

## ROSH HASHANA DAY 2--THE LOVERS

On Yom Kippur, on Musaf, we will once again be reciting the Birkat Cohanim, the Priestly Blessing, where all the Cohanim in our congregation will be removing their shoes, washing their hands, and coming up in front of the congregation, and underneath their tallitot, will be blessing us with the Yivarechecha. A few years ago when we did this blessing I noticed that one of our Cohanim, Leonard Fixler of blessed memory, was praying with extra Kavanah, intentionality. He was really getting into it, and it was really a beautiful thing to watch. So I asked him after the service why, on this Yom Kippur, was he praying with such enthusiasm and fervor. And he said to me: "Rabbi, I was just praying that no one would steal my brand new Arthur Beren shoes."

This is not a real story, but every time Leonard Fixler told a joke, he would begin it as a story, and it always took me a while to figure out that it was a joke rather than a story. Such was the way Leonard Fixler lived his life—with great joy and love and humor. After surviving the Holocaust he decided that it was his sacred duty to enjoy every moment of life. And he did.

Continuing our theme of honoring those very active members of our congregation that have passed away during my tenure here and the lessons we have learned from them, today I want to share some stories of the people I call the "lovers," those who illustrate what King David taught when he asked in Psalm 34:13: "mi haish hechafetz chaim, ohev yamim lirot tov? Who is the one who longs life and loves to see the good all his days?" Leonard Fixler was certainly one of the many people who simply loved life, and we have been lucky enough to have in our congregation.

Ben Zoma asks at the beginning of Pirke Avot Chapter 4 Eizeh hu ashir, hasmeach b'chelko, who is rich, and the answer is usually translated as "the one who is content with his lot." I think that's not a great translation, however, since "sameach" really means to rejoice in one's lot. The middah or Jewish virtue/value I want to talk about today is called "sameach b'chelko," to rejoice in one's lot in life. It's the opposite of the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment "lo tachmod," not to covet. When it comes to this virtue, we have been truly blessed here at Temple Beth Abraham with several individuals, in addition to Leonard, who lived their lives according to "sameach b'chelko."

Another Holocaust survivor who believed it was his mission to enjoy life to the fullest was Jack Jeger. I am sure many of you are familiar with his signature expression "you're OK in America." He said it to everyone—friends, family, old, young, the Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids as they processed around the room with the Torah. And it's because, to him, we were "OK" in America. Even with the growing threat of anti-Semitism and other things, after what he went through as a survivor, everything was a blessing. He also loved to dance and tend bar and play with children (my own son Jonah, as a preschooler, used to call him "one of my best friends"), anything to enjoy life to the fullest and express contentment with his new lot in life. When he came here even in his later years, he would hold court, relishing his time here as everyone in the congregation, especially the women, would hug and kiss him, and here, at least one more time that we were "OK in America."

There was Gertrude Weiss and Rita Frankel, two women who were "OK not just in America, but specifically in Oakland." They were connected to just about every single person in

Oakland. Gertrude grew up here and would tell you, me, or anyone else who would listen exactly who knew whom and when they met, who dated whom in High School, who went to Oakland High and who to Oakland Tech, who to Sinai and who to Beth Jacob. She expressed “sameach b’chelko,” contentment with her lot in life by connecting people to one another.

There was Gloria Reid, whose smile lit up a room the size of this sanctuary. Gloria was another regular at Shabbat and minyan services, where she smiled her way through the entire service and sang at the top her lungs. She loved music of every kind. When Cantor Kaplan started his Raza d’Shabbat service, originally intended for younger people, it was Gloria who came, sang, and relished every moment of it. My favorite Gloria story was when she attended our Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, our late night study session on Shavuot. When we ended at Midnight, she insisted on continuing studying well into the next morning, so I drove her to Beth Jacob with me where we made it past 2 AM. And she was well over 80 years old by this point, but she didn’t want to miss out on a single waking moment of life. She was always looking for ways to practice “sameach b’chelko,” to express contentment with her lot in life and to enjoy every moment of it.

