toward the home of Nancy and Ray Zibman at 423 Ward Street, eager to be on time for once. Turning right from Sumner onto Ward was Professor Altmann, striding ramrod-straight. Beside him was a bald, shorter, older man: Professor Jacob Katz. At our first week, then, there were Professor Altmann, Professor Katz, and Professor Fox. Rodney Falk layned, Josh Jacobsen davened, and we were on our way.
One day I called on Professor Altmann at his home, at the point south of Newton Centre where Langley Road bends to the left and is joined at an angle by Glen Avenue. I came late one fall afternoon, no doubt to discuss some important affair of state. When I knocked, there was a small delay. Professor Altmann opened the door. He wore brown slacks, a brown, knitted vest, a white shirt and tie.
"I must apologize, Dr. Rockoff," he said. "But I was taking a nap and did not have time to put on a jacket."
Prepared to overlook this, I followed him into his living room, which was furnished in subdued tones and dark wood. A piano stood in the far corner, illuminated by a lamp which shone on a volume of Beethoven sonatas, open to a middle-period piece and in obvious regular use.
Professor Altmann motioned me to the sofa opposite and said, "Would you like a drink? Scotch, perhaps?"
I nodded.
And then he said, "How would you like it? Neat?"
This question plunged me into perplexity. I plunged the wellsprings of my
savoir-faire, wellsprings which run shallow when your cultural roots are in the *pailshe shibbel* in Williamsburg. "Neat," I reasoned, must be the antonym of "on the rocks." Dare I use a technical term I had never used before? Yet if I said "on the rocks," whose meaning I was sure of, would that mark me as the kind of philistine who diluted presumably fine scotch with ice? My whole world passed before me, as I said, "Neat, please."

Professor Altmann began to pour. As I gazed across the room at one of the leading rabbis and scholars of the 20th century, standing among symbols of Central European high culture, pouring me a scotch, neat, I thought to myself, "What on earth are you doing here? How did you blunder into these precincts? You are way out of your depth!"

Somehow I managed to get through the rest of the interview, though what we spoke about, I don't recall.

Professor Altmann surprised us by not just joining but taking an active role in shul affairs. One matter which brought about was the choice of a name for our shul. Yet another committee came up with a list of possibilities. In the end the vote came down to either Shaarei Tefillah or Darkhei Noam. Choosing a name meaning "Paths of Peace" would of course have marked us as a breakaway shul (not that we needed marking), though perhaps time would have eventually laundered the stigma as it has that of other schismatic institutions like Temple Israel or Temple Mishkan Tefila.

At any rate, as we considered each of the Committee's initial list of choices, Professor Altmann rose to be recognized.

"I propose," he said, "that we call ourselves Kehillat Lomdei Torah, because that is what we do." And then he sat down.

We gaped with the mix of awe and wonder that a child has when his teacher comes to dinner and turns out to eat like everyone else, or when an adult suddenly spies a famous celebrity doing something ordinary, like crossing the street. This awe did not, of course, stop us from voting down his motion.

Professor Altmann took an active role in other ways as well. He critiqued those who *davened* and spoke. He was not, for instance, a devotee of the *Erev Shel Shoshanim* school of *nusach*, and while he would tolerate popular tunes in the *chazarot hashatz*, if a *chazan* used one that he found too rollicking, he did not hesitate to address the gentleman immediately after davening to suggest that his choice of melody was not suitable for the sanctuary on *Shabbat*.

But if that were not intimidating enough, anyone whose sinuses needing clearing out could do worse than having Professor Alexander Altmann, scholar and practitioner *par excellence* of modern Jewish homiletics, critique his *d'var Torah*. His criticisms were always fair and constructive, but also blunt and honest. On one occasion, a guest speaking on *Parshat Vayeshev* referred to an questionable action by Yaakov Avinu and opined that Yaakov had acted "like a jerk." Bear in mind that our collective ethos early on was shaped by Harvard Hillel, so what followed might be termed Harvard Hillel versus Hildesheimer. After davening Professor Altmann strode over to the speaker and told him exactly what he thought of standing in front of the ark and calling our forefather a jerk. The poor fellow never came back to our *shul*; soon after, he took a position in Omaha, Nebraska.

Some thirty days after Professor Altmann passed away, a commemorative service was held in his memory at Brandeis. Almost all of us came. The idea of marking *shloshim* at a secular university points up the inner tension in the field of academic Jewish studies. There is a difference between the academic and the religious temper which goes beyond this or that issue. The academic approach is ironic, skeptical, and original; the religious sensibility tends to be straightforward, credulous, and conventional. Of course individuals and the institutions they create can sustain greater contradictions than these. Besides, this particular tension, which has always lain at the heart of this community, can lead to creativity and the release of energy, sometimes in the form of light, at other times of heat.

