

HHTAY2018- Yom Kippur Morning Sermon

My Father Plus One

Three years ago at TAY, I spoke about my mother. This year I am going to talk about my father plus 1

It is time to revisit a theme; I talked about on the High Holidays in 1981. It was a sermon about who are our heroes. Why is it time to revisit that sermon? Well, there was a shortage of heroes before, but there is a much worse shortage now. It must be bad if you can ask Alexa for role-models and heroes. There are fewer and fewer reliable role models in the areas we have always turned to find those heroes, government and politics, arts and entertainment, sports, etc. I want to return to it not just because things have gotten worse, and not just because heroes and role models are a very important part of our lives; I have another reason. I do believe strongly that our behavior is shaped by what we see others do, that is to say, "more learning is caught than taught; imitation is much more critical than instruction

Few of you will remember my father, He was a travelling salesman, and not around TAY as much as my mother; he died in 1970. In addition to my father one of the people in that original story also plays a significant role in my remarks to you today. You'll get what I mean, but to do so, you have to return with me to April 8, 1954, 64 years ago. I quote from the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission Report, dated January 31, 1955: "Paul Wolkin aged 39, furniture manufacturer, helped to save Jan S. and Lawrence W. Vera, Jr., aged 27 and 2, respectively, and attempted to save Janet L. Vera, aged 12 from drowning, East Montpelier, Vermont, April 8, 1954. A four-door sedan in which Mrs. Janet Vera, two year old son Lawrence and step-daughter Janet were riding skidded from the highway into the Winooski River, submerging upright in cold water 6 feet deep, 20 feet from the bank. Mrs. Vera climbed into the back seat holding Lawrence and Janet. Wolkin, who like many travelling salesmen was always checking his rear view mirror, alighted from his automobile and ran to the bank. Removing only his topcoat and suitcoat he entered the water. He attempted to swim directly to the sedan, but was carried three feet downstream from it by a three-mile-an-hour current, from the melting snow. Swimming as hard as he could against the current, Wolkin progressed to the sedan just as it settled to the bottom. He submerged to the right rear door with great effort, opened the door slightly. He strained himself, experienced sharp pain in his back and his chest as he pressed one leg against the door and opened it wider. Briefly raising his head above water for air he groped into the sedan, got hold of Lawrence and drew him outside. Emerging Wolkin lifted Lawrence onto the roof of the sedan which was covered by water three to six inches deep. After

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taking a deep breath he again submerged and reached into the sedan. He found Mrs. Vera, pulled her from the sedan, raised her to the roof and told her to hold Lawrence. She told Wolkin that the 11 year old girl was still inside. As he lowered his head beneath the water and groped into the sedan, he felt intense pain in his abdomen. He swallowed water and rose to the surface observing that Lawrence and his mother had been swept from the roof and were drifting rapidly downstream. Wolkin was reluctant to give up his search for the 11 year old step-daughter, but realized that the others were in imminent danger of drowning. Swimming 70 feet downstream he overtook Lawrence and Mrs. Vera who was inert and had released Lawrence. He took hold of her and clamped Lawrence to his side. They drifted 30 feet, Wolkin in that distance towing Lawrence and Mrs. Vera to 8 feet from the bank. He tried to get footing on the irregular bottom, but was too weak to stand in the current. Two men were waiting from the bank extended a tree branch to Wolkin and he thrust Lawrence to them. Mrs. Vera slipped from his grab, but was pulled back to the bank by the man who aided Lawrence and Wolkin from the water. The young step-daughter's body was recovered an hour and a half later. Lawrence, Mrs. Vera and Wolkin were all suffering from extreme shock and exposure, and were removed to a hospital where Mrs. Vera was revived. She contracted pneumonia and was confined to bed for a week. Mr. Wolkin was hospitalized three days and suffered from effects of the act for six weeks. All recovered."

