

## House of the Living -- My Once and Future Neighborhood

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I would like to introduce you to my once and future neighborhood. The streets, the houses, the people of my earliest awareness, a neighborhood that was full of life, and so it is and shall it be in a different key. Born in Boston, I grew up in the town of Winthrop, not far from here, just beyond East Boston, next to Revere, little more than a square mile jutting out into the sea. For my first six years or so, we lived in my grandparents' house on Tewksbury Street, just down from the beach. I drove through the old neighborhood with our kids and with little Leo this summer when they were home for a visit. It seems so strange, I used to just walk up the stairs to see my grandparents. Times change, though, and that's the constant, and neighborhoods change, and so, of course, do we. I remind myself that I travelled some thirty-five hundred miles from home, to Victoria, British Columbia, taking along my parents' grandchildren.

I pointed out the sagging garage behind the old house. That was where Ponchie and Poopsie lived. Ah, you ask, they were my two imaginary childhood friends. They lived in the garage and drove a big red fire truck, taking me for rides around town and making me, at least in my mind, the envy of all my friends, just how I wished it could be. There's where my grandparents' store used to be, the Beach Specialty Shop. There's the elementary school where I went to summer school before starting the first grade. I had trouble adjusting to the academic life in kindergarden and it was advised that doing a little extra time might help me make the grade. The best part of that summer was seeing my zayde, "Pa," at noon, waiting for me in front of the store as I walked home to the gray, wood-shingled house we all shared. In the back of the store we had tea and crackers together, and he would often give me a small toy. There's where Baron's market was, and that was Appel's kosher butcher shop. Most importantly, that's where Izzy and Fanny Kaplow's grocery store was. They lived across the street from us. Upstairs from them lived Alan Lupo, alas, of blessed memory, who became a writer for the Boston Globe. He was in high school then, one of the "big kids," from whom I was so proud to receive hand-me-downs or just a wave and a smile. Among my earliest and warmest memories is the Kaplow's store, the wood stove, the pickle barrel, brown waxed paper from a long roller, and the sawdust covered floor. Here are the shuls, at least the worn-out buildings, the big one, Tifereth Israel, and the little one, Tifereth Abraham. The two shuls had little to do with each other, which is why it delights me that our Torah is from one and our reading table is from the other. Every time we read the Torah here at Nehar Shalom, we bring those two old shuls together. Across the street from the shuls is what was once the Jewish Community Center. It's a large brick building, rather impressive to me as a child, with a large flight of stone stairs leading up to the wooden doors. (I remember the classrooms, the auditorium, B'nai Brith meetings, the Purim carnivals. It's all gone now. The JCC for a time was a Pentacostal church with a sign that said, "Jesus Saves." Now it is a small hotel, billed as being near the airport, a place from which to get to somewhere else.) Times change. Not many from my time stayed around Winthrop, but some did. Leaving the tired old neighborhood, we drove with the kids out to Deer Island to go for a hike. As we started out on the path I noticed two benches, each having been dedicated to the memory of high school

classmates of mine who had stayed in the old town. Startled, I wanted to sit down and reflect, but Leo kept me going on the path forward, even as I looked back.

One way or the other we come home at some point, realizing that home isn't necessarily the same place we started out from, any more than the old neighborhood is. That is what the Torah means by the phrase "being gathered to one's ancestors." Return of the soul to its source is beyond place. The soul knows no bounds in its release. That is why we can speak with those we loved from wherever we are. Our souls come home to the embrace of those who came before, to God's embrace, to the embrace of life itself. The sacred vessel of the body that housed the soul also needs a place to return to, to receive the embrace of earth from which it comes, אדם מהאדמה / *adam mey'ha'adamah/the human who is of the earth*. We prayerfully acknowledge during these days in the ונתנה תוקף / *U'n'saneh Tokef* prayer, אדם יסודו מעפר וסופו לעפר / *adam y'sodo mey'afar v'sofu l'afar/the origin of every human is of the dust, and to the dust does each return*. It is the way of nature, the cycle of life. It is a greater embrace than of one place, yet, we need to choose where that place will be.

During the past summer, Mieke and I made that choice. We purchased graves, two small plots of earth in the midst of all earth, in the midst of all time. The word for grave in Hebrew is קבר / *kever*. With a slight shift, קרב / *kerev* is the root of קרוב / *karov/close, near*. That is the key, and so now may we always be, in this life and the next. The decision and acting on it, and the awareness that we have done something so significant is a deeply personal, most intimate experience, touching me in ways that I had not anticipated. It is a decision and act that I acknowledge freely to having put off, out of my mind even as it nagged at me. Like many, I was afraid, even superstitious. Does acknowledging mortality in such real terms make its ultimate expression in death more immediate, more likely? Of course not, I reasoned, but nevertheless. Ours is a later marriage, a precious gift, how to speak of death, beyond which now we shall not part? I too shied away from the morbid in the midst of life, at least what seems to be morbid, what seems to be life, even while avoiding the fullness of what life is, of what truly in the end gives life its greatest meaning and impetus for living, that indeed we are finite. I have spent much time over the years speaking about these matters as a rabbi, yet painfully aware that I was avoiding the challenge of my own words. Some among you in this room have come to speak with me about choice of cemeteries and what to think about in selecting graves, some of you much younger than I. I have been touched and humbled by such discussions, moved and challenged as people wrestled with how their choice of final resting place will reflect their values in life.

