

## Gift Giving – Connections

I recently posed a question to many of you- What is the best gift you have ever received? Our friend Jan shared this story

About 8 years ago, Jan is at art fair in Charlestown, Rhode Island and sees a beautiful painted bracelet. She tells Steve, the artist, how much she likes it and then he asks her, “Do you make things?”

She answers, “Yes, I’m a painter.”

He responds, “Please take this bracelet as a gift, and when you are ready bring me one of your paintings.” The next week, Jan brings him a painting of a osprey in a tree. He loves it. And friendship is formed.

Skip ahead 7 years to last year, when Jan’s daughter Laura married Mark. Steve made their rings by melting down gold rings from both families. It symbolically represented combining both Laura and Mark's past, and creating a future.

Jan writes:

“When I met Steve, I was amazed at how he could gift **me** the bracelet, without really knowing me at all. I felt honored that he had complete trust in me.

We see the spark of God in each other.

The bracelet gave me the opportunity to give the spark back, and see it grow a thousand times more.

This Elul Story, one of the many that were shared to help us prepare of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, captures the essence of gift giving and receiving.

**Gifts help us create connections.**

When we feel connected to another person, we feel more connected to God. When we feel more connected to our families and to our history we can feel more connected to ourselves.

And when we let ourselves connect to our deeper “soul” selves all these connections fall into place.

So let's explore gift giving.----

When did Jews start giving gifts? ---

The very first gifts were not to other people but given to God. We call them sacrifices, or in Hebrew Korbanot.

Let me take you back 3000 years, you're a farmer in the land of Israel. The rain has fallen and you have had a good crop. You are happy. Not just a little pleased, but ecstatic that you will have food to feed your family, you will have crops to trade or sell. You will have what you need to make it through another year. So what do you do? -- The first thing you do, is take a portion of your food and give it away. You put your first fruits in a basket and you set it aside for God.

You've offered Korbanot. The very name of this kind of gift giving, tells us its purpose. Korbanot are things that draw you nearer to God. Kerev is to draw near.

(Breathe)

Like you, I have received many gifts in my lifetime. The intangible ones, the inadvertent ones and the type that come in the form of people (many of whom are in this room, right now.) And I treasure these gifts, but sometimes gifts in the form of objects leave a lasting impression. They are memory makers, conjuring up stories and helping us to connect to moments in time.

Tonight I would like to focus on 2 physical gifts.

The first gift is this **Kiddush cup**, which was given to me by my grandfather, Justus. He wasn't religious. He was a surgeon, and probably only belonged to a temple because my Nana wanted to belong. But he bestowed this cup to me with ceremony.

He said, “ This Kiddush cup was my grandfather’s and I remember him using it. Now I want you and Steve to use it with your children.”

So if you count my kids, it has been in our family for 6 generations. (Put cup down)

This is obviously a gift of connection to my grandfather and to my immediate past. ||

Because it is a **Kiddush** cup - it is also a connection to my **Jewish** past. That is actually the purpose of saying the Kiddush over the wine. To connect us to the Jewish story. In the Kiddush we

remember Ma’aseh Bereshit- the Creation of the World,

Yitziyat Mitzrayim – the Exodus from Egypt

and Makadesh haShabbat - the gift of Shabbat.

However, my memories of this cup are a bit more recent. I love sitting at the Shabbat table with my kids, or I did when they used to live in the same state as me and I could compel them to be home for dinner. We would make Shabbat and each week and share our “highs and lows”.

“I did really well on a test this week”

or “I didn’t study enough and it showed.”

“I finally mastered a move in soccer.”

“I lost my cool at a colleague.”

“I met a goal in cycling.” (-that’s my big kid!)

We would have a family Shabbat dinner. And without knowing it we were giving our children another gift. The gift of knowing where they came from.

It turns out that children who know where they come from are more resilient. <sup>i</sup>

Professor Marshall Duke of Emory University realized, that "The more children know about their family's history, the **stronger** their sense of control over their lives and the **higher** their self-esteem." It also turns out that “they tend to do better when they face challenges.”

