

Their Names Our Names

I have this terrible vision. I'll tell you about the vision. My vision consists of a sea of glasses: reading glasses, bifocals, sunglasses... There are women's glasses and men's glasses. And within this sea, there are waves upon waves of ever fragile children's glasses, and these waves are crashing from the gates of Dachau to the gates of Treblinka to the gates of Auschwitz.

I imagine nearly six million pairs of glasses, that once allowed our ancestors to see, that once allowed our ancestors to read to loved ones before bed, peruse sacred stories, love letters, glasses that allowed them to look through their precious photo albums, maybe look back at old invitations to anniversary parties and birthdays. I imagine these millions of pairs of glasses. Discarded now. Destroyed. Tossed without any mercy into bins and barrels by stone faced members of the Nazi Party, a people intent on eliminating a people.

I imagine all that the six million might have seen. All that my own relatives might have seen. I imagine the places those eyes might have gazed. Maybe Jerusalem at sunset. Graduation ceremonies perhaps. The latest plays and movies. Maybe one day - somehow - impossibly enough - their own grandchildren, their own great grandchildren. On our very *bimah* for a Bat Mitzvah. For a wedding.

Those whose glasses were taken, whose dignity was taken, whose lives were taken, what would they have gone on to see? What would they have experienced had they somehow survived?

Might they have lived to see us, a people living and learning, thriving, not Ghetto-ized but American-ized, not tormented but liberated? No longer in hiding. No longer in fear, but in relative peace, in a wonderful new building as a new year begins.

I imagine all that I might do now for their sake. I imagine the ways in which I might, as some kind of belated tribute, *see through* all that was once only a vision of theirs, only a dream, more than a dream really. What can I do? What can I do for the sake of those six million who never *could do*?

I imagine this question. I think about it often actually. As a rabbi. As a student. As a son and a brother, as a husband. As a soon-to-be parent. What can I do? What can we truly do?

And just about every time I have these visions and I begin to ask myself these kinds of questions, I find myself returning to an answer. And the answer is: I can devote myself to the future of my people. This will be my personal tribute. I can bring the past to my daily life like fuel. I can allow myself to feel this past urging me. It's the weight of countless would-have-beens. It's the burden of the attacks they endured, the pains they felt, the brutality that rose up like a fire to consume them. I feel it. We still feel it. Inspiring us.

And the way I – and we – can bring this feeling, this sensibility, to life is by working to educate, and prepare, and care for those who represent a new generation, the next generation: our children. In this way we actualize the visions and the dreams of our ancestors. I believe our Jewish past calls us to our Jewish future.

After all, *their* vision, visions that are young and eager and energized, brimming with ideas and plans and determination and *life*, these visions symbolize a people who have – by the grace of God in heaven – persevered.

And we can help them. We can help them, as part of our Jewish mission, to use their vision and their life for the good, for the Jewish, for the moral. We can help them apply their skills and passions and strengths in a way that will speak to not only good character, but good Jewish character. We can help them apply their skills and passions and strengths in a way that will speak to not only good communal involvement, but good Jewish communal involvement.

Our Hebrew High School program, for instance, is a bastion of discussion, safety, and inclusion. It is a place of action and interaction. Eighth through tenth graders meet on Tuesday nights from 6:40-8:00. Eleventh and twelfth graders meet once a month, on Monday nights. One hour and twenty minutes. Eighty minutes removed from anything akin to gossip or bullying. Eighty minutes removed from competition. Eighty minutes that blend community service, dialogue, and a very real sense of personal growth. Eighty miraculous minutes that will, on a regular basis, allow your children *to see* a Judaism that is theirs, a sense of heritage that is theirs, a sense of connection that is their own.

Our youth group programs, JORTY, the junior youth group, and SORTY, the senior youth group, each blend the educational and the social, the very overtly Jewish with the more subtly Jewish: holiday parties, museum trips, shows, baseball games, social action... Those who take part in these programs come away with a sense of Judaism that is fresh and is vital.