This tension was evident that day, as speaker after speaker rose to praise Professor Altmann's erudition, his originality, his scope, and his massive intellectual legacy. And each speaker was forced to note as well the curious fact that this giant, who had been lionized in so many academic settings, had in his years of formal retirement found that the institution which somehow meant the most to him — which had put a lift in his voice, a sparkle in his eye, and a spring in his step which friends hadn't seen in years — was of all things a shul, and an Orthodox *shul* at that. How very curious.

I was very proud to hear this. I suspect that my friends were too. I am sure we were.

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At first glance Professor Marvin Fox was a more approachable figure. He was born in Chicago and spoke with the flat accents of America's heartland. He dressed like other American men of his generation: conservative, dark business suit, white shirt, and tie. He wore a fedora just as all adult men did until January 20, 1961, when Jackie showed up in her pillbox and Jack showed up with nothing and destroyed the hat industry overnight. Of course, Marvin Fox was not just any man but a professor of philosophy. He entered Northwestern at some absurdly young age, having skipped any number of grades, and got his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. So because he neither sounded nor looked as though he came from Poland or Brooklyn, you could be pardoned for not realizing that Professor Marvin Fox was a very yeshivish
kind of guy. I say yeshivish not just because he got semicha from the Chicago yeshiva. More than just granting him a degree, the yeshiva shaped his outlook and attitudes in fundamental ways which his appearance and speech patterns belied. He was well aware of this contradiction, and sometimes made good use of it.

For instance, he was once visiting London for the bar mitzvah of one of his grandsons. His daughter Sherry accompanied him to a Jewish bookstore to buy a set of shas as a bar mitzvah present. To a greater extent than, say in a Wal-Mart, in a Jewish bookstore what they sell you and how much they charge depends on who they think you are. Observing this modern-looking gent looking to buy a shas, the clerk opted for condescension. Taking down a masechta, he intoned, "Now this is a folio of the Babylonian Talmud . . ."

Citing some passages from its contents by heart, Professor Fox soon let the man know exactly whom he was dealing with.

But there was much more to his yeshivish orientation than the ability to impress bookstore clerks. Early on our shul faced a crisis. Having outgrown living rooms and outlasted the Hammers' hospitality — they had decided to reclaim their house — the only place we could go was the social hall discovered by Joel Allen belonging to the Trinity Episcopal Church on Furber Lane. None of the members of our Rabbinic Committee was prepared to rule on this inflammatory issue. Professor Fox contacted a famous rosh yeshiva at Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, who ruled, on condition of anonymity, that we could.

And how was it that Professor Fox was on sufficiently intimate terms to call this man? Because he had worked closely with him, and with many other roshei yeshiva. He helped the yeshivas obtain government funding, and worked closely with Torah U’Mesorah to establish day schools. This was a time when most American Jews looked at day school education as a step “back to the ghetto,” before roots and ethnic pride had been invented, when a rabbi who spoke mit a bekzence was not a charming sage but a backward grinner. I don’t know how many frum professors there were in American universities in those days, but there weren’t many, and there were probably not any who combined Professor Fox’s ability to speak the American language with his understanding of and sympathy with the leaders of the yeshiva world.

Professor Fox was a scholar of vast erudition and a huge talmid chacham. He wrote many papers on a wide range of topics, but only one book, Interpreting Maimonides, published in 1990. A central argument of this work is Professor Fox’s contention that there is no split between the Rambam of the Mishnah Torah and the Rambam of the Moreh Nevukhim. I don’t want to coyly hint at an intimacy I didn’t have or a philosophical insight I don’t claim, but I would still suggest that this assertion of the essential harmony between halachist and philosopher, between rabbi and professor, was one which had for Professor Fox not just professional significance but personal resonance as well.

Unlike my few meetings with Professor Altmann, I had many with Professor Fox, to whose home I went often in the early days. My intention at first was to have a brief discussion about this or that pressing issue, but soon learned that with Professor Fox there was no such thing as a brief meeting. In fact, with Professor Fox there was no such thing as a brief anything. Had Marvin Fox been a piece of music, his tempo marking would have been largo maestoso: slow, stately and majestic. He walked slowly, he talked slowly, he even sang slowly. On his yahrzeits, Parshiot Chayei Sarah and Vayigash, he davened and leyned, and services took a very long time. But nothing was as slow as his lecturing on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, which no one who heard could ever forget. When I taught my sons the Rosh Hashanah trop, and they tended, as kids do, to rush, I would remind them, “Think of Professor Fox.” At once they would recall his inimitable, “Ome-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-eyn!” and slow down.

