

PASSION AND ACTION
Rabbi Roger C. Klein
Yom Kippur – 10 Tishri 5779/19 September 2018
The Temple-Tifereth Israel

One evening, many years ago, my father, of blessed memory, and my son Danny and I attended an exhibition tennis match between two tennis greats, Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. My father sat between us. As we were watching the match, I could feel that my father was growing uneasy and I asked him about it. He responded, with his characteristic gentleness, that he didn't really understand what was going on and that he needed some explanation about how a tennis match works. So, I began to explain the scoring system to him, going into the meaning of "love," "ad in" and "ad out," how many games in a set, how many sets in a match, and what a tie-breaker was ... things like that. But, evidently, I was explaining too much or too fast, because, at one point, he interrupted me and said, "I don't have to truly understand the game, I just want to get close to understanding."

I've thought a lot about that conversation over the years. To be sure, I remember it because it was a moment of special intimacy with the father whom I deeply loved ... and because of his memorable

sense of humor. But I have also thought about it because his comment has always seemed to me to capture something profound about life. How often do we really understand what is happening around us or inside of us? How close to full understanding do we ever get? How close do we *need* to get? Isn't it enough sometimes just to have intimations ... especially if they are powerful intimations ... of life's deeper realities and possibilities? Sometimes, all we need is pointers, suggestions, hints ...and some way to turn these intimations into action.

I want to talk with you this evening/morning about the meaning of life. Yes, the meaning of life! And I'm going to try to get you to understand what I'm driving at. But I'm not going to do it through long-winded descriptions and or complex explanations which wouldn't get to the bottom of it anyway. The poet William Wordsworth reminds us that "we murder to dissect." Rather, I'm going to point to the meaning I'm after through snap-shots, through pictures of how exemplary individuals act in moments of pressure or of pleasure, actions which display the depth-quality of their lives. Illustrations of how to live a life. And by telling you stories, I hope to convey something powerful about what life can be for the rest of us. I am

incapable of fully describing what I'm driving at but I can shine a flashlight at it and hope that you get it ... not for complete understanding but in the hope of getting "close to understanding."

Two stories: The first one takes me back to when I was a rabbinical student at The Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. We students were lucky. We sat among famous and formidable professors; and these men ... they were all men at that time ... impressed us with their academic accomplishments and their impressive personal charisma ... Jakob Petuchowski, Samuel Sandmel, Ellis Rivkin, Michael Meyer ... masters of Bible, New Testament, and Jewish Theology and Jewish History. And then there was Werner Weinberg. There was nothing formidable about Werner Weinberg at all, at least not on the surface. He was slight of build and likable; and he spoke in a voice so soft and in such a monotone that you had to sit in the first two rows of the classroom in order to hear him try to convince us of the elegance of Hebrew irregular verbs and of the subtleties of Hebrew syntax.

Then one day in class ... I can't recall what led him to do so ...he told us a story, a story about his personal life some decades before. We already knew that he had been caught up in the Nazi

whirlwind ... that he had experienced Kristallnacht in 1938 and that later he had endured two and a half years in the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. And in his later memoir he tells the reader that he struggled, at that time and throughout the rest of his life “to know what it all means” and that he concluded that there is no explanation and that, in any event, explanations do not heal deep wounds. But then, we wondered, how was he able to go on and live a productive life? And then he related to us the Tale of the Torah Scroll.

It happened, he told us, that Nazi toughs picked him and his wife up in Holland on Erev Rosh Hashanah in 1943 and sent them to the Dutch Camp Westerbok. A few months later they were transferred to Bergen-Belsen. Now, in the basement of that synagogue was a secret closet in which synagogue officials, completely unbeknownst to Weinberg, had hidden their sacred objects ... tefillin, prayer books, and Torah Scrolls. Also unbeknownst to him, one of those scrolls had been saved and brought to Amsterdam from Rheda, his small home town in Germany, as the result of a Kristallnacht fire which burnt down the Rheda synagogue. It was a scroll that had been lovingly written in 1845 at

the request of Weinberg's great-grandfather and which had been in his family for a hundred years.

After Weinberg had been liberated from Bergen-Belsen at the end of the war, he finally learned the location of that Torah Scroll after a long and arduous search. Locating that scroll was one of his central obsessions. And so he went to the Amsterdam Synagogue, descended to that basement storage closet and "miraculously," as he told us, "there was his family scroll." And he described to us, with tears in his eyes, that "that scroll still had its precious wimple [Torah belt] firmly in place; and that wimple was still wound spiraling upward, ascending in holiness. And, still affixed to that scroll was the original note, saying in Dutch: "this Sefer Torah belongs to Werner Weinberg." As he told us this story, we too began to weep, for both our precious teacher who miraculously sat before us and for our precious "tree of life" that had survived.

Weinberg, he went on to say, carried the Scroll with him to his new home in America and kept it for years on a bookshelf in his study. But, he told us, he felt that it belonged in a synagogue where it could be used and cherished. "I felt an overwhelming need to keep alive the story of this Sefer Torah's particular fate. It was the symbol

of both the agony of the Holocaust's victims, and the imperative of memory crying out to the survivors. It bore witness to what had been lost; it also was an inseparable part of me and my own story. So for the time being, I told myself that the compulsion to restore the Torah to its rightful owner or to its 'legal or moral successor' simply meant that my home was its home. Nevertheless, I hoped that some day it would find an honored place in a proper Aron Kodesh ...” So he kept it at home and used it from time to time to show children; and to teach them about the Torah and about Judaism. Once, he said to us, when he was showing it to a group of very young children and telling them how a Torah Scroll was made, a first-grader asked why the Scroll was pieced together from different sheets and not made from one long roll, and how the boy sitting next to him told him that sheep didn't come any longer.

