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At 85

Five years ago, Rabbi Rheins was kind enough to invite me to speak about what being 80 meant to me. Now, he has invited me back to speak this evening about what it means to be 85. Thank you, my friend. I do welcome this opportunity and appreciate your kindness in asking me.

In two days, I will be 85 years of age. While it does seem odd to me, it doesn't seem old to me. My sense is that age is just a yardstick in the game of life. For some the field is short, for others long, and for the few even longer. For some the field is lush grass well kept; for others it's pitted, rocky, and tenuous. And the certainty in all of it is that no one ever knows just how long their field is. Therefore, age is just an accounting of what yard line one has reached on his or her field of life. That is to say, age is irrelevant actually. It is only relevant actuarially.

The most difficult thing about being invited to speak this evening is the startling realization that five years have passed since I turned 80. The math is correct, but the psychology is all off. I could swear that 80 was just the other day. Time has lost its perspective, or as Einstein might have put it ... its measure of relativity.

The question that plagued me ... that's a word especially in vogue nowadays ... was, should I speak about these past five years and how they have seemingly changed the moral, psychological, social, political, and historical culture of our country and our world? I wrestled with that, pondered it deeply, and thoroughly considered that possibility for well over ten seconds ... then decided to leave it to the pundits in newspapers, magazines, and on CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and ... ESPN.

I spent another second or so debating as to whether to speak about Israel. But Israel is doing just fine so far this year without my help. You know that when there are more Arab nations that woo and befriend Israel than they do Iran, it's probably safe to save that sermon for another day.

So, that leaves me with the quandary ... what to say. Well, when one is old enough, why not begin with nostalgia?

Carson Elementary School in Price Hill, Cincinnati, Ohio, my third-grade teacher was Mrs. Overstreet. It was about this time of year, 1944. For almost two months, our class had had daily spelling tests and penmanship exercises and she decided to put them both in practice by asking us to write an essay – perhaps the first essay I was ever asked to write. The topic: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I had been asked that question a number of times before then by grandparents, uncles, aunts, older cousins, and the like, but this was the first time I was asked to put it in writing.

Yet even though I was only about eight at the time, I somehow sensed that the query was looking for the wrong answer. What did I want to be assumed that a job or a career was the answer. But what did I know about jobs or careers at eight? I knew the cop who walked our neighborhood, the firemen at the station around the corner, my teachers, my dad who sold insurance, the local grocer, the soda jerk at Woolworth’s ... those are the only workers I was familiar with and I didn’t want to do any of their jobs. Yet, the question stayed with me ... but, it morphed. It changed ... significantly over time ... and that in turn informed and changed me. I had no doubt that sooner or later I’d figure out a career path or a calling, but how would I figure out a value system? What did I want to be when I grew up, became not what did I want to do, but what kind of person did I want to become?

Many of you know that my Sephardic grandmother, my mother’s mother, played an important role in my early upbringing. She and grandpa whom I called Pop (don’t ask me why) had the upstairs apartment in our duplex, and it was to their apartment that I returned from school every weekday, staying with them until my parents came home from work. Grandma saw to it that I ate the requisite two homemade *biscochos* covered with sesame seeds and had a glass of milk while I told her in detail about my school day. During some of those sessions she played umpire as I pitched.

“Well, grandma,” I remember telling her one day, “we were shooting marbles under the big tree in the school playground and Johnny Varon took Hymie Cook’s favorite shooter and said it was his. And Hymie started to cry.”

“*Es picatho, hijo mio*. It’s a sin to cheat in a game or in life,” she said. “A cheater always thinks he is getting away with something, but in fact he is making himself less of a person not only in everyone else’s eyes, but in his eyes too. Besides, if he has to cheat or steal to get what he wants, he will never

become a responsible or strong person. What kind of life is that to be incapable of succeeding on your own? *Nuestro Señor es Grande* – (the Sephardim of Cincinnati referred to Gd as *Nuestro Señor*, Our Great Mister), *El Dio* did not put us here to cheat. We are here to do what is right and good to the best of our ability. Remember, Adam and Havah were kicked out of the garden for cheating. So, what Johnny did could not find favor in the *ojos*, in the eyes that are always aware of our heart and our deeds.”

Somehow, grandma always seemed able to tie a moral to a biblical story or vice versa. And for her, good deeds were divinely blessed, and bad acts were *picatho* – sins. Karl Menninger who along with father Charles founded the Menninger Psychiatric Clinic in Topeka, wrote a book back in the ‘70s entitled, *Whatever Happened To Sin?* in which he maintained that when we lost our inclination to call bad acts sins, we lost our moral compass. My grandmother would have had much to discuss with Dr. Menninger.