My meetings at the Fox home went like this: I took my place on the sofa while Professor Fox sat opposite on his favorite easy chair. June Fox would come in to offer (soft) drinks, which we would politely refuse, and she would withdraw, leaving us to our deliberations. I would raise whatever issue was current, and then listen as Professor Fox discussed it at leisure and at length from all possible angles.

In addition to his achievements as a scholar, Professor Fox was noted for his administrative skills. He was not an absent-minded professor. He knew what he wanted to get done, and did what it took to achieve it. He was also very generous with his time and advice with students who sought his guidance on professional or personal matters.

In short, Professor Fox was a great scholar, a great talmid chacham, a wise counselor. And he loved Tab. When the Coca-Cola company switched from Tab to Diet Coke, this posed a big problem. Fortunately, Naomi Osher contacted her suppliers and amassed a stash which she made available to the Foxes which lasted for years.

Those of us who live on the Walnut Street end of town often toddled along with Professor Fox after shul on Friday night like peripatetic philosophers, as he recounted stories. Some of those he told about himself revealed aspects of his personality one might not expect from my description so far.

For instance, when he was a chaplain in the U.S. Army during the Second World War, he befriended a priest and a minister — the proverbial threesome of so many jokes. One day the galach had a problem: a funeral at which he (nisht ugedacht? misericordia?) had to officiate, and a prior commitment he couldn’t break. Enter Father Fox. This was no problem, because of course Pro-
Chaval al d'ovin v'la mishtakchin. Alas for those who are lost, who cannot be found. Alas for those founding events, which cannot be retrieved. Alas for those intense moments, luminous with a glow which cannot be conveyed. Chaval indeed.

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The American synagogue community is a hybrid institution, a mix of Jewish tradition and American democracy, the ancient and the modern, the contingent and the transcendent. Scholars tell us that when they started out, synagogues may have been devoted just to Torah study, with tefillah coming later. In recent times, however, a shul has been a place to daven, as it is for the most part in Israel, except where Anglo-Saxism like some of our children are grafting American cultural forms onto Israeli soil, complete with announcements, Rabbinic Search Committees, and building finds. The idea of a synagogue as community center was pioneered, like the bat mitzvah, by Mordecai Kaplan. Both his ideas have been laundered by time. (Our own member Josh Musher is Kaplan's great-grandson — Josh too has been laundered by time.)

A shul then serves many functions: a place to daven, to learn, to grow spiritually, to drink single-malt scotch and eat matjes herring. In its eighteen years our own community has distinguished itself in many ways. Our rabbinic leadership began with a distinguished committee which included Professors Altmann and Fox, as well as our friends and advisors Professors Nahum Sarna and Lester Segal. Rabbi Moshe Symkovich came on part-time, and for the past six years we have enjoyed the splendid guidance of Rabbi Benjamin Samuels. We have had fine speakers and creative educational events, pioneering efforts in women's religious expression, social outreach, youth programs, and more. All these are important, and I don't in any way wish to disparage any of these by focusing on just one aspect of our shul which I have always found outstanding: the way we support each other as though we are part of an extended family.

Even before 1983 there was something friendly about the avira d'Newton. People from Brookline would visit and say, "It's nice here — people seem to like each other."

Ever since we began, people have moved in, long-term or for a sabbatical year, and remarked in astonishment the extent to which our shul community at once enveloped and supported people who had been total strangers, to an extent they found gratifying and at times almost unbelievable.

Because it sometimes takes distance and perspective to appreciate what you have, newcomers and visitors can perhaps appreciate some things to an extent regular residents cannot. It is not "normal" (in a statistical sense) for gabbaim of a small congregation to organize shiva minyanim in the home avelim simultaneously with the regular one in shul. Nor is it typical to find the almost super-

fessor Fox was fluent in Latin. What he actually said is not recorded (perhaps kiddush levanah in Latin), but the service was performed and the day saved.

Or there was the time at an airport somewhere in the Midwest when he spied his old Phys. Ed. teacher from Northwestern. Hailing the man, Professor Fox could see that his teacher didn't recognize him.

"Coach," he said, "don't you remember me?"

"I'm sorry," said the man, shaking his head.

"Think for a moment, Coach," said Marvin. "The worst gym student, the most uncoordinated boy you ever saw . . ."

The coach smiled and threw open his arms, exclaiming, "Foxie! It's really you!"

Professor Fox never lost his perspective or his sense of proportion. He once told me about a dinner he attended in honor of the 15th anniversary of the day school in Columbus. In addition to his work with Torah U'Mesorah for day schools in general, he had a large personal hand in establishing a school for his own kids in Columbus. He did a lot of things himself, including driving the school bus. An image to conjure — Marvin Fox driving a school bus! The only things I can imagine about that is that the children maintained strict decorum, and the bus never exceeded the speed limit.

