

## The Last Sermon

- While we are on the topic of sermons—an ominous word I always avoided, I am reminded of the following joke. There once was a Rabbi who was an amazing speaker. He could speak for 30 minutes at a time and the Congregation were so mesmerized that they felt as though hardly any time had gone by. One day, a well known congregant approached the Rabbi after a particularly lengthy sermon that far exceeded the average 30 minute length. He said: “Rabbi, I would like you to meet a friend of mine who happened to be in shul this Shabbat and wanted to speak with you about your sermon.” The Rabbi shook hands with the stranger, who explained that he hosted a radio show and wanted the Rabbi to speak on it that week. The delighted Rabbi immediately agreed. The radio host then said: “Rabbi, as you know, air time is very valuable, so I must ask you to condense today’s sermon into 5 minutes.” “Not a problem at all”, replied the Rabbi. “Well then” asked the host, “why couldn’t you have done that today?”

But no worries friends. Today, even though I will give you as close to a sermon as you are going to hear for a while, but I think you will not only survive, you will thrive and not regret the time we spend together.

Tonight at mincha we read the parasha I read for the first time 36 years ago, **ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע**—“And Jacob left Be’er Sheva.” As you know, this verse talks about Yaakov fleeing from his brother Esau on a journey towards a known destination but unknown destiny. I am his far inferior namesake and when I came to the Stash, I too began a journey. Unlike Yaakov, I had no idea where I was going. But like him, I had no concept of how transformative the journey with all of you would be.

But it’s interesting that the Torah hints at the outcome—years later, after Yaakov’s lengthy stay with his father in law Laban (which was shorter than my stay here) we read the remarkable verse **ויבא יעקב שלם עיר**

**שכם**, often translated erroneously as “And Jacob came to the city of Shalem, also known as Shechem”. The proper translation of this verse lies at the heart of what I want to tell you today: after years of adventures—not all of them easy—Jacob came “shalem”—completely and peacefully to the city of Shechem, back to the Promised Land of Israel.

Most of our classical commentators take this verse as an expression of surprise that the inexperienced boy Jacob, a mommy’s boy who stayed close to home until forced from his home by a bitter quarrel with his brother, managed to not only survive but thrive and prosper in the vicissitudes of the intervening years. They are correct—I came to the Stash 36 years ago as a newly married, doctoral student who learned a great deal in many ways I didn’t expect. In many ways I am surprised that I at first survived and later thrived in this place which wasn’t always as friendly as it is today

Let me offer a nod to the power of historical narrative before I return to the lessons of our parasha and its parallels with my career. Raconteur. I want to share a few stories with you and I hope you will remember them for mythmaking is the weave of community and storytelling is a powerful art. If I repeat some stories you’re familiar with, I do not apologize, some congregants here for the first time need to hear them to understand the spirit that animates us and, as I have learned as I moved away from the ivory tower of academe into the shmutz of Bathurst Street everyday Jewish life—stories are a hell of a lot more of a fun way to learn history than reading boring, albeit well written books

## II

Many famous places have foundation stories. Rome has Romulus and Remus, Canada has Sir John A and Cartier, the US has George Washington, and my story at the Stashover has.....drum roll please...Alex Hecht to blame for me. Let me explain.

After I finished saying kaddish for my father, I continued to go to Adath Israel to read Torah for first minyan on Mondays and Thursdays. One day after services in November 1981 a man came up to me. He looked carefully to the right and left before speaking, as though a KGB spy was lurking in the immediate area, and then spoke in a whispery voice: “they need a ba’al koreh at the Stashover.” When I asked him what the Stashover was, he stared at me and said, “it’s a shul” and fled quickly as though assassination was imminent. Truth being told, I had been married for a short while, had a number of part time jobs, and could use some more income. I called the number in the phone book for the shul, which at that time was the same as Al Wise’s. A gruff voice answered and said : “yeah, we need a ba’al koreh. Come to the shul on Shabbes” and hung up. After doing my due diligence, I discovered the shul’s location (not far from my apartment on Wasdale) and arrived at about 9:05. I was greeted by the sight of a number of elderly men who looked none too delighted to see me. One of them, whose voice matched the one I had heard on the phone, and who I later discovered to be Al Wise, cordially came over and said: “who the f..k are you?” Terrified, I babbled that I was there because I was auditioning to be the ba’al koreh. The man promptly informed the others of my presence by tell by bellowing, ignoring the guy who was daavening, “Jeesus, this kid just walked in and he is gonna read the Torah. What a damn disaster!” He then turned back to me and informed me that “well you’re here already so you may as well go up and show how little you know.”

When I actually went up to layn the silence was overwhelmingly. I felt as though there was a trap door under the bimah that was about to open under my feet. I read the first aliyah flawlessly and quickly. There were two men on the bimah. One was the late spiritual leader Joel Teich and the other was our late President Moshe Hauer, Saul’s father. Both were quite deaf, so they bellowed across the bimah at each other. It turned out that I was hired for two reasons. First, neither of them could hear any mistakes. Second, and more important, the

parnas Pinye Frimmerman, Mordechai ben-Dat's father, affirmed that I layned very nicely. His learned opinion, since he actually was learned, sealed the matter. And so I was hired for a miniscule salary that barely paid 5 months rent.