He discovered this by asking, “*Do You Know*” questions and then testing the children’s resilience. Questions such as,

**“Do you know where your grandparents grew up?**

**Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?**

**Do you know where your parents met?**

**(sad) Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?**

**Do you know the story of your birth?”**

“Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?”

Duke concluded, that “The answers have to do with a child’s sense of being part of a larger family.”

Not all of our family stories are even positive ones. But that is okay as it turns out the most helpful narratives include the good and the bad.

“Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital.

But --we also had setbacks. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. You had an uncle who was once arrested! But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.”

Marshall points out,

“It is not the *content* of what is known that is the critical factor, but the process by which these things came to be known.... In order to hear family stories, people need to sit down with one another and not be distracted.

Some people have to talk and some have to listen. The stories need to be told over and over and the times of sitting together need to be multiple and occur over many years.”

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I'm sharing with you one layer of story from this cup, my layer. I wish I'd used this Kiddush cup as an opportunity to ask my Grandfather more questions about his grandfather. To hear the 6 generations of stories. I didn't do that-- but I did receive the message of this cup being gifted to me -

Susie – you are part of something bigger than yourself- our family, and we have made it this far.

### MUSIC!!!! (Meditation)

Take a few moments and think of a gift you have been given that is a **memory maker** for you. Close your eyes-- and picture an object that you treasure and think about the person who gave it to you. It doesn't have to be an expensive item just one that conjures up a story or a connection. I'll give you a minute to listen to your heart.

### PAUSE with Music

I hope you were able to think of a connector gift or will be able to later on.

Judaism didn't need a professor to teach it the importance of helping people to know that they belong to something bigger than themselves. We have holidays and rituals and ritual objects that help remind us of our story, over and over again.

The shofar is a gift that we will hear tomorrow. It connects us to our people's story without words. It touches us on a deep, gut level and reminds us we are not disconnected fragments of humanity, but are part of an extended family. One that tells us who we are and where we belong. One that gives us strength and resilience.<sup>ii</sup>

### (Pick up Cup)

Each time I lift this little cup filled with deep red wine|, and sing the Kiddush, at a holiday meal|, I am connecting to the story of our people, to our family story, and I hope, to

God. I am creating resilient children and adults. And along the way I'm helping to better connect us to ourselves.

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It can be really hard to connect to ourselves. We live in a world that allows us to shut our emotions and avoid our feelings. We can distract ourselves with TV, movies and computers. We text instead of talk. We use Facebook instead of meeting face to face. || How do we stay connected to ourselves and open to **feeling** our emotions?

The Kabbalistic text, the Zohar, teaches- "there is a palace that only opens to tears."

This brings me to gift number 2 – this handkerchief. (pick up)

This is a meaningful gift because my mother-in-law gave it to me to walk down the aisle with at my wedding to Steve. It was a gift to her from her mother. This handkerchief was the "something old" I carried with my bouquet. I didn't actually use it, I wasn't going to blow to my nose on an antique lace hanky. And as Steve pointed out, who could possibly cry-- when marrying him!

But we do cry at so many life cycle events. Obviously we cry at funerals.

And we know why we cry. We are devastated that we will no longer be able to see and touch and hear our loved one or friend.

Although sometimes, we need a hanky because we are laughing so hard as we remember a funny moment. I once went to a funeral where the man who died loved the Grateful Dead. The Rabbi wore a Jerry Garcia tie and they played a Grateful Dead song in the middle of the funeral –

I don't remember if it was "Heaven Help the Fool" or "Ripple" – based on Psalm 23. Most of the stories were about hilarious antics this man had been party to. There was true laughter, but then the tears turned to grief as the knowledge of "And We Bid You Goodnight" crept in.

At funerals we also cry for ourselves as we examine **our lives**. We cry for moments we have **not** stopped to connect with other people, for times when we have **not** been fully

present and **fully alive**. These tears open the floodgates in our hearts which are triggered by life cycle moments.

B'nei Mitzvah Tears exemplify this the most.<sup>iii</sup>

For parents this is a moment of transition. Often the first big party you are throwing, -- and the most expensive!!! Maybe that is why we are crying!

