

A WAKE BEFORE PASSOVER—YIZKKOR SERMON PESACH 5766.

He had worked for our local Jewish day school for decades. Whenever I went there for a meeting or to teach a class, he, a Catholic, and I, a rabbi, would greet each other comically.

“Father, how are you?” he would ask me.

“Rabbi, I’m fine, praise God,” I would answer, as we laughed at our worn out joke about misplaced religious identities.

At times, he would feed me harmless community gossip. Mostly, we talked about our respective religions. His dedicated work in a Jewish institution had made him far more conversant about Judaism than I was about Catholicism. He had crossed into my world so many times so faithfully for his job, that I thought of him as an honorary member of “the tribe.”

“Father, God bless you” he would call to me each time I left the building.

“Rabbi, God bless you” I would respond.

Eventually he retired. We had never been close friends, and our two communities, separated by a mere three miles in the same metropolitan area,

were like different planets. For the next two years, we neither saw nor spoke to each other.

He reentered my small world when his daughter died of cancer. Rushing around to clean my house and prepare for the seders on Passover eve, I discovered that her wake would be held late that afternoon, four hours before the start of the holiday. With the time before the holiday quickly fading, I grew anxious thinking about paying my respects to her family. Passover preparations are a labor intensive, highly particular Jewish experience. By removing all traces of leavened foods which are forbidden to us, we bring big, universal concepts such as slavery and freedom into the smallest spaces of our homes and stomachs. Koshering and cooking preoccupy even less religious Jews, and those of us who are more ritually observant set aside almost all other daily concerns in the week before Passover to prepare exhaustively. As I thought about stopping my work in order to attend the wake, I almost shuddered knowing I would be leaving this place of private holiness and joy to cross over as a stranger into the strange land of someone else's nightmare.

I tried rationalizing about not going: the cleaning and shopping were not done, I would have to fight horrible rush hour traffic and an endless receiving line to see

him for a mere minute, and my presence might mean nothing to him. My anticipatory guilt and empathy for my old friend gradually wore down my rationales. I put on formal clothing, got into my car, and inched along Central Avenue towards the funeral home.

A close Jewish friend who also knew him was already waiting there. We nodded to each other, aware of where we had both come from, as we stood on a silent line of well-wishers snaking through the building for hundreds of feet. His daughter had been the beloved chief of a local fire department. The firefighters and police in their crisp blue uniforms crept forward with mournful reverence to honor their sister who had not been killed by fire or a bullet but by her own body's self-betrayal.

An hour later, we stood over her open casket which dared us to imagine her awakening to ultimate liberation as Christians view it. Then our turn came to comfort our friend and his family.

As I silently embraced him, he whispered, "Thank you Rabbi."

There was nothing I could or needed to say. Our old joke had no relevance in that place among what the poet, Ruth Brin calls the living and the lonely dead. Our different backgrounds were peeled away, exposing the raw wound of common

mortal experience which afflicts everyone. As I embraced my bereaved friend I recognized that we shared the only thing which mattered at that moment.

We were both fathers.

I turned around and left to drive back home.

Much of my decision that Pesach eve to be with my old friend and his family was motivated by pure compassion for him. Losing his daughter was an immense, almost unspeakable tragedy; I knew that all of our Pesach celebrations notwithstanding, what would the meaning of communal celebration and freedom be for me that night if I hadn't done something, even something small, to help them know that our Jewish community was there for them in the time of their most intense loneliness? Much of my decision that day was also motivated by pure religious obligation. Our halakhah, Jewish law, of mourning, like so many of our laws of interpersonal kindness, makes very clear that when a fellow human being suffers, we aren't obligated to do everything for him or her, but not attending to him or her because we're too busy or distracted or scared is simply not an option. God may have cared that my house was clean for Pesach at that moment, but I'd like to think that God cared more, or at least equally as much, that I was comforting mourners. Compassion and obligation do not run on

parallel tracks in Jewish law: they intersect. We perform mitzvot of hesed, kindness in direct imitation of God who visits the sick, welcomes the stranger, comforts the mourners and buries the dead. God the Almighty Ruler of the universe is never too busy to show up to personally attend to those in need. We, howbeit far less perfectly and consistently than God, are nonetheless offered the sacred opportunity to do what God does.

Yizkor is yet one more blessed opportunity for us not only to remember loved ones, but to help each other do so, in fulfillment of our obligation to act with hesed. As we rise for Yizkor, we have this next opportunity and challenge as Jews, as people, to help each other cross the Red sea of memory, loss, healing and redemption.