I was now amidst men (predominantly) and women who acted like them and fought even better—like Anne Wise who simply knocked down the mechitza in the early 60's and proclaimed “we don't need that up in this part of town any more”—and any man who argued would have suffered the same fate as the mechitza. These were “tough Jews”. They weren't fancy; they knew about the seedy side of town—the stuff I thought only goyim pardon my language did.

For instance, one Sunday breakfast they began talking deli...ahh you think what a lovely thing...corned beef sandwiches, pickles in a barrel, and the like. No way, these guys reminisced about the Caddie with two guys who pulled up outside the original Pancer's. One guy stood outside and the other came in, mowed down Mr. Pancer (supposedly for debts owed to the Mafia—crime has never been solved) and left—after that I was supposed to continue eating breakfast as the men gleefully discussed his demise and their personal feelings about him and the food. Another Sunday I learned more Toronto history—the kind I never talked about in the U of T Ph.D. seminar I was taking that year. As you may have heard, the greatest maritime tragedy in Toronto history occurred in 1949 when the *Noronic*, a Great Lakes pleasure ship, burned at its Toronto dock. One of those who died was a shul member, found dead of smoke asphyxiation in the arms of his also deceased shiksa paramour—to which Al Wise, our Treasurer for six decades explained: “lucky s.o.b! He had a good death. If his wife had found him alive with the shiksa, THEN he would have suffered.” You can imagine how stories like this and others gave our son Baruch wonderful sex-ed lessons that put him well ahead of his peers!

Sunday breakfasts were also where I learned first hand about the Holocaust . My survivor father never shared his experiences, so I sat enthralled when Saul Hauer told how his family were saved by a Polish worker who respected his father's honesty and kindness. Risking the life of their own family,

these Poles hid 5 Havers in the silo of their barn for over three years. Once, apparently tipped off by a neighbour, an SS man entered the kitchen where the 14 year old daughter was chopping vegetables. “Where are the Jews?” he demanded. “ Looking up, she declared: “there are no Jews”. The officer took the knife from her hand, put it on her wrist and flatly demanded: “show me where the Jews are or I will cut off your hand.” “Then cut it off,” came the reply, “for there are no Jews here.” The Germans left. Saul kept eating; I lost my appetite.

Life had roughened these people, but there was a deep devotion to the shul underneath their tough outer armour. Can you imagine anyone who would willingly remain Shul Treasurer for six decades!? Why—because his father’s last words—according to him (and his father was a President of the Slipia downtown)—“take care of the shul”—Al sure did in many ways—not all of them good but his devotion cannot be questioned.

Let me share one story about his excellent fund raising techniques: he once left a casket at the side of the grave until the children got a certified cheque from the bank to cover a number of years of unpaid dues, before the interment could take place. I courageously asked Al how he knew the kids wouldn’t pay the overdue bills and he explained: they learned from their father—he would take his right hand down there to open his zipper but G-d forbid he should move it over to take out his wallet.” The federal and provincial governments need a man like Al.

Al Wise was bigger than life, but there were other Al’s—Tiny Grossman—for one—Gayle’s father alav hashalom who spent months of the year collecting presents for the Chanukah party which he presided over with great gusto, with super 8 cartoons from a rented projector, enough hot dogs on buns to feed 1,000, and enough party favours and booze to float a casino. This is where I learned the rules of poker and roulette. And while we are on betting, who can forget our former President Joe Spring, who sat Baruch on his lap while he taught him improper Yiddish terminology for body parts and tried to inculcate a sense of the wonder of the Daily Racing Form to boot? Or our Cohen “Westy” Weinroth—so named because he ran the numbers for the West end of town!

But, and this is the wonderful takeaway I wish to share, all of these people harboured a deep and almost primal energy and fierce love of being Jewish. At the time I was a staid intellectual in a doctoral program, who looked at Jews academically rather than emotionally. I had never encountered Jews like these at the Stashover and it was somehow both frightening and invigorating for me to learn how to interact with them and gain their trust and ultimately, in some cases, their friendship.

The visceral nature of Judaism at the Stash sometimes also included stories of great pain and deep sadness even though they also resonated with the power of Jewish survival. I recall a congregant named Mr. Fox, a quiet Hungarian man who davened quietly, said little, but dutifully attended every Shabbat. One day, as I was laying in June somewhere in Sefer BaMidbar, Mr. Fox, who had the aliyah, began to weep as I read. He was a learned man; he was the only person who could read quietly along with me. And here, as I kept reading, he began to cry. Not loudly, but silently and deeply from the heart. I stopped, but he motioned me to continue. At the Kiddush, I quietly went up to him and asked why he began to cry. He spoke in a quiet voice of how his father had been the shames of the small shul in Hungary that he had attended. One Shabbat the Hungarian police came. They harshly ordered the Jews out of the synagogue as part of a round up the town Jews and transport them to the ghetto of a larger town. The congregants quickly filed out but Mr. Fox's father lingered, trying to take the Torah out of the ark. The enraged police shouted: "if you like the synagogue so much you can die there!" and set the place alight. Mr. Fox heard his father's screams as he helplessly stood outside. "The Nazis came when we were laying this aliyah; I will never forget." I have pledged never to forget the sound of his voice or the look on his face as he told this to me in that quiet way of his.