My father was the main hero of the version of the sermon I delivered in 1981, when we had only been in Northbrook, IL for a year (previously I had spoken about his heroism when I was an assistant rabbi in Great Neck, NY. Today is the first time I have given this sermon in the synagogue where I grew up. I read it to you as it was reported by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, which was set up originally by Andrew Carnegie to bestow awards for heroism on courageous Americans. Fast forward from April 8, 1954 to April 9, 1994. My 30th Nottingham high school reunion was approaching. I was doing what I guess a lot of us do as we reach mid-life. I was thinking about the past. In the course of all of this nostalgia, it occurred to me that it had been forty years since that rescue. My father had died in January of 1970, but I began to wonder what happened to the Vera family. I did find out and Janet Vera is that someone new, the person who was rescued now joining my father as a heroine the "plus 1" in my sermon today. Permit me to explain why. To do so I have to tell you just a little bit about my search for Janet Vera, this being Janet Vera the mother who was 27 years old you remember at the time of the accident who had a son Lawrence who was almost two years old and she also was at that time pregnant. I did not tell you that.

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Without all the search engines we have today, I started looking at a scrapbook that my mother had made of all of the articles and letters, newspaper clippings that surrounded April 8, 1954, it's a wonderful scrapbook. I love taking it out. I love showing it to our children. It gives me a tremendous feeling of pride and joy. I started looking for addresses in order to find the Vera family. In the course of doing that, I started to reread some of the correspondence between Janet Vera and my parents in the months following April 1954. I read carefully for the first time Janet Vera's letters to my father, and I found a woman of extraordinary faith, extraordinary inner-strength and character. And though her theology and belief in God are in many ways very different from mine, I realized that this woman was a woman of profound faith in God and extraordinary inner strength because of her beliefs.

I share with you only one small part of one of what I call her letters of faith. June 14, 1954, to my father: "I also noticed that you (my father in this case) are dwelling over the loss of our daughter. I have finally come to realize that God's will was done, how and why is what I shall never know, but I do know that she has reached heaven and her place beside God, and many of us shall never be that fortunate. God must have had this all planned and it must have been for the best. It's hard to make one's self realize all that, but I really have to if I care to carry on."

Though the theology is very different from what I believe and what I teach, I found a heroic element in her words, knowing what she has been through from which many life lessons can be learned. Reading these passages and others like them made me even more anxious to find her. In 1994 she was 67 years old. I started checking information based on old addresses in the scrapbook on the backs of envelopes. On Saturday night, April 9, 1994, I tried Malone, New York information based on those 1954 letters. Now I probably don't need to explain very much more about my father's heroism to anyone. On the back of the medal he received from the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission it says "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friend." And, I would say that this event in my young life has had a profound effect on me, and has something to do with the fact that I am standing here before you today. My father saved human lives; part of being a Rabbi is to try to save human souls.

Like my father, Janet Vera demonstrated a commitment to principles, to values of the highest moral caliber, life-affirming values, faith-affirming values of goodness which in both her and my father were exemplary, and what's more-reliable and consistent under the most trying circumstances, something which to say the least is missing today in most of today's so-called heroes. But there

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is something more to the Janet Vera side of the story which came from a phone conversation on April 9th of 1994. Her heroism bears further explanation, because to me there is something very, very special about it that I must tell you. I called Malone, New York information, and believe it or not, there was still a Vera family living at the same address they had lived at 40 years earlier. The Vera who was living there was Lawrence Vera, Jr., now approximately 40 years old, the little boy my father had rescued. I spoke with him at some length; he had led a very difficult life burdened with difficult physical and emotional challenges. We spoke and he told me that his mother Janet had remarried and was now living in Washington, D.C. He gave me her phone number.

On Saturday night, the 9th of April, 1994, 40 years and one day after that original event, I called Janet Vera. She answered the phone, I told her who I was and she told me that just as I had been thinking about that event 40 year ago, so had she been thinking about it. We were both overwhelmed by the feeling that arose from each of us. I started by telling her that we both had sons named after my father. The baby she was carrying when he rescued her she later named Curtis Paul, after my father, and our older son Joshua is named Joshua Paul. She proceeded to tell me about her difficult life, and believe me, her son Lawrence's problems are only one small part of the difficulties she has experienced both physically and in life in general in the last 40 years. I don't have the time to go into all the details, but trust me, the challenges she had experienced since April 8, 1954 are in many ways just as great as that moment in the river in Vermont.