We can take a moment and pause..., these are not easy matters, not easy to talk about. It is especially difficult amidst the tormented awareness of souls wrenched from life so long before what we would hope to be their time, before life had even begun, young lives shattered at the very vista of life's promise, babies, children, parents, all too young, the tragedies right here among us. So too, each day's reminder of war and terror, and the specter of more, bodies upon bodies, not the way or meaning of mortality as meant to be, as meant to teach, a reminder to live. All the more so to consider the idea of what it means to "rest in peace," not enough as a wish for the dead, but for the living to rest in a world of peace. The cemetery becomes a place of peace, the presence of souls who cry with us, who comfort with their knowing, of having been there, of having lived and also of having died, who inspire with the stories of their lives and the universal story of life.

This is what Yom Kippur is about, a reflection of life in the mirror of mortality. In the span of one day we make the journey in reverse, from death to life. Abstaining from the physical stuff of life, from the ways of the body, we engage the meaning of life, of life itself and our own, renewed and reborn at the end. It is the same dynamic as in the purchasing of a grave, accepting death as a part of life to help us live. The *kittel*, someday to be the burial shroud, is worn at times of joy, even as on this day of hope and transformation, so too beneath the chuppah, at the Pesach seder, wine-stained and tear-stained at the time of our homecoming to say that we had lived. Of a shtetl story I once heard, only to have one's own *kittel*, not to be in need or to rely on others when the time came, there in a drawer with a pair of pants or two, one for the week days and another for Shabbos if lucky. And ever since then, I keep my *kittel* right there in my dresser drawer with underwear and sox, a daily reminder of mortality, the delicate fabric of life.

It is all beautiful, so much meaning, but still so difficult. It requires courage to truly make the journey of Yom Kippur, to purchase graves, to accept that death is part of life, to have the courage to live. It is hard to hold hope and fear together. It becomes easier when we can acknowledge both as part of one whole, of who we are. Yes, I cry when I think of having a grave, when I think of my own mortality, even more so when I think of that of Mieke, or my children, God protect them. But it is also liberating to consider our end, to think about what we want the final canvas to look like, and what we will do in the mean time to create it, remembering to paint with the brush of each day's colors, of each day's possibilities. It is the meaning of Psalm 90, *למנות ימינו כן הודע, ונביא לבב חכמה* / *limnot yamenu ken hodah, v'navi l'vav chochmal* / *teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*. We know that our days are numbered from the beginning, that they are finite. In their being counted, the challenge is to make each of our days count, to insure that our lives stand for something.

The elders in my life growing up, family and friends of family, the people of the old neighborhood even as its geographic borders expanded, were passionate about what they stood for. Like many of the European born generation, they had lived hard lives. They had known sickness and struggle, hate and pogroms, the bribery and brutality of finding steerage across the sea, and then to adapt to new land and language, the stigma of being "greeners," whom even their children were embarrassed by, and there was the pain that was for the most part unspoken, of those left behind beyond the abyss from whom the letters stopped coming. They were people who worked hard, who lived by their hands, their wits and their wiles. Their degrees were from the school of life, and their visions were shaped by what they saw and by what they knew in their hearts could be.

As much as I tried to put it out of my mind over the years, I always knew that in the end I would return to the old neighborhood as it has come to be. It was my grandparents' generation who founded the Jewish Deed Holders Cemetery, which is one of the Everett Jewish cemeteries off of Fuller Street. An association formed, now an "International" of sorts, as people of like mind and heart joined together from surrounding communities and neighborhoods. Many of them sang together in the Freiheit Chorus, the Freedom Chorus, and they knew that in the song of life the minor tones would come. They were people of shared ideals and social values, a "lantsmanschaft" of sorts, but not in the usual sense of a benevolent association of people from

the same town in the old country. This was a lantsmanschaft of people joined together in the new country by idealism and hope, and the politics meant to give expression to their beliefs, people determined to make their adopted land the country it was supposed to be.