I will also never forget the part that Cantor Skurka, a small man with a big voice and an even bigger heart, played in teaching me the seriousness of the High Holy Days, the ימים הנוראים. When he davened Yikzor on Yom Kippur, the tear streamed down his face and every word was weighted with emotion. He

shared with me that, when he came to Auschwitz, “my wife and baby went one way, up the chimney, and I went the other.” And if that wasn’t enough, years later, his son was killed on a snowy Highway 401 coming home from Western University. Truly, Shimon Skurka’s tears taught me that, as we read in the machzor at Neilah: שְׁעַרֵי דַמְעוֹת לֹא נִשְׁלֹבוֹת –the gates of tears are never locked to our prayers. May the gates ever remain open to you in the merit of those whose memories I have invoked and the others who time did not permit me to talk about.

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But let me return to the story of Jacob and my own. Jacob’s journey and sojourn in Laban’s house changed him inexorably. He matured in many ways. While I am much less than my illustrious namesake, I have had the similar experience.

I learned to widen my vistas and curb my judgement. I discovered firsthand that people found different roads to Judaism and that intellect was nice but the combination of emotion, community and memory possess even more vitality and meaning. All these discoveries helped me grow and mature from being a mere academic observer to being a passionate participant in Judaism. It was a core experience that helped catalyze my growth from teacher to educator to coach and mentor, and from a husband to a partner in a marriage and a devoted father to my children.

And as the shul’s founders began to pass away, my role gradually grew and expanded. And suddenly, as our numbers dwindled and our existence was threatened as we approach our centenary, it was time to move from the 1940’s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The question became: How do you renovate a community without destroying it in the process?

Jay, Ricky, and I found a way; we did it because it had to be done. I knew what I had to do in theory because I had written about it, I had some practical ideas because I had lived through organizational renewal at Shaarei Tefillah, and I wanted to create a shul free from rancour and politics—if such a thing is possible—especially among Jews.

Your presence testifies to our success. I am proudest of developing the brand of “Intelligent Judaism” and convincing a congregation in which shouting often trumped sense, that scholarship and discussion and reaching a consensus are the way to move forward. I am proud of developing classes that made people feel empowered to learn and speak and feel that they could learn Torah by participating rather than by just being told what they should know. I am proud of guiding us to widen participation in the service without alienating anyone—even Willie!!

Of course, I haven’t done this alone—first and foremost the reason I stayed and the reason I am saying it’s time to retire—my family. Barb—how hard to never have me home and never sit with me how much more should you give up? I look forward to sitting with you in shul when we are not at a bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, or aufruf. Baruch—a shul man through and through—you learned so much here about non-shul topics but also grew and gave sage advice at the Board. Yoelit—incredible teacher, so good that people don’t know or believe she also is a doctoral student in Clinical Bioethics, I need more time to talk to her and learn from her when she is actually home on Shabbat. Yehezkel—I want to come to Partnership Minyan and daaven with you and hear your lovely and inspiring voice.

And I must mention a couple of members of the “shul family” who have worked most closely with me. Ricky: look how far you have come. You used to follow Mother Hen Shandel out the door before Musaf on the High Holy Days, now you stay till the end and are a leader of the shul!! How wonderful!

Jay—keeping it short will prevent tears. Let’s just say that “thanks” is a highly inadequate word for the privilege of both working with you and your friendship for the last few decades. As you say: “we’ve had a great run!”

So, like Yaakov, I have come through this all shalem—in one piece and shalem—thank G-d in peace and shalem—fuller from the experience of working with and meeting so many of you and having the pleasure and privilege of our paths crossing in life.

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Dear Congregants – I offer you a “Final Challenge”. The motto of the University of Toronto is *carpe diem*, seize the moment. My friends, this is your time to “seize the moment”—you have Rachael who has many gifts I lack, use the freedom that our shul’s egalitarianism provides you with to learn how to join her more often on the bimah! I would hope that the women especially should be present and heard taking out the Torah, writing prayers, making your presence known. It is your collective duty to go further AND not sit in the seats but keep learning, keep striving, and keep finding ways to keep the services on Shabbat relevant and exciting to all

Rachael, I give you my blessing in all things....may you grow here as I did and find new ways to let your voice ring out.

My friends, I thank you all for enlarging my life experience and sharing this journey with me! Finally, I must note that part of being shalem—fulfilled—comes the related word, shalom—which means hello/goodbye and peace. I am at peace with my choice to retire for my ever curious mind, like Frodo Baggins, always wants to keep going down the road. I have already said hello years ago, and I fear to overstay my welcome. So, I now say shalom to you—שלום לקרוב ולרחוק—good bye to those who are close by—with us today, and to those who are far—

not here either because they couldn't make it or because they are in a better place—the shtetl in the sky

I bid you all shalom, may you all find shlemut—completeness and the fulfillment of your dreams in the roadways and byways of life.