But what struck me most of all, and I did not solicit her answer, I just let her talk. What struck me most of all was that she spoke with the same unremitting faith in God and faith in life, as she had spoken 40 years earlier. The same words, the same sentiments, the same commitment that I derived from this woman's letters were in her voice when we spoke this on the phone. We have since begun to correspond with each other, and the next time I was in Washington, D.C. in 1995 Judy and I had the opportunity to visit with her in person. I was truly moved as well by that face-to-face conversation. What was so exceptional to me was that she has remained the heroine of faith, consistent, reliable, unremitting, not just in the months after April 8, 1954, but throughout the 40 years since and under ongoing and difficult circumstances. It was a life-long commitment, and for that Janet Vera Waslowski deserves a heroism award equal to my father's. Sadly, we ultimately lost touch again.

And, so I ask myself and I ask all of you, where today do we find these kinds of heroes for ourselves and for our children, reliable, consistent, and unremitting in their commitment to values and to role-model behavior? Now, I am not

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condemning all politicians, entertainers or athletes, please and I'm purposely not mentioning any names, but the heroes are too few.

Jewish history and tradition are replete with wonderful heroes and role models that any one of us could call our own. And you are all welcome to adopt my father, and Janet Vera as your heroes, but the best place, the best way to find the most available and effective heroes is not elsewhere. People you read about, people you hear about are useful and important, but there is nothing equal to watching someone else, not on television, but in real life. Therefore, the best place to find the heroes and role models for our children is right here. It's you and it's me; we have to be the heroes, we have to be the role models, we have to be the examples, first and foremost for our children, but also for anyone and everyone whose life intersects with ours. Remember that more learning is caught than taught.

There is a fascinating Jewish concept which underscores this part of life called "marit ayin". It is a little hard to translate, but it suggests that someone is always watching everything we do, and potentially emulating all that we do. Therefore, the Jewish tradition believes that we must never even give the appearance of wrongdoing. That's a pretty awesome responsibility. It's a full time job of self-awareness to be conscious that someone, your contemporary, younger or even older is copying your behavior. To live with that kind of responsibility in mind requires a life-long commitment to live in a responsible way. That's why I brought my father plus Janet Vera into the sermon, that's why I wanted you to meet my father and her, because she had a lifelong commitment she was tested and tried and challenged, but never wavered. She continued to live by her principles. I'm not saying this is easy, and nobody is perfect and maybe that is good role modeling for our children to see us make mistakes, as long as we are willing to admit them.

But the bottom line is that heroism, role modeling, is not something we can leave in the hands of others. It's true in all aspects of our lives; it's true -- morality and ethics, etiquette. It's true in what we eat, it's true in how we dress, and it's true in all areas of Jewish practice. Most of us won't have to jump in a river, most of us won't have to go through what Janet Vera did, but all of us want to raise our children to be good human beings and good Jews. And this concept doesn't apply only to parents and children, it applies to grandparents, it applies to siblings, it applies to synagogue leaders. I can talk, and you can talk until we are "blue in the face". It will ultimately be what other people see us do that is going to make the difference.

Since I am delving into my past, let me illustrate it with one more story that
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Rabbi Mordechai Waxman, my senior Rabbi during my years in Great Neck, told a long time ago, I don't remember them all of his stories; this one I remember. It came to mind again. There was a member of Temple Israel of Great Neck whose observant father had died, and in the course of talking to Rabbi Waxman the rabbi asked him where he was going to sit Shiva to verify what he presumed, that the man would sit in his parent's home on Staten Island. The man said "no", he intended to observe Shiva in Great Neck in his own home. Rabbi Waxman said to him "you know you really should be in Staten Island, that's the tradition your parents would want". The man persisted and stubbornly said "no his brother and sister would be on Staten Island" and that makes it okay for him to do what he wants to do - to be in Great Neck. Rabbi Waxman seeing that he was absolutely determined finally asked him why he was doing this. The man said "I am sitting Shiva in my own home because I want my children to see me doing it".

It's your children seeing you light the Shabbat candles, it's your children seeing you say Kiddush on Friday night, watching you put money in the Tzedakah box regularly not just one day or another day, not just when you feel like it, regularly, reliably, consistently for a lifetime. That will make the ultimate difference in what they do. You all have the image in mind of a little child standing in the bathroom watching his father shave; that kind of thing never ends. It's in every aspect of our lives whether as parents, as human beings out there in this big world. You are being watched. Every deed, every word, everything you do or say means something to somebody else and it's being absorbed and taken in for possible future use.

Say we still have heroes! I will say we still have heroes, but I'll only say it if you'll say it too. We still HAVE heroes, as long as we are ourselves willing to BE heroes?