So, I was thinking of what I wanted to be when I grow up as I began to write this sermon, and grandma’s Torah nudged me as I noshed nonchalantly not on a *biscocho*, but on one of the oatmeal cookies that Rikki had just taken from the oven.

This Shabbat is the forth and last in the month of November ... the four Torah *sedras* of this month contain four ideas concerning what ... or rather *how* we should want to be when we grow up. So, let me share those four things with you, and then you can decide what you want to be ... when you grow up.

This year, the first week in November, we read the sedra **Toldot** (Gen 25-28).

It begins with an account of the birth of the boys born to Isaac and Rifka, twins who struggled fiercely in her womb. Some of the rabbis who comment about this uterine warfare maintain that it was a moral struggle between the *yetzer ra* and the *yetzer tov* – the two inclinations that each person possesses one to do bad and the other to do good. As Esau and Jacob wrestled before birth and then struggled with each other for decades afterwards, so Jewish tradition would teach that bad and good struggle within us until one conquers the other.

A story:

The chief and his grandson were walking along the mesa. “There are two wolves that live within us,” the grandfather says. One wolf is evil, envious, often crazed, and dangerous. The other wolf is fair,

generous, gracious, kind, and good. And they growl at one another and test their strength within us against one another each day and every day.

“That seems terrible, grandfather,” the youngster said. “How do we know which one will control us?”

“That, my son is easy to answer,” grandfather replied. “The one you feed.”

In a Mishna, Ben Azai says that simply: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah, avayra goreret avayra* – good acts beget good habits, bad deeds beget wickedness.

The lesson – we become what we practice to become.

The moral – do good for good’s sake because it will make you good.

The Sedra read on the second Shabbat of this month is called **Vayaytzay**. (Gen 28-32)

This was my Torah portion some 72 years ago. I read it in Ashkenazic Hebrew, because that was the Hebrew pronunciation of Mr. Lapidus who taught it to me. He was a very short, slim man, with a long beard. He was probably then in his 50s. I thought him to be old enough to have arrived with the Pilgrims. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony was held in the minuscule chapel of the Vista Del Mar orphanage in Los Angeles. That was the Friday night rental of our new congregation in Culver City. There were eight rows in the chapel. The pulpit hovered uncomfortably five feet above the first row. I was five feet tall, maybe. I could see no one over the top of the pulpit and no one could see me. It was perfect.

A quick summary of that Sedra ... Jacob has received a spiritual blessing from his blind father, and when Esau finds out that Jacob has as it were taken the blessing meant for him, he vows to kill his brother. This sedra then begins with Jacob on the run from his brother ... and it ends four chapters later with Jacob running from his father-in-law. It begins with a stone that Jacob places under his head as a pillow while he dreams of a ladder reaching into heaven, and it ends with a pile of stones that Jacob builds as a sign of a pact with Laban that they will not cross beyond this stone mound, in Hebrew, this *gal-ayd* – this Gilead, this Golan, to do harm to one another.

So, at the beginning, Jacob flees to his mother’s brother, to the land of Uncle Laban, where at the well, he meets cousin Rachel and wants to marry her. Seven years of labor he gives his uncle, but Laban then tricks the one who tricked his father and substitutes elder daughter Leah on the wedding night. Shortly thereafter, we find Jacob is husband to both Leah and Rachel and to their handmaidens Bilhah and

Zilpah. Leah bears six sons and daughter Dinah, the handmaids bear two sons each, and Rachel finally gives birth to Joseph and is pregnant with Benjamin.

Jacob succeeds beyond Laban's wildest dreams. The flocks and herds increase beyond reason, but after 20 years, Jacob wants out and makes a deal for his share of the animals. Everything seems set. Yet, knowing his uncle for the rogue he is, Jacob awaits an opportunity, folds his tents, takes his flocks and his burgeoning family, and is once again on the run. Laban is furious. He did not get to say good-bye to his daughters ... and besides his family idol is missing. He runs after Jacob and catches up three days later.

The sedra is all about the dynamics of duplicity. Jacob tricks brother Esau, Rifka/Rebecca tricks husband Isaac, Laban tricks nephew Jacob and so does wife Leah. The midrash is especially poignant on this account. Jacob is angry with Laban of course. "After I worked for you seven years for Rachel, how could you deceive me with Leah?" To which Laban replies coolly: "In this place we marry off the eldest before the youngest." To that Jacob has no argument, so he turns on Leah. He blames her for being complicit in tricking him.