The youth groups, the Hebrew High School, our wonderful religious school under the direction of Lauren Resnikoff, these are places that allow us, all at once, as a Temple, to hold strong to our past, and even stronger to the future.

Now, in addition to having this terrible vision of mounds of glasses, I happen to have terrible vision. Without my contact lenses I may as well be in the dark. Lost. I fumble for the alarm clock. I fumble reaching for my glasses. It is maddening and disorienting.

It is actually my poor vision that recently led me to believe I had become the punch line of a joke. I mean, it's not totally out of the question that someone would think to prank the rabbi.

I came in from a run one day and checked the mailbox. No I wasn't wearing the robe at the time.

This is, I will tell you now, in every way, a true story.

And in the mailbox I found the standard series of envelopes – bill, bill, junk, bill, you may have won a million dollars, junk, bill... etc.

At the bottom of the pile, however, was a curious envelope, a larger envelope, not addressed to me or to Lisa.

The envelope was addressed to Herbert David. This, incidentally, is not my name. Or Lisa's.

I stared at the envelope and tried to discern its contents without opening it. I held it up to the light. I shook it once or twice. I looked at the name. I *stared* at the name: Herbert David.

It was the middle of the day. On this particular day it was one hundred degrees outside. Yet I stood, frozen. Dumbfounded.

Herbert David was the name of my father's father, my grandfather. With just a few possessions, his glasses, a few items of clothing, some books, some hope, he left Germany. He left as all four of my grandparents left Germany. That is, just in time. Though not everyone in my family was as fortunate. And Herbert David, my grandfather, passed away twenty eight years ago already.

I couldn't quite make out the return address. Finally I opened it. And inside I found... a pair of glasses - nothing more.

I held these glasses in my hand. They looked like they could have been his. Maybe they had been. Maybe he had actually worn them, I thought to myself, in coming to this country, with little sense of the language, in raising my father in their small home in Cincinnati, in reading the paper each morning, even in closing his eyes as he dozed off at night, the radio humming, thinking of what had so nearly become of him. And by extension my father. And by extension me. And by extension the child Lisa and I are about to have.

I thought of words like connection. I thought of words like miracle. My mind looked for words that do not yet exist. Could there be a single word which captures the weight of then and the grand impossibility of now? Could there be a single word that captures the breadth of his life and its impact now on my own?

Like the image of mounds of crushed glasses, this story, it forced me to think. It forced me to think about how I can allow my story - our stories - to encompass far more than those images directly in front of us, but past images, and future images.

Do we let the past in? Can we find a way, as Jews, to wear lenses that allow us to, all at once, to see those who came before us, in all of their complicated once-upon-a-time splendor, and those who will be as well, in all of their perfect promise?

And for a long time that's what I thought the entire episode must mean: That those glasses were sent to me, somehow, by some kind of postal angel, so that we might think on this Rosh HaShanah about the ways in which our past must be part of our present. I had been sent the glasses so that we could see that really there is no past and present, but simply an extraordinary on-going narrative, of which we are all a part, all of us. We are part of a family that is as far-reaching and astoundingly circular as the Torah itself. His glasses become my glasses. Their names our names. Their *seder* plate ours.

For a long time I thought it was all pretty...clear. I shared this episode with some of you when it first happened. Then I thought more about it. And I slowly came to realize that the story *is* about all of this, but maybe it's about a little more too.

So I will say this in closing. I now believe that this story, like every story, is about the very idea of meaning. It is about the way in which we make meaning, each of us. It's about the way we might actively bring a sense of wonder and gratitude, a sense of sacred meaning, into our daily lives, not traveling blindly, but remembering the inherent sense of the awesome that is life.

Glasses in the mail are indeed more than glasses in the mail. An anniversary is much more than an anniversary. Family dinner, an overdue conversation, a little one's first birthday, her first day of nursery school, holiday celebrations, a victory, a *simcha*, a quiet happiness, these are moments that are about so much more, moments to treasure, truly treasure, inspire our children to treasure.

May we in this coming year open our eyes wide to the wonder and see all of the beauty. For all of them. And for every one of us.  
Amen.