Most of the rabbis in town, Orthodox included, opposed the new day school for the reasons usual at the time — ghettoization, competition for their own Talmud Torahs, and so forth. By the 15th anniversary, of course, all that had been forgotten, as these same rabbis sat at the dais and took credit for their efforts and foresight. Professor Fox stayed in the back, troubled not at all. He had done what needed doing, but founding schools was not his department. He was more than happy to withdraw when appropriate.

Giving rabbinical advice wasn't his department either. When our shul needed him for this, he joined our Rabbinic Committee and contributed mightily. When we hired first Rabbi Simkovich and then Rabbi Samuels, he was very happy to meet with them, offer his unconditional support, and graciously withdraw to let them do their job.

Professor Altmann passed away in 1987, Professor Fox in 1996. Since then the years have been generally kind. We live in a pleasant and prosperous suburb. For the most part, until recently anyway, we've enjoyed peace and stability. But time and entropy have done their thing, as they always do. Some of us have passed on, others have moved on. The Shaarei Diaspora now extends to Detroit and New Jersey and Boca Raton, to Rechovot and Jerusalem. For our first several years we often had no one to say kaddish at the morning minyan, a circumstance rarely repeated since. Until recently the congregation lacked its own beit olam, its place of eternal memory, but now it has one, and it is not empty.
human levels of support which the Chesed Committee of our community extends in both good times and bad. That successive generations of individuals have perpetuated this institutional culture over such a long time is something of which I think we should be very proud.

Discussions of communal support often center on so-called “life cycle events,” like a wedding, a brit milah, a simchat bat. While this is true, most of life is lived before, between, and after such events, after the speech is done, the program finished, the party over, after the performance has ended and the players have left the stage.

The professors of whom I spoke did much for us, but we did something for them as well. I think of examples. When Professor Altmann passed away and his wife Judith sold the house on Langley and moved to London, I think of the people who were not close friends but still made a point of visiting that remarkable woman in her bright and airy flat in Chelsea, overlooking the Thames, decorated with her own pastel watercolors and mementi of her Alexander, as she called him. I think of Marcia and Alan Feld bringing a bag of videos of the 1930s screwball comedies of which they are fond to Marvin and June Fox, to help ease the painful and fearful hours of Marvin’s chemotherapy.

I can think of many such events and so, no doubt, can you. They are homely acts, recorded nowhere, except for being ketuvim al luach halev, inscribed on the tablets of the heart. They are the sort of things people do for each other when their relationship has no instrumentality about it. We do them not because we have to, or to improve ourselves, but only, as Professor Altmann might have said, because that is what we do.

Last winter, at the fifth yahrzeit of Professor Fox, the shul sponsored a dinner before the annual Fox Memorial Lecture. This was billed as being for the AK’s, the old-timers. June Fox came from Chicago, as did her son Avi.

Most dinners, as everyone knows, are tiresome affairs, but this one was different. The sense of shared experience filled the air. As Avi rose to speak, we all recognized how much he looks and sounds like his Dad. Among his eloquent and heartfelt sentiments, one stands out. “Dad,” he said, “considered all of you members of his extended family.”

Yes, that was it, exactly. And we felt the same, about him and each other.

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Ha’im mitma’atim badorot, do the generations diminish? I wouldn’t know. The trajectory of decline, if any, is too gradual to be apprehended from the vantage of a single mortal lifetime. But even that cramped view permits the observation that dorholekh v’dor ba, one generation passes and another comes, each generation with its own style, its own trappings, its own cultural stance, its own issues by which it defines itself and by which its successors, through modification, rejection, or indifference, define themselves in turn; each genera-

tion with its own life cycle, of youth, adolescence, maturity, and dotage.

The professors who led us when we started out were crucial for my own generation’s passage from adolescence to maturity. For that, and for much else, we will always cherish their memory and owe them more than we can repay.

But in the last analysis the life cycle of a particular generation is of small moment. What matters are not the ephemeral trappings but the enduring core, that which passes midor l’dor l’dor vador, from generation to generation through all generations.

What happened here eighteen years ago, happened. Mai d’hava hava. Vos iz geven iz geven. It is best looked upon not as a threadbare episode from somebody else’s stylized narrative, a leaf from someone else’s diary, a faded photo from someone else’s album, peopled with figures who are evocative, familiar, but finally unrecognizable. What happened then was not a beginning. In a story thousands of years old, what is another beginning?

Rather, what happened should be looked at as another in an endless series of transitions. The brit to which we all subscribe was signed et asher yesno po imanu omed bayom v’et asher enenu po imanu bayom, with those with us today and with those who are not. The founding of this shul was the work of those who happened to be here, inun d’mishtakchin, who formed a bridge with those d’ovdin v’la lishtakchin, those who cannot be found because they are gone, and those who cannot be found because they have not yet come to be.