Finally he decided to give it to HUC which was, he says, “my synagogue” and where my Sefer Torah belonged. The Ark of the College was the “rightful successor” to his hometown, Rheda, he said. And, as he later wrote, “in the hundred and thirtieth year of my great-grandfather's Torah which was miraculously saved from the synagogue of Rheda, and in the year of my sixtieth birthday, its flight,

together with my own, finally came to an end.” And this scroll,” Weinberg later was to write, “was last used as a family Torah by our granddaughter, Stephanie, for her Bat Mitzvah on October 10, 1975. From it she read the story of Noah – about the ark, about the flood which all but destroyed the world, about the first dove that found no rest for the sole of her foot, and the second dove that returned at eventide carrying an olive branch. Three days later, in the presence of the entire Cincinnati School community, I formally presented the Sefer Torah to the Hebrew Union College. Now that Torah Scroll forms a visible bridge between a perished Jewish civilization and a flourishing one In this rabbinical seminary, it recalls the story that must never be forgotten. May it bear constant witness to what is so precious to our folk and our faith: the study of Torah, religious observance, and ethical conduct.”

And when, in the years since I heard that story from Werner Weinberg himself, I continue to be moved by the passion and the commitment that led Weinberg to search tirelessly for that Torah and not to rest until it rested in its new and permanent home. What presses a person on with such determination? What depth of connection to Torah and its significance drove him relentlessly? I

sensed then and I sense now that there existed in him a primal urge and passion and a foundational sense of purpose that gave permanent power to his life, in spite of his suffering.

My second story comes from a brief talk that a member of our congregation gave several years ago at a Yom Kippur afternoon service. It is a talk that moved me then and continues to move me now. It is a simple but poignant narrative about a relationship between a grandfather and his grandson ... and about the fruits of that relationship. Here it is, in part:

When I was a young boy, my grandfather taught me valuable lessons about apologizing, seeking forgiveness and not holding grudges – principles that I have tried to carry with me throughout my life.

My grandfather died when I was 19. He came to this country from Hungary at the age of 30. Within a couple of years of being here, he learned to speak English well enough to become licensed as a ham radio operator. ...

I loved going to his home because he would take me down to the basement and show me all of his radio equipment. I was fascinated watching and listening to him speak with people from all over the world.

One of the things I remember most from listening to him talk on his radio was how he would apologize to his fellow ham-radio-operator friends for not staying in touch more often. Or, if someone ever apologized to him for not communicating more often, my grandfather would make the other person feel good by saying, 'Don't worry, we all have busy lives.'

My grandfather also took great pride in giving me 'words of wisdom,' often by reciting different quotes or passages and then say, "That's the Jewish way of life."

I still remember as if it were yesterday. And I'm sure many of you have heard these or similar types of quotes before. He would say things like ...

“ Billy [this is not his real name] ... Billy, apologizing when you're wrong or when you make a mistake is a must. And never ruin an apology with an excuse.”

“Billy, never hold a grudge. That's like letting someone live rent free in your head.”

“Billy, forgiveness brings peace. Forgiveness helps you live a happier life.”

And then “Billy” concludes his talk by saying: “So I thank my grandpa for instilling these important principles in my life, as they serve to reinforce my pride in living, just like he did, a “Jewish Way of Life.”

Now, it is impossible, at least for me, not to sense the power in this scene: the understated passion behind the grandfather's convictions, the almost oracular clarity of their formulation, the love between grandfather and grandson that permeates those scenes. Life

lived with a power that has not yet dissipated. How did those precious moments come about? What prepared grandfather and grandson for them? What drove them to experience them over and over again? Passion? Attentiveness? Desire? Love? The capacity for appreciation? We see it and we dimly recognize it but we can't get to the bottom of it. But we know that, in Weinberg's odyssey and in Billy and his grandfather's rich relationship, lie elements that made for them, and can make for us, a life of meaning and purpose and contentment. Ways of living that, when consciously pursued, can make all the difference.

I recently came across a quote by Elie Wiesel that caused me to lift my head from the page and stare off into space. Perhaps you, too, have had the experience of reading something that stunned you and disallowed you to continue reading, at least for a moment or two. I will paraphrase this quote slightly: "In philosophy all questions are valid; in matters of commitment, those questions had better be preceded by answers" (Elie Wiesel, *Wise Men and Their Tales*). Questions, indeed, are fine and they are important. They challenge easy and facile answers and they promise a more resilient faith. But questions without answers, questions without prior commitments are

sure to lead to endless doubt and to a downward spiral of a corrosive skepticism. First must come robust convictions passionately embraced and vibrantly lived out. Weinberg's love of Torah and of Judaism, and his commitment to the future in spite of the evil he personally experienced in all its savagery. Billy's grandfather's love for his grandson and his desire to teach his grandson what he knew about life ... and to do so with humility and grace ... these are some of the elements that give firmness and power to life ... and bring contentment and joy. On this holiest of days, let us take advantage of these precious hours of reflection to help ourselves emerge with a keener understanding of our own commitments, our own answers ... to those commitments we have already but insufficiently enacted and to those commitments we have not yet begun to enact. And then to resolve to maximize our opportunities to put these answers, these commitments, these convictions into action.

Amen.