

RH Morning 5776: Legacy
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I begin this morning with two stories:

The first comes from the kitchen table of One Old Oak Road in Rye Brook, New York. Growing up, our Friday night ritual included candles, grape juice, and homemade challah. Somehow, the ritual also seemed to include spilled grape juice on a regular basis, especially when my sister and I were younger. Therefore, there was also a time where this ritual included grapes in the kiddish cup instead of any kind of liquid.

As we grew older, my sister and I knew that, even if we wanted to spend the evening out with friends, we first had Shabbat dinner as a family. That led to some negotiations: maybe we light the Shabbat candles a little early to allow for social time with friends, but nonetheless, it was our family tradition.

Carving out time to celebrate Shabbat, I learned the value of regular quality time with family. I learned to appreciate Jewish ritual. I learned how to make challah. All of these things, I learned from my parents. In that way, I inherit their legacy.

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The second story is about Alfred Nobel, creator of the Nobel Prizes. This story is told by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in The Book of Jewish Values.

“Alfred Nobel earned his fortune through the production of explosives. Among other things, he invented dynamite...When Nobel’s brother died, a newspaper ran a long obituary of Alfred, believing that it was he who had passed away. Thus, Nobel had an opportunity granted to few people: to read his obituary while alive. What he read horrified him: the newspaper described him as a man who had made it possible for more people to be killed more quickly than anyone else who had ever lived.

At that moment, Nobel realized two things: that this was how he was going to be remembered, and that this was *not* how he **wanted** to be remembered. Shortly thereafter, he established the awards. Today, because of his doing so, everyone is familiar with the Nobel prize, while relatively few people even recall how Nobel made his fortune. “

While hopefully few of us will ever actually read our obituaries, we all live the lives that *become* our obituaries. We shape our own legacy. Or do we?

Some parts of legacy, we inherit: I was born into the Shabbat tradition of my parents.

Other parts of legacy, we earn: Alfred Nobel intentionally chose to make a contribution to the world that would reshape the way he would be remembered.

We sit here today, celebrating the new year. On Rosh Hashanah, we are instructed to think about how we have lived this last year and how we wish to live the next year. Each year, we get to start anew, and yet, we are not completely divorced from our past. We contemplate both the legacy we have inherited and the one we wish to impart on the world.

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For the past five years, my study partner and I have co-authored at least one High Holy Day sermon. This year, we found ourselves looking at this very topic of legacy from two different life-stages.

I stand before a new congregation for the first time as the Assistant Rabbi. I have inherited the legacy of a beloved Associate Rabbi and his Bobby stories. I am not yet in a position to think about leaving my own legacy. I am only at the very beginning of an unwritten journey, ripe with opportunities for meaning and growth.

Dusty, on the other hand, is in her sixth and final year at HUC in Los Angeles. As she prepares for her senior sermon and her third year as intern at the same congregation, her focus is more on what she wants to leave behind.

As we worked together, we honed in on two main questions: what is the difference between the legacies we inherit and those we earn, and how much control do we really have over those legacies? Furthermore, to the extent that legacy exists and shapes us, what is our role in working with and creating our own *legacies*?

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We'll begin with the first question: what is the difference between an inherited legacy and an earned legacy?

Inherited legacies are those things, material or otherwise, that are passed down to you and that you in turn pass on to others.

Some of you may know this already, but I am a pretty avid Yankees fan. You can imagine, then, that living in Ohio for Rabbinical School, it was difficult for me to grapple with the lack of Yankee games on TV.

One day, during my second year at HUC in Cincinnati, I was telling an upperclassman about my baseball woes. As a Cardinals fan, he could relate, and offered me a resource: a phantom MLB TV sign in account.

“Thank you so much!” I excitedly quipped.

“Don’t thank me,” he said, “it belongs to a student from several years back.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes! Feel free to pass it on.”

And I did. For four seasons I watched my Yankees and shared the account and password with others.

Until opening day of the 2015 season. I tried to log in and it no longer worked. We were facing the end of an era.

Then, we were told that Rabbi Daniel Bogard was coming to campus to have lunch with students. I knew that name. I couldn’t figure it out, but I felt like I knew that Rabbi.

Then it hit me. Danielbogard@mlbtv.com. *That* was the login of the phantom account. I was going to meet the person who had provided me with my baseball fix!

I awkwardly introduced myself and thanked Rabbi Bogard for the baseball.

“Wait, other people are still using it?” he asked, “That was created ages ago!”

“Actually,” I said, “at least four people in this room right now have been using it.”

He laughed uproariously.

“That wasn’t even my account. Someone else established it with my name. But I’m glad the **legacy** has lived on.”

I did not actively seek out the login information for the MLB TV account. It was a legacy I inherited.

Another example of inherited legacy can be found in the statue-lined tombs of the ancient Egyptian kings; horses and dogs and little clay people line the floors surrounding their mummified remains. These figures are not just for decoration—they represent real horses and dogs and people. In the ancient Egyptian understanding of the afterlife, it was important to bring possessions with you, for your material needs in the next world could only be met by transporting those things with you from this world.

