

EREV ROSH HASHANA--SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

I prefer a good funeral to a good wedding. Does that sound strange to you? I imagine that for many of you it probably does. In fact, one of the things I hear most from members, long-time friends, even people I have just met who find out that I am a rabbi, is something along the lines of: "It must be really hard to be a rabbi, to have deal so much with the sadness surrounding all the deaths and funerals. I could never do that." In fact, I have done something like 250 funerals in my career and only about 50 weddings.

Yes, sometimes it is really hard to be a rabbi, but that has much less to do with the funerals and much more to do with the hours and the fact that you simply "can't please all the people all the time." All rabbis know that no matter what we do or do not do, and whether we do something too often or not often enough, we will inevitably disappoint just about everyone at some point. But I digress. Funerals, well, certainly they are emotional for me, but very few things give me greater fulfillment in my life and career.

Don't get me wrong. I love weddings too. I don't get to do nearly enough of them, honestly, but I certainly love them when I do, especially when they involve people I have known most of their lives, officiated at their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, confirmed them, like Jacob Raskin last Fall and Maya Harlev next Fall. And I have gotten to fly to New York, Hawaii, and most recently, Park City, Utah to perform them. Hey, it's a tough job, but someone has to do it. But once again, I digress.

What I did realize very early on in my career was that I got more out of funerals than weddings. I learned this at my first wedding. After some very meaningful sessions of premarital counseling and eagerly anticipating sharing the concepts of Kiddushin, holiness, and bashert, meant to be, and yichud, the private moment where the couple connects both to Hashem and one another, I found myself mostly dealing instead with the bride and the mother endlessly squabbling over centerpieces, the order of the processional, and making sure the brother and sister didn't have to stand too close to one another. By contrast, at funerals, families seem to legitimately come together and bury the hatchet as well as the body, like Isaac and Ishmael did in the Torah for their Father Abraham, in order to pay proper respects to their loved one. There's plenty of squabbling, to be sure, but that takes place mostly in the lawyer's office, not in the shiva house or the cemetery.

But the real reason I get so much fulfillment at funerals is not because everybody is on their best behavior, but rather, because I get to be a firsthand witness to the incredible lives that people have led. The stories I hear of the things people have done, their happy childhoods, their productive careers, their romantic moments, their lifelong struggles, the challenges they overcame, their philosophies on life, the causes they cared about, the values they held dear, their favorite quotes, their bad jokes, their phenomenal, aspirational, and inspirational journeys. These are the things that I get to document and share with families at one of the most important times in their lives. And I always leave inspired.

I have been especially privileged, honored, and blessed in getting to know so many incredible people in *this* congregation. When I arrived here in 2001, our congregation was filled with members in their 70's and 80's. And these were some incredible people I feel fortunate to have known and called friends. These were volunteers extraordinaire, Holocaust survivors,

fountains of wisdom, living histories of Temple Beth Abraham, Oakland, and the world. These are people that gave everything to this congregation-- their time, their money, their presence, their hearts and their souls. They saw this place during its highest heights of the Rabbi Langh, Rabbi Shulweis, and Cantor Cohen eras in the 50's and early 60's, and they saw it come crashing down and nearly die in the 70's and 80's when the Jewish community fled Oakland for the suburbs. But they maintained this congregation and refused to let it die. They saw us through a string of Rabbis, Cantors, and Educators, and before they passed away they provided the bulk of the money that gave us a parking lot, a redone school and sanctuary, a courtyard, an accessible campus, and an elevator. I had the honor of being friends with so many of them, but most importantly I learned from them.

I knew that, given the age of so many of them, it would be my sacred task to bury them, and I knew that would be difficult. I knew that it was my awesome responsibility (and I use the word awesome, nora in Hebrew, in the sense of both awe inspiring and terrifying) to be what the prolific science fiction writer Orson Scott Card called a "Speaker for the Dead." As he wrote in his introduction to a book by that name, he believed that the job of the "**Speaker for the Dead**" was not just to praise, but to understand who a person really was, what his or her life really meant. The speaker of the dead would have to explain their self-story, what they meant to do, what they actually did, what they regretted, what they rejoiced in." And I try to do that with utmost seriousness and purpose.