We cry because we are really a grown up now, with a 13 year old, how can this be? We vividly remember our teen years.

We cry because every day we worry just a little bit, about our kids, as they face the scary moments the world throws at them.

We cry because our child has accomplished something really hard. And if they can do this for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, then we know they can do anything to which they set their mind. In that sense we are crying because we know they are going to be alright.

We cry because when else in their lives will they be surrounded by so many people who love and care about all in one place?

We cry because all the words we put in our speeches to our children only skim the surface of how much we love them.

These are some of the reasons parents cry. **Why do Grandparents cry?** For many of the same reasons but for a few others as well.

As grandparents, We cry as past, present and future meld together in this moment. Our baby's baby is becoming a Jewish adult. History is folding in on itself.

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, in his book, *Putting God on the Guest List* quotes a [grand] father who cried profusely at his [grand]daughter's Bat Mitzvah.

“My father and my brother are both deceased. My [grand]kids are named for both of them. And now my [grand]-daughters are both mature Jewish adults. I feel that the cycle is complete. Certain things touch you that persuade you of a Higher Power. For me, it was the memory of people who had died. I tell you, I could hear them taking pleasure in my [grand]-daughter reading the Torah”<sup>iv</sup>

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In this moment, we have a sense that Judaism, the teachings, the faith, the traditions that have shaped us will continue. As Rabbi Salkin says, *“the B’nai Mitzvah ceremony symbolizes that they [parents and grandparents] are **not** the last Jews on earth.”*<sup>v</sup>

We know that this grandchild, has taken his or her place in continuing our tradition, and that there **is** hope for the future.

When we cry at a B’nai Mitzvah, we know that the young adult standing in front of us, knows from **our tears** that we are speaking from the heart. From that place that we wish we could always speak from, but often find too overwhelming.

All these tears open up| a part of our soul that we often try to keep closed.

Judaism teaches us that crying is good for us. I once heard a beautiful phrase

**“tears are a mikveh for the soul.”**

Let’s think about that. The water in a mikveh needs to be natural, flowing water. The purpose of a mikveh is to cleanse us ritually. The water washes away one status and allows us to transition into another. A holier status.

We can view our tears, as our own **portable** mikveh – natural waters that flow from our eyes, and helps us to cleanse our soul. This gives us the ability to unlock a part of our selves that we often keep locked away.

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Tears flow at life cycle events.

When we cry, at these moments, we could use a handkerchief.

(pick up hanky)

So I have my hanky. And I hope to pass it on to my children or grandchildren to carry at their weddings. Although maybe I should hold on to it, as I'll probably be the one who needs it the most.

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These two gifts have helped me to connect to my family, past and present, and have enabled me to connect to myself, to access the parts of **me that really matter**. In making these connections I am drawn closer to God. Linking me to that notion of Korbanot, gifts that bring us closer to God.

I have a challenge for you!

Many of you have already thought about the question “what is the best gift you have ever received” and shared your stories with the congregation in our Elul stories. And if you haven't been following them or are a guest here tonight, I encourage you to find them on our website and be inspired by the many gifts our congregants have received.

But my challenge tonight turns the question around. **What gift can you give that will help someone else to draw closer to their family story, their soul, their history or our history, and to God?**

What can you give?

Of course you are constantly giving gifts of your time, your self, a kind word or a phone call. But what **item** can you give that will serve as a korban- a connector?

And **when** you give the gift --sit down and share the story of your gift and what it means to you and your family or what it might mean in the future.

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May **we** be blessed to **always** recognize the gifts in our lives and to allow them to be memory makers, connectors, korbanot and soul openers.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Marc Angel – Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo. Sept 20, 2016 (NYBR) Jewishideas.org  
Huffington Post 3/32/13 Marshall Duke

NYT –Bruce Feiler 3/15/13

<sup>ii</sup> Marc Angel

<sup>iii</sup> *Wendy Jaffe –B'nai Mitzvah: It OK! Go ahead and cry. Nov 16, 2006 Jewish journal.com*

<sup>iv</sup> Jeffrey Salkin, Putting God on the Guest List. P. 34

<sup>v</sup> ibid