"On our wedding night, when I called you Rachel, you said 'here I am.' How could you pretend to be who you aren't?" To which she responds: "You should talk. When your blind father called you Esau, why did you respond, 'here I am' pretending to be who you aren't?"

A story:

A friend met the elderly, greatly revered Rabbi Zusia walking by the way. They stopped to chat. Talk of family turned to health and then to deeper matters. The friend in all seriousness asked: "Rabbi Zusia, when your time comes to stand before the Holy One of Blessing are you not afraid that Gd will ask 'Why were you not as great as Moses'?" To which Rav Zusia replied: "No, my friend, what concerns me is that Gd will ask, 'Why were you not the best, the most real Zusia you could be'?"

The lesson – we should try to be our best most authentic self regardless of conditions or circumstances. Pretense will lead to pretense. Life is complex enough; why make it more so? Don't do what you are not adept at doing; don't pretend to be who or what you are not. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare put these words in the mouth of Polonius: "This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day. Thou can'st not then be false to anyone."

Sedra #3 is called **Vayishlach** (Gen 32-36).

Jacob and his family have left Laban and proceeded back to the land of his birth. He hears that Esau is on his way and 400 men ride with him. Jacob is greatly afraid. That night, he leaves his family and crosses over the River Yabok. There he wrestles with someone or something. He is wounded in the thigh but is also blessed – his name is changed to Israel, meaning one who wrestles with Gd and man and has prevailed. He devises a plan. He sends 550 animals in manageable groups led by his men as gifts to his twin brother. He divides his camp putting the handmaids and their children in front, Leah and hers in the middle, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. And as he prays ... Esau arrives and runs to meet him. They embrace and kiss ... but Torah puts dots above the letters on the word kiss ... as if to say it was the kiss of appeasement. Esau is surprised and impressed with the size of Jacob's entourage and professes to not want or need all the animals, but Jacob insists and then tells Esau to go back to his land and Jacob will travel slowly along.

Twenty years have passed since the men have seen one another. Yet, here they are together and the meeting is brief. They do not ask about their lives, their history, how the parents are doing, nothing. Jacob has gained nothing from the encounter; Esau has been enriched. Appeasement is costly. Chamberlain taught us that at Munich; Stephen S. Wise taught us that with FDR; Bibi taught us that with Hebron, Jericho, and Bethlehem; and now once again appeasement seems a possibility with Iran. Appeasement is worse than war because it is costly at first and ultimately leads to nothing positive ... an empty kiss at best.

A story ...

Donkey tells the tiger, "The grass is blue."

Tiger replies, "No, it's not. The grass is green."

The donkey insists. The discussion turns into a heated argument, and before it becomes a fight, the two decide to submit the issue to arbitration. They go to see the lion. As they approach the lion who is seated upon his throne, the donkey starts shouting: "Your Highness, isn't it true that the grass is blue?"

The lion replies: "You believe the grass is blue?"

“Absolutely, great lion, king of the jungle. And the tiger disagrees with me, contradicts me, and annoys me. Please punish him.”

The king then declares: "The tiger will be punished with three days of silence."

The donkey jumps with joy and goes on his way, content and repeating "The grass is blue, the grass is blue ... see, it's as I said, the grass is blue!"

Tiger, befuddled, asks the lion, "Your Majesty, why have you punished me? After all, the grass is not blue, it's green."

To which the lion replies, "You know that the grass is green; you've known that to be an undeniable fact; you've known that and every reasonable being knows that the grass is green. Is that not so?"

“Yes,” the tiger says, still quite perplexed, "So why do you punish me?"

To which the lion replies, "It has nothing to do with whether the grass is blue or green. The punishment is because first of all you came and bothered me with that question just to validate something you already knew was true, and second, it is degrading for an intelligent creature like you to waste your time and mine arguing with an ass!"

The biggest waste of time is arguing with the fool and fanatic who doesn't care about truth or reality, but only the victory of his beliefs and illusions. Never waste time on discussions that make no sense. There are people who, for all the evidence presented to them, do not have the ability or the desire to understand. Others blinded by ego, hatred, or resentment, only want one thing and that is to be right even if they aren't.

The lesson – Jacob bought a cold peace with his brother. Then he knew enough not to accept Esau's invitation to live nearby. You can't appease those who are set on a course no matter how foolish or harmful it may be. Don't allow your sense of compassion to let others, whose thoughts and values you don't share, send you down social, cultural, political, mental, or religious paths you see as blind alleys.

The Torah says it simply and clearly – *lo taylaych acharay rabim l'ra'ot* – do not follow others to do evil or to act foolishly.