I realized how much it in fact meant to me to have a resting place among them for when I am gathered to my people, as I finally picked up the phone and called the Jewish Cemeteries Association. The first person I spoke with said there were still plots available, clarifying that I meant the "New Jewish Deed Holders," as opposed to the "Old," the original, smaller cemetery across the road. I felt a palpable sense of relief, even asking a few times for reassurance. A few days later I spoke with the person who actually handles the arrangements, and he said, "no," he didn't think there were any more plots there. Crestfallen, I waited some weeks before hearing back and knowing for sure, yes, there was room. Two rows would be added at the very end and we could have two plots there. If peace of mind is the measure, I knew it was the right decision. I felt it on a deeper level, as well, when I asked the man about the history of the place in which we had just become deed holders, realizing that I probably knew more than he did about the people buried there. In a good natured way, seemingly in part to inform and in part as though to ask, why would a rabbi want to be buried there, he said, "well, they're socialists." "I know," I said, "they're my people," realizing the multi-layered meaning in my response. We're all one people, religious, secular, socialist, capitalist, all one along the whole span of how we call ourselves as Jews. There are some from the old neighborhood, of course, perhaps some with whom I davened in the little shul as I got older, who wouldn't be caught dead in the Jewish Deed Holders Cemetery. And from the other side, if truth be told, about a rabbi coming among them, I can already hear some murmurings, as in "there goes the neighborhood." When we are gathered to our people, though, it is not limited to one neighborhood, any more than in life to one shul or way of being Jewish. Through one neighborhood we are joined to them all, and so through our own people to all people. As I find it important to be a bridge-builder in life, so when that time comes may I continue to be in death.

Every neighborhood has its own character and texture, its own identity, that which makes it unique. It may be in the architecture of the homes, in the languages the people speak, perhaps in values commonly held and respect nevertheless when values differ, perhaps in the way of sharing the joys and sorrows in neighbors' lives. That there will be joys and sorrows is a reality that touches every neighborhood, every gathering of people in the living of life. And all is reflected in the gathering of lives to their people at the end of their days, architecture, language, values, joys and sorrows. Cemeteries, too, are neighborhoods, each expressing its own unique character and texture, each expressing the universal realities of life. The essence of lives are etched in stone there, stories told in the grappling for words by loved ones seeking to tell of ones they loved. Cemeteries are a reflection of life in all of its modes and depth of meaning, ways of the world and of eternity. It is all in our traditional calling of a cemetery as *בית החיים* / *beyts ha'chayim* / *House of the Living* and *בית עולם* / *beyts olam* / *House of Eternity*, the former much more than a euphemism, the latter much more than of time beyond. As *House of the Living*, a cemetery tells of people's lives more than of their deaths. Amidst the telling of so many lives, a cemetery is a place for the living to gather and reflect on the living of their own lives, of values, and priorities, channelling memory and learning from stories told in stone. As *House of Eternity*, a cemetery is a place where the streams of past, present, and future converge in a gathering of time, time that is real, without deceit or illusion, no longer amorphous and that allows no artifice, our own place in the flow of time revealed.

עולם / *Olam* means eternity, but it also means past, and future, simply as in tomorrow, each day a link to eternity. And it means world, the present time and place in which we stand, the teeming sphere of life we share with all people. And in its root, עולם/*olam* means hidden, for all of our yearning that which is beyond our knowing, intimation to be gained only in living.

I approach the House of the Living -- My Once and Future Neighborhood through two brick columns. On the right column there is a stone plaque with names of a long ago oversight committee, all of whom are probably now on-sight advisors. Through the same portal and just to the left of the path is the "Mishna Cemetery Association of Chelsea." I muse that I should be able to find someone there to learn a קאפיטל / *kapitl / chapter* of Mishna with. Among the old socialists, though, as was often the case, there are undoubtedly some who are learned in the traditional sources of Yiddishkeit, knowledge lovingly held ungrudging from early years, even with pride. Perhaps they shall not rue after all a fellow traveler who happens to be a rabbi, and even to spar in Torah with those from across the aisle, perhaps some politics mixed in.

Beyond politics and ideology, beyond the gnawing question of why, I always stop at the very first grave and cry. In one of her few English sayings, Bobi would shake her head and say, "Y is a crooked letter." There is no one to ask in any case, only to wonder as I look at the stone for Judith Sylvia Gass, April 17, 1943 - February 17, 1967, not quite 24 years old when she died: "For all your strife and turmoil are ended..., Your vibrant zest for life, though now a cherished memory, We do not surrender.... Directly across from Judith's grave, those of her parents, words that tell of grief transformed. Living many years beyond the loss of their daughter, of Sophie: "Beloved wife, mother, grandmother; Activist for peace, education, and civil rights." Of Nathan: "Beloved husband, father, and grandfather; Dedicated his life to improving the welfare of mankind."