As most of you know, each year I link all my High Holiday sermons to a common theme. Last year the theme was the power of words. This year the theme is the lessons I have learned from my elders, specifically those elders in this community who have passed away. As it says in the book of Deuteronomy, Parashat Haazinu

Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past.

Ask your father, and he will tell you, your elders, and they will inform you.

It is a custom in Jewish learning to dedicate teachings to those who have come before us, and at a time where we will read about "who shall live and who shall die" in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, this year I want to not only dedicate these sermons to those phenomenal people who came before us, but I feel like I also have to share some of their stories with you, our congregation. I feel like I owe it to them and the lives they led, but I also owe it to you, because, again, these were incredible people who were an inspiration to all who knew them, and I was lucky enough to have known them.

I am going to focus specifically on the lessons and values, which in Judaism are called Middot, that they taught, often unknowingly, while they walked this earth. Middot and Mitzvot are very similar, but there is an important distinction. Mitzvot are commandments, which are obligatory, whereas Middot are values that a person may choose to live by. The idea of Middot originates in Pirke Avot 6:6, where 30 of these "Middot," values are listed. With that in mind, on these High Holidays I will be discussing values and lessons learned from what I will call the lovers, the doers, the givers, and the teachers. So over the next ten days we will explore the middot or values of Melacha (working and doing, specifically for others), Sameach b'Chelko (being content with your lot and loving life), Tzedaka (giving), and Limud (learning and teaching.) These are lessons that all of us need to hear over and over again. And by focusing on

their values we will be honoring these people once again. Who exactly? You will have to come to find out. And if I miss honoring one of your favorite people, or worse yet, one of your relatives, please forgive me. When you honor people by name, there is always the risk of leaving someone out. Feel free to let me know, and maybe I can honor them with another teaching at another time.

I have to confess that as much as I am fulfilled by serving as a “speaker for the dead” and working with families who are in mourning, it is often difficult to look out into this room and at these seats and not imagine the bodies that filled them at one time. As we read once again about “who shall live and who shall die” and I look out into those seats, I am constantly reminded of how much I miss so many of them.

Two final thoughts before I conclude. First, if most of these names sound unfamiliar to you and you didn’t have the privilege of knowing them, make up for it by getting to know those octo and nanogenarians that are still with us today. You can find many of them at just about every Saturday morning service and Kiddush lunch. Say hello. Sit with them. Get to know them. You will thank me if you do. Oh the stories you will hear.

Secondly, particularly for those who led long, full lives, consider the parable of the two ships from Midrash Kohelet Rabba. Both are in the harbor. One of the ships is about to leave the harbor, and the other has just arrived from a long journey. For the one that is about to set sail, there is great rejoicing, cheering, a joyous send off. In modern cruise ship parlance, it’s a bon voyage party on the Lido Deck with champagne and caviar. For the ship that has just returned to port, there is no rejoicing, only silence. For the modern cruiser, this means kicking you out of your stateroom at 6 AM with nothing to do.

One wise man says to the other, shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shouldn’t we be celebrating the ship that has arrived safely from its journey? It has arrived safely, weathered every storm, and returned to port. For the ship that is about to leave the harbor, we don’t know what storms it may encounter on its journey. We don’t know what dangers are lurking around the corner. We don’t know that it will even find its way back.

So it is with humanity. When a child is born, we don’t know what lies ahead, what kinds of challenges await this beautiful, innocent soul. And yet we celebrate their birth, as we should. But when someone is laid to rest after a good, long life, shouldn’t we be celebrating the fact that that person has departed after accomplishing much, leaving a good name, and returned home, so to speak?

When we leave this earth, we have no choice but to let go of our material things, our anger and enmity, our fears and our doubts, any hard feelings we have toward anyone else, and leave behind, I pray, only the lessons and the love.

My friends, may the memories of these incredible souls continue to bless us, and, most importantly, may we continue to learn from them.