And finally, we come to this week's sedra – **Vayayshev (Gen 37-40)**

To set the scene, it is of note that three people die in last week's sedra. Deborah the nursemaid-midwife of Rachel, and she is buried under a pine tree that weeps. That of course sets the stage for the tragic death of Rachel while giving birth to Benjamin, and she is buried in Ephrat which is in Bethlehem. Lastly, Isaac, who though blind had blessed his twin sons at least 20 years earlier. He dies being 180 and is buried in the cave of his ancestors – Machpelah in Hebron.

The patriarchs and matriarchs now take a back seat as the next generation takes center stage. Joseph is 17. He will dominate 13 of the last 14 chapters of Genesis. It could be argued that the Joseph story is the greatest short story ever written. It is interwoven throughout with love and hate, boasting and envy, dreams and more dreams, betrayal and redemption, pathos and humor and irony abound. There are recurring symbols that move the story along. Joseph goes from one coat to another, one pit to another, one place to another. There are silver coins and a silver cup, sacks with money and sacks with food and specific food items that all play a symbolic role as do caravans and wagons and famine and feasts along with hidden identity and revealed identity and all of it written by the hand of a master storyteller who would today be up for a PEN/Malamud Award or an O. Henry Award for excellence in short-story writing.

Joseph's life is a roller coaster ride from the moment daddy gives him a special striped coat. Thrown by his brothers into a pit, he is sold to a caravan, taken to Egypt, made chief of a household, thrown into another pit – a prison, falsely accused by another's lie, then brought out of prison to interpret dreams, because of which he is made vizir to Pharaoh. Joseph then leads all of Egypt through a famine, pushes his brothers through tests of loyalty to one another until finally revealing that "I am Joseph; does our father yet live?" All of Genesis begins with Cain's moral question, "Am, I my brother's keeper?" and now it ends with Joseph's certain answer, "Yes, indeed."

And then it is the Patriarch Jacob who brings the entire clan to Egypt so as to spend the last 17 years of his life with the son who was sold there at the age of 17.

All of the emotions that can destroy people and families are in the story, yet so too are those virtues that redeem. Courage overcomes defeat, generosity overcomes envy, love overcomes vengeance, faith overcomes disappointment. The roller coaster creeps upward and then races down, it takes the curve left

and soars again only to spin as if out of control down, screamingly down ... until perhaps it levels out and everyone grows up.

A story ...

Nathan is the personal advisor and prophet of King David. He has no reticence – no qualms or fears, in telling the king what he thinks, even to the extent of calling him out for a grievous moral lapse. The world lies at David's feet. His power is far reaching and awesome. One day, a visiting monarch coming to pay his respects and tribute to the king, brings him a beautiful gold ring as a gift. David loves the ring. He wears it every day.

Once, as he and Nathan were talking, David asked his advisor to do something special. "Have words engraved on it," he says, "that will keep me on an even keel – words that will remind me not to overdo things, not to despair of failures and not to become smug and haughty over successes."

Nathan took the ring and returned it a few days later with three Hebrew words engraved beautifully into its surface ... words for the king to look upon each and every day. The words were *gam zeh ya'avor* – this too shall pass. Whether sad or happy – this too shall pass; whether pleased or disappointed – *gam zeh ya'avor*; whether sick or well, young or old – yes, this too shall pass.

The lesson -- *tempus fugit*, time flies and as Rikki likes to say, like a roll of paper towels, the closer to the end the faster it goes.

So, what do I want to be when I grow up? What might we all want our children, our grandchildren, and for some ... our great grandchildren to be when they grow up?

My answer? I want to be a person who has always tried to do good and never knowingly bad. Someone who has tried to be the most authentic person I can be, never fooling myself into thinking that I am something or someone else. Someone who can discern fact from fiction and can decidedly walk away from potential battles with those who simply will not discuss disagreements nor accept facts. There is always help for those who are limited, but there is no cure for stubborn stupidity. And finally, on this day -- the 37th anniversary of the death of our dear daughter and sister Robin, the words on David's ring were never more poignant, "This too shall pass." All of life is a roller coaster – to survive the ride, no matter

one's age, one needs the balance of perspective – that no matter the condition or the circumstance, *gam zeh ya'avor*, this too shall pass.

What do I want to be when I grow up? In retrospect, I could have answered Mrs. Overstreet's essay with just one word – the word *good!* What a much more pleasant place this would be if everyone could and would choose to write that essay.

May we all be blessed in such a way as to live each day regardless of where our yard marker finds us on our field of life, with values that ennoble and perspective that keeps us on a true, a good ... and steady course.

Amen