Judaism thinks differently. Pirkei Avot¹ teaches: “when a person passes from this world neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor pearls accompany him, only Torah and good deeds.” In other words, our money has no value in The World to Come. This teaching helps us think about the way we act in the world, but it also points to a practical need: if you can’t take it with you, where should it go?

This is also where we shift from the understanding of inherited legacy to our role in earned legacy.

At first glance, earned legacy feels to be opposite inherited legacy. If one is received, the other is self-created. Our earned legacy, in the words of Pirkei Avot ², is the “good name” one “acquires for himself.” The way we act determines how we are known. The way we are known determines how we are remembered.

In his New York Times editorial “The Moral Bucket List”, writer David Brooks comes to the conclusion that “wonderful people are made and not born.” The people he admired had achieved an “unfakeable inner virtue, built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.” Or, we might say, a legacy that they built for

¹ Pirkei Avot 6:9

² Pirkei Avot 2:7

themselves, rooted in humility, conscience, and love, and based upon values of ongoing growth and improvement.

In Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he asserts that everyone is seeking meaning in their lives and there are three ways in which one might find it: "1) by creating a work or doing a deed; 2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and 3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."³ Each way in which we might find meaning stems from an initial action we must take, and those actions are the foundation upon which our legacy forms.

We get to choose: how will we act? *Will* we act?

This choice is directly within our control.

We each have the ability to create meaning for ourselves. We earn our legacy because we act in the world in a way that creates legacy.

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We are both legacy inheritors and legacy creators, part of a never-ending chain of transmission. We learn from Torah to think "*lador vador*", from generation to generation. List after list of names connects our ancestors to each other, down the line to us. These lists remain in our ancient text to legitimate and validate, to allow us to live the

³ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, page 111

legacies of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah Rebecca Rachel and Leah – and to create our own legacies, legacies of the Moredecai's, Satsky's and Sandman's.

But how do we do that? One way is by listing family members who have come before us; reciting Mourner's Kaddish and Yizkor in their memory. Yet there is more we can do.

Tradition teaches that we must repent today lest we die tomorrow. The High Holy Day liturgy of Unetaneh Tokef reinforces that message—in the next year, many shall live and many shall die. Therefore, we must decide for ourselves: what will we do with that life?

On this Rosh Hashanah, I make three suggestions; three actions we can take to impact our legacy.

First, we can heed the advice of my college softball coach and “control the controllables.” I don't control what I inherit; I do control what I do with that inheritance. I don't control the weather or the umpire or the other team, but I do control my effort and preparation and my reaction to the umpire's bad call. Letting things go that are beyond our control is another aspect of this mindset. And when we

adopt this kind of an attitude, we can make positive contributions to the world around us. We can shape our legacy in a meaningful way.

Second, we can think about the way in which we are acting in the world rather than simply reacting to the world.

I recently had the great privilege alongside Rabbi Dinner and Zemer Lexie to march on America's Journey for Justice with the NAACP. From Selma, Alabama, to Washington, DC, a broad coalition of people nationwide are marching nearly one thousand miles. Amid this broad coalition of people, there are almost 200 rabbis who have marched carrying a Torah scroll.

During the march, I met a man named Middle Passage. Originally from Mississippi, this 68 year old African American man started in Selma and walked every mile of the march. A veteran, he has marched carrying the American flag. I asked him why he came to march. He told me that if an almost 70-year-old man can do it, then no one else has any excuse not to. He added that we're all in it together and he is committed to doing his part. Middle Passage acted in the world.

Tragically, Middle Passage suffered a heart attack and died on Saturday, at mile 920, three days from DC.

In a meditation used before Mourner's Kaddish, J. Philip Rudin wrote, "Let it not be said that life was good to [him], but rather that [he] was good to life." He was good to life. He acted. He impacted his community. He incrementally changed the world.

Third, we can write an ethical will. This practice used to be quite common in Jewish households. Parents would write a letter to their children in which they would try to summarize and synthesize all they had learned in life and what they wanted most for and from their children. "They would leave these letters behind because they believed that the wisdom they had acquired was just as much a part of the legacy they wanted to leave their children as were the material possessions."⁴

Having done this a few years back, I can attest that this is no easy task. I felt scared and overwhelmed as I decided what pieces of wisdom I wanted others to take from the way I lived my life. But something transformative happened as well: The task created an opportunity for me to refocus and evaluate. Was I really living up to the standards and teachings that I wanted? Would others be able to identify the lessons and wisdom that guide my life just by knowing me? How could I be doing a better job?

⁴ Rabbi Jack Riemer in the preface to "Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury"

Writing an ethical will is difficult just as reading an ethical will is difficult. And yet, with roots in the Bible, it is a practice with a tremendous opportunity for benefit—benefit for the author and the reader; for this generation and the next.

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One day, when I have a family of my own, I intend to create Jewish rituals and spend quality time together. I inherited this legacy from my parents. I will not do things exactly the way they did; my legacy is influenced but not dictated by that of my parents. I will make it part of my legacy when I grasp it and act; choosing to continue it.

As we enter 5776 may we have the courage to evaluate the legacies we have inherited and the fortitude to act in the world so that we can shape our legacies as well.

Shanah tovah.