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From: Morris Allen <mojo210al@icloud.com>
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Subject: One Person's Response to Communal Fear 7.14.20

WAGON WHEEL CENSUS 5 Trucks 4 Cars 2 Runners 1 Walker 1 Bicyclist

The story is told about the group of friends who know each other so well that instead of telling jokes, they simply shout out a number. And as a result, each of the friends knows the punch line associated with that number. A new person joined their group, saw the friendly banter and after someone had yelled out #2 and people were rolling on the ground, they decided to do the same. #2 and no one laughed. Puzzled, they asked what they did wrong? "Buddy, some people just know how to tell a joke better than you!" We all have our punch lines. My #1 go to story about my past as a congregational rabbi was the one about my one transformative encounter with Rabbi Hershy Matt (zl). He told me the following punch line that he learned from his congregant and friend, Is Segal(zl). "rabbi, you have the opportunity to touch people's souls, I sell window dressings for a living. Now stop worrying about yourself and go back and touch those souls." That fateful walk home from shul in October 1987 provided me with a new understanding of my role and my life.

I tell you that because there is a steep price which comes from choosing the path of becoming a clergy—regardless of religious denomination or theological structure that defines your path to the Divine. It is never simply a job. And even when the "job" part is over, the part of having touched a soul remains. It happened to me again last night when after dinner I looked at my email only to see that Catie B. had died. At 33, her death struck me as way too young and way too filled with sadness. I first met her in the basement of the Talmud Torah as she walked around with her mother and her father and Susan Cobin showing she and her brother the building. Back then, our communal leadership understood that educational institutions were portals to the community they served. (Wish that wisdom was still evident in decision makers and power folks. Now they believe institutions are simply portals into the interior of the institution itself and not the community as a whole—but I digress...). In any event, walking around the rooms that once contained the teaching rooms of Mr. Page(Mar Daf), Barbara Glaser, and Yosi (ok-for the not knowing -Yosi Gordon), I came to see a young girl filled with curiosity, wonder and a whole lot of resistance. I don't know why Phyllis and I were down there—probably having a meeting with one of the teachers about one of our kids. In any event, shortly thereafter, Catie B and her mom and brother found their way to our shul. And until shortly before I left the pulpit itself, I had the opportunity to touch their souls and to impact pieces of their life.

It is a heavy price we clergy pay for that opportunity. It often means that successful clergy know that their calling takes primacy in their lives and that schedules are lovely but necessarily so—they are

fluid. I still remember a dear friend of mine from Rabbinical School who thought for years as a young boy that the cemetery was also Disneyland. Every Sunday his father would promise him that they would go to Disneyland, and invariably they ended up in a cemetery as his father did a funeral or an unveiling. He learned well, however, and the souls he has touched as a result have been transformed in the process. For me, seeing the news of Catie B.'s death, brought back so many memories and pained me so greatly. Phyllis reminded me of the work that our shul did in getting her to Ramah, the partnerships we built with the camp in getting her there. The High School graduation party in her mom's backyard, the last meeting with her in her own apartment about ideas for helping others she was working on. And then, of course, the formal relationship ended. In the world in which we live, where everