

Nurse Logs and Memory

Yom Kippur Yizkor 2016 / 5777

I want to share with you two stories from the summer and a poem.

First, in August I flew up to Minneapolis to perform the wedding for a young couple that spent many years here in Durham and found a Jewish home here in Beth El. The bride's family was Russian. At the wedding reception, while people sang and danced, her father sat next to me and told me his family's story.

The bride's father was five years old in June 1941. They lived in Latvia and, when Germany started bombing the area on the first day of the war, his father's family faced a decision: stay or leave. It might have made sense to stay. Many Jews in this area had served in the German army in World War I and some speculated that the Germans would treat them favorably as a reward for their service just twenty-five years before.

If not for a small bit of - one cannot call it luck, but circumstance - there would have been no choice whatsoever. The bride's father's elderly grandmother lived with her son and their family - they could never leave her behind. But one week before the war began, grandmother went to visit her other daughter in a nearby village, leaving them with an excruciating decision. Should they stay and risk being caught up in the impending chaos of war? Or should they depend on their relative's family to care as best they could for their elderly grandmother and, now being able to move quickly, should they flee through the doorway that circumstance had opened for them? They decided to leave.

There were no vehicles. They let go of their possessions and clung to what is most important: each other. Mother and father walked, the kids took turns riding on bicycles - and they went east, 50 kilometers in the hot summer sun until they crossed the Russian border to relative safety. They would learn later that their village was taken by the Germans on the 2nd day of the war. His elderly grandmother, his aunt and the rest of their family were all killed.

As we sat at the wedding, the bride's explained, every member of his known family could be traced to that one decision: to leave on the very first day of the war, and to that one shift of circumstance - that their elderly grandmother had gone to visit her daughter a week before the war. As he spoke, I remembered a prayer we sing at Tachanun: Shomer Yisrael, Shmor Sheirith Yisrael - "Guardian of Israel, Guard the remnant of Israel" and thought about how much we are all "Sheirith Yisrael" - the remnant of Israel, the product of accident after accident, the end of a long string of luck and circumstance through Jewish history that brought us alive as Jews to the beginning of the 21st century. Today I think about we are not here as products of our own design, but rather how lucky each and every one of us is to be here on Yom Kippur. It is fitting today to remember, to remember those who came before us.

The second story is not from Minneapolis or Latvia, but from Olympic National Park in Washington where, as I mentioned on Erev Rosh Hashanah, Jennifer and I recently enjoyed a trip to celebrate our 20th anniversary. As part of our trip, we walked through the Hoh rainforest and the Park Ranger explained how these temperate rainforests are home to Sitka spruce, hemlock, and Douglas fir trees. Some of these trees grow to over two hundred feet high and produce so much foliage that they block out most of the light. The forest floor can sustain ferns and other shade loving plants but beneath the ferns, it is so dark that scientists noticed a problem: Even if seedlings were to germinate, how could they gather enough light for them to photosynthesize? Or, put more simply, how can these giant trees regenerate themselves?

And the answer, I learned, on my walk with the park ranger, and my wife, is something called a nurse log. When one of these huge trees falls, it clears a path of destruction, not only when it hits the ground, but clearing out part of the canopy over the forest and creating a place where more sunlight happens to get in. But it's not only that.

In his book, *The Private Life of Plants*, David Attenborough explains that these giant trees reproduce themselves:

...with the aid of their own dead bodies. The girth of an adult tree is such that the upper side of a fallen trunk remains above the ferns. A seed from a neighboring tree that lands on it can thus get sufficient light to germinate. Being perched there brings another advantage: the bark of the prostrate tree is very fibrous and holds moisture like a sponge so the young plant does not lack for water. As the seedling sprouts, it sends down roots. They grow over the flank of the log and down into the rich soil beneath.

These stories - the story of a nurse log and the story of a Russian family wedding in Minneapolis - go together in my heart, not just because I encountered them both over the summer. They each made me think of Yizkor.

Today we remember those who came before us. We remember with gratitude both the miracles we received through no merit of our own and the decisions they made based on values - such as letting go of possessions and clinging to what's most important - that made our lives possible. We remember how much our lives are like those of seedlings that grow on a nurse log, how we are nourished by the gifts of those who came before us, how our lives would not be the same were it not for the sacrifices they made.

We remember not merely to recall those who are gone, but to allow them to challenge us: can we make of ourselves a nurse log? Can we clear a path for the sun to shine? Can we gather water and food for the next generation to grow? Can we follow the example of those who came before us and gave us the forest floor?

Before our meditation, I want to conclude with a poem by Dana Gioia, not about trees, but about gardens and memories of times spent together with those we love. It is called: The Lost Garden.

*If ever we see those gardens again,
The summer will be gone – at least our summer.
Some other mockingbird will concertize
Among the mulberries, and other vines
Will climb the high brick wall to disappear*

*How many footpaths crossed the old estate—
The gracious acreage of a grander age—
So many trees to kiss or argue under,
And greenery enough for any mood.
What pleasure to be sad in such surroundings.*

*At least in retrospect. For even sorrow
Seems bearable when studied at a distance,
And if we speak of private suffering,
The pain becomes part of a well-turned tale
Describing someone else who shares our name.*

*Still, thinking of you, I sometimes play a game.
What if we had walked a different path one day,
Would some small incident have nudged us elsewhere
The way a pebble tossed into a brook
Might change the course a hundred miles downstream?
The trick is making memory a blessing,
To learn by loss subtraction of desire,
Of wanting nothing more than what has been,
To know the past forever lost, yet seeing
Behind the wall a garden still in blossom*

Can we make memory a blessing? We feel loss. Can we still see in our lives that there is a garden in bloom? I know the temptations of grief. I know how hard it can feel to move on. I know that sometimes we feel a desire to return to the way that thing were. But the trick is to make memory a blessing, and to see a garden still in bloom. Amen.