

Sh'mini Atzeret 5767
Mr. Kaufman

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah.

This morning, I want to tell you about the “candy man” at my dad’s shul. That’s not a paid position, or even elected; it’s sort of self-appointed. Many synagogues have a person, usually older, who hands out candy to the children during Shabbat morning, and in my dad’s shul it was Morris Moishe Kaufman. But he also did much more. I remember his reciting the *El Maleh Raḥamim*, the memorial prayer for the six million at the Yizkor service on Yom Kippur. As a survivor, Moishe filled his chanting with all the emotion he could draw upon. In his voice filled with the gravel of years and the Sighetian accent of his youth, he poured out his heart to the absent God asking that those who found no peace in this world would find shelter, security and eternal life in God’s embrace in the next world. Sadly, Morris - Mr. Kaufman, as I called him - passed away this summer.

A few weeks ago, the New York Times published a moving article about a missing suitcase. A Jewish man in Paris was fighting with the Holocaust Museum in Auschwitz for his father’s suitcase.

After the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of World War II, a suitcase was found fairly well intact at that place of hell. Clearly it was an important piece to add to the story of those who came to Auschwitz and never left.

Years later, the son of the owner of that suitcase, who was only three when his father died, discovered that his father’s suitcase, the only item of his father’s that remained after his murder at Auschwitz, had been preserved. It does seem right and proper that it be returned to him. He is, after all, the son. But the museum claims the luggage belongs to the world as a silent witness to the horror that transpired. It will not return the suitcase to him. So the matter stands as it is adjudicated in the French courts. To whom does memory belong?

My father, Rabbi Stephen Lerner, shared with me his moving eulogy for Mr. Kaufman. But he had omitted some of the most significant details of his life: that his first wife and infant daughter were murdered at Auschwitz. Mr. Kaufman’s family, his second family, requested that my father omit that, and my father complied with that request. To whom does memory belong?

Not all the stories of the Jewish people’s magnificent and unique and disquieting history are preserved, of course. Sometimes all that remains is a memory of a memory, recalled occasionally with pride or more often with indifference: non-Jews talking of their descent from rabbis; Gwyneth Paltrow’s forbears who were Hasidic masters; the Colombian UN Ambassador, a strong

Catholic, referring to his great grandfather as the hazzan of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York.

An interesting trend relates to those who convert to Judaism, and, in the course of their studies, realize that they have Jewish ancestors or they have a family tradition that their great-grandfather was Jewish, but no more is known. Did these people flee their pasts and melt into the larger world? Were they expelled from the Jewish world of their parents when they intermarried? Did these people think they had shed their Jewish roots only to be the subject of family whispers about the Jew in their midst? One way or another, most of these people have been lost to us.

Some have had their Jewish roots totally and successfully suppressed. It must have occurred thousands of times and, for the most part, no one discovers these Jewish roots. But, if one wants to become a larger player in the world - in politics, in entertainment, in sports – everything about the person becomes newsworthy. Researchers have a way of turning up details that the subject does not even know.

Thus John Kerry learns that his grandfather was Jewish. Madeline Albright discovers that both her parents were Jewish. George Allen, a southern son with the Confederate flag on his sleeve, discovers the significant Jewish roots of his mother. Not surprisingly, he is not happy about that revelation.

I don't know about Kerry, but it is hard to imagine that a woman whose field is international relations, a scholar like Albright, would somehow not be interested in discovering more about her past and about the lacunae in her family's recent history. Allen's lack of curiosity is not as surprising.

And maybe we should not be surprised all that much. Curiosity is not a hot item today. Many seem more concerned about reality television than their own real life!

It's unfortunate that most do not explore their own histories. When Allen's mother apologized to him, was it for her hiding her pedigree or for her having such a pedigree? This is sad - her family, the Lumbrosos, played an important role in Tunisian and Italian Jewish history, both Jewish and general, during the past four centuries.

The Encyclopedia Judaica mentions nine members of the family who were of importance in Tunisian, Italian or Jewish life. Isaac ben Jacob Lumbroso was chief rabbi of Tunis around 1750, a scholar whose work *Zera Yitzhak* was a commentary on many sections of the Talmud. He was quite wealthy and encouraged many distinguished rabbis and many rabbinical students whom he supported to live in his city. He played a significant role in the general life of Tunis, appointed by the *bey*, the ruler, to be his collector.

The last Lumbroso mentioned in the Encyclopedia Judaica is Alberto Emmanuelle Lumbroso of Turin, Italy who became a distinguished historian of Napoleonic times and who donated his personal library to become the core of the National Library in Turin in 1904 after the library's collection had suffered terrible losses in a fire.

By the twentieth century, the Jewishness of many in the family was both superficial and weak. Thus, when Mrs. Allen saw her father taken to a concentration camp, this vague pride in the Jewishness of the Lumbroso line did not outweigh the desire to live. Thus she came to the United States, and her Jewish roots were rolled away into oblivion. And what became of memory?

What Madeline Albright's family and George Allen's mother did has not been unusual in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When the going gets rough, some Jews get going.

Mr. Kaufman was not such a Jew. He emerged from the horror of the Holocaust, married a woman named Rose, had two sons, spent time in Israel, in France, and finally in the United States, first in The Bronx and for many years in New Jersey. He became a distinguished high-class tailor, with people like Jackie Kennedy as his clients. But he was to know more tragedy. His older son was killed at the start of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

But he remained a Jew to his core. However, it is not surprising that he and his family did not live a very observant Jewish life after WWII. He focused on working as hard as he could to support his family.

But then something happened. With his retirement, Mr. Kaufman found his way back to the synagogue every Shabbat. With his dapper dress, his pleasant manner, his candy for the young, he became an integral part of the shul, and the synagogue became a second family for him. His davening exuded old-time Yiddishkeit and provided a sense of warmth and inspiration. He was the real thing.

For many contemporary Jews, the respect for our past, the need to commemorate the Holocaust, the sense that we must keep the Jewish enterprise going for the sake of past generations is all too common and completely understandable. I share it to a large degree, as I am sure many of you do as well. But it is not sufficient.

While most of us do not possess the richness of Mr. Kaufman's Jewish experience in what was the shtetl-like world of Transylvanian Jewry, American Jewry is not without resources of its own. In speaking of Noah, the Torah says: "*Noah Ish Tzaddik, Tamim Hayah B'Dorotav* – Noah was righteous in his time," but the rabbis add that perhaps in Abraham's time he would not have been so

righteous. Well, maybe we can't live in the intense, hothouse world of Eastern European shtetl Jewry, but we can and should live as intensely as we can as Jews in this time and this place.

We have the freedom to proceed as far along the path of Jewish commitment as we wish. We can, with study, wrestle with our tradition to understand it more fully; we can with moral and intellectual determination commit ourselves to live it more comprehensively, to add one major mitzvah to our weekly or preferably our daily pattern of life.

While Mr. Kaufman has been called to the *olam haba*, the world to come, may his life inspire us to uncover the greatness of our tradition.

As we turn our thoughts to our own loved ones, family and friends whom we remember during Yizkor, may their narratives motivate us to deepen our Yiddishkeit.

May we embrace their memories, ever aware that we can shape the memories we leave behind.

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