We do our best to go on. I continue down the path, noticing recently for the first time the grave of a well-known sculptor, George Aarons, a carving in the stone and words that say, "His love for humanity expressed in form." Of people known and mostly unknown, a common message in the air, of hope so open and vulnerable, a sacred intimacy felt in their presence, prayerful in spite of themselves. Of Samuel and Rose Rosenblatt, "Workers for Peace and Justice." Of Isaac Nahamkin, "Devoted to Humanity." Harry Senders was "A Lifelong Fighter for the Rights of Man;" and in their presence, David and Dora Katz remind, "They Live for all Time Who Fought for Peace and Justice in Their Time." It is a beautiful expression of what eternity means, and of how we merit to live in its house, which is בית עולם / *Beit Olam*, by helping to build it, to bring to peaceful fruition the flowering of tomorrow. Each one singing her and his part, row after row, some in English, some in Yiddish, the spirited refrain all the same: פאר שולם אונד סאשול גערעכטקייט / *far sholom und soshol gerechtkeit*, you understand, "for peace and social justice;" אן ארבייטער פאר שולם / *ahn arbeiter far sholom/a worker for peace*; and another who could be any number of others, who labored tirelessly for fifty years for a באפרייטער וועלט / *bafreiter velt/a world that is free*. (Of all that gives meaning to freedom and to life itself, bread and roses, the harmonies that join us one to another, a poignant teaching from the stone of Joe Korsun, "Everything that is Dear to People, I Have Called My Own;" And over there are old friends, Miriam and Jack Pizer, a piano in stone for her, the love and the lessons she

gave, and for Jack, the quintessence of his life and of our striving, but one word, *מענטש* (*mentsch*.)

I pause in the next row and linger as always, the row so perfectly transplanted from the old neighborhood. There are all the Kaplows, Sam and Sadie, Fannie and Izy, as they once were right across the street, even closer now. I can just about smell the pickles and feel the warmth of the wood stove in the old store. I spend some time with my grandparents, Bobi and Pa, Yosel and Rivka, sharing, catching them up, thinking of Bobi's *lekach*, her Yontev honey cake that was like none other. Pa, יוסף ב'ר, נפתלי, was such a simple, gentle man, reaching out to all, and thus the two clasped hands of friendship at the top of his stone. Of Bobi, so feisty and strong, רבקה בת רחל, it says in my uncle's words, "Rifke... A Woman Before Her Time." She didn't let go easily, unafraid to speak her truth and her pain. She banished God long ago when the rabbi, the Bezilrer Rebbe, who was a surrogate father to her and her sister, was the first one killed in a pogrom. She screamed at her mother, "you say there is a God!?" In the telling of her life to me, stories carried in my heart, that scream echoed so many times, even as it softened a bit in her latter years to make room for another rabbi whom she loved.

Of laughter and tears, the story of our people, of life itself as lived by all people. I always stop at a small, heart-shaped monument of pink granite: "In Loving Memory of Our Beloved Daughter, Marlene; 3/27/56-5/6/56. She was barely six weeks old, the daughter of the man I knew only as Mr. Glimcher, or just Glimcher, as they called him, the Yiddish story teller. He would regale people with Sholom Aleichem stories, sometimes in our living room, until tears rolled down their cheeks from laughing so hard. My mother told me that he thought he really was Sholom Aleichem. I didn't understand much of the Yiddish, but I understood everything. And so I came to understand what was never said, Glimcher was the clown who cried within, making people laugh while carrying such deep grief.

Of stories that tell of our people's past and of individual lives, of history and heartache, of struggle and striving, hope is triumphant here in the House of the Living, in the Jewish Deed Holders Cemetery. I come to what is now just about the last row, with room for two more rows just beyond, and there I linger the longest, "Sireen Evelyn Reinstein, שרה חוה בת יוסף ורבקה, Caring wife, mom, sister, Bobi, teacher; She Loved Nature, Peace, and Humankind." "Hi mom, good Yontev, good Yontev. There is so much to tell you about, about the kids, about Mieke and me, about our *shtibl* that you would so love. I know that this will make you cry to think about what it means, and me too, but someday we're going to be neighbors. You know, you taught me better than anyone else that death is part of life and I thank you for that because it makes all of this so much easier. Yes, to speak of death is to speak of life. I'm just gonna take a walk over there, mom, and I'll come back soon." I stand by some smooth grass right alongside the path. I think we'll be okay here, Mieke, and thank you for your understanding. Yes, I promise I will tell the kids not to try to get here during rush hour. As the man said when we completed the purchase and became Jewish deed holders, צו הונדערט און צפנציק יאר / *tzu hundert und tzfantzik yohr* / to a hundred and twenty years. Now let's all go and help create a better world, א באפרייטער און שלומדיקער וועלט / *a bafreiter un sholomdiker velt* / a free and peaceful world. That is the message carved in stone in the House of the Living -- My Once and Future Neighborhood. לחיים / *L'chayim* / To Life!