And who could forget the grandfather of all “sameach b’chelko,” contentment and just general happiness and appreciation for life, as well as the actual grandfather of a number people in this room, Sam Bercovich. Sam was practically synonymous with TBA. He was the great nephew of the founders of this synagogue, Abraham and Bertha Bercovich, and he met the love of his wife Ellen on the giant steps outside, where there is a plaque that commemorates the place and moment they met. His loves were family, Temple Beth Abraham, the Oakland Raiders, and baseball, not necessarily in that order. As many of you know Al Davis was one of his best friends, and he sat in the Owner’s box for each game, right next to Al, so he could often be seen on television. The contrast in Al’s scowl and Sam’s smile made for some great moments. Al may have owned the Raiders, but it was Sam who owned the enjoyment of the Raiders. His furniture store, Bercovich and sons, also sponsored baseball in Oakland for decades. People like Frank Robinson, Tommy Harper, Ned Yost, Vada Pinson, and Curt Flood, along with about 100 other major and minor leaguers, played for the Bercovich All Stars. He infected all of them with his smile and with love, and I sat in awe of him at a presentation about baseball in Oakland at the Oakland Museum, as countless grown men thanked him personally for doing no less than saving their lives. As Hall of Famer Frank Robinson put it, “he took the knife out of my hand and put a baseball bat in it instead.” It was my great honor to present him as one part of the first class of inductees at the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame of Northern California. And now his wife Ellen has also passed on. When it came to sports, she was actually the athlete in the family—a great golfer among other things. Her idea of contentment was to be surrounded by family and friends at all time. And now she, too, is home, where she wanted to go after Sam died, next to him for eternal life and love. Sam knew, perhaps better than anyone I have ever met, how to live sameach b’chelko, rejoicing in life and enjoying every moment of it.

Sam and Ellen loved life, and they had good long lives. Someone else who expressed great contentment with his life but whose life was cut far too short when he died of a heart attack in his 50’s was Murray Davis. As much as I have said that I find funerals to be among the most fulfilling part of my job, recalling this one still brings me feelings of great sadness and pain. But he certainly lived life to the fullest while he was here. When you would ask Murray how he was doing, his response was always “living the dream.” There was some sarcasm to it, to be sure, but he also meant it. Murray was like a lot of people most of us know—except he

was kinder, more talented, and better looking. Many of you know that the courtyard is named in his honor, others may also know he helped me establish Rock and Roll Shabbat. He was the lead guitar player, recorded an album for us, and also wrote original songs about the 10 Commandments, the Barechu, and the Mi Chamocha which we sing most often here at TBA. Murray always wanted to discuss either music, baseball, or God with me, and he knew a lot about all three. We often combined the two, as my favorite High Holiday preparation was spent at a Giants-Dodgers game just a few days before Rosh Hashana back in 2002. Some of what I learned from him can be expressed by Murray himself, in the song he wrote for our 100 year Centennial celebration.

The Torah circles on, like a warm familiar song.  
 Wherever you may roam it's like returning home  
 And when your sails are badly torn, you need shelter from the storm,  
 You'll know where you can go, to feel that healing glow.  
 The everlasting light is always burning bright.  
 Shining through our prayer and joy and tears.  
 The everlasting light burns every day and night.  
 And we'll make sure it's burning for another 100 years.

In the Torah portion we read today, Abraham is asked to give up the thing he rejoices in the most, his son Isaac. He asks no questions and makes no protest, which is disturbing to the modern and ancient reader alike. It's a complex story to be sure, but perhaps the most important lesson is quite simple—to enjoy every moment of life because we never know what moment may be our last. The most we can do is do what Murray, Sam, Ellen, Gloria, Gertrude, Rita, Jack, and Leonard did—enjoy each moment to the fullest, live the middah of sameach b'chelko.

How do we live according to their model? I have a few suggestions. They are not a panacea, but they are a good start.

1. Take Shabbat. Some kind of Shabbat, whether it's a long meal, a longer nap, lingering over Kiddush lunch here, a walk in the woods, something. It's the original way we were supposed to “stop and smell the roses.” It's “the pause that refreshes,” as the Coca Cola add used to say. By pausing each week to reflect you will be better able to appreciate the challenges that come your way the rest of the week.

2. Make lists. Not to do lists but to appreciate lists. One year, just after the Holidays, for my sermon I simply listed 200 things I appreciate, from people to songs to foods to positive things that happened in the world. I encourage you to do the same.

3. Express gratitude. Recently a friend of mine from college, who has struggled with addiction problems, called me up, out of the blue, to thank me. I was surprised both to hear from him and/or that he would thank me? I was so surprised, in fact, that I was a little worried about him. “What are you thanking me for,” I asked? We've only spoken a few times in the last few years. Yes, he said, but when we spoke I was kind to him and I shared some of the wisdom of the Jewish tradition, he said. His group encouraged him to make a round of gratitude calls, to express appreciation for everyone who has been good to you in any way. And it made my day, if

not my week. Who was helping whom here? The answer was pretty clear to me. But it was “mandating,” in a way, the idea of appreciation.

Like Leonard and Jack and Gloria and Gertrude and Sam and Ellen and Rita and Murray let us love life, long for life, appreciate life, learned to be content with our lot and pass that feeling on to everyone we know. Eizeh hu ashir? Our sages ask. Who is rich? Hasameach b’chelko, they answer, the one who is content with their lot in life. May 5779 be a year where each and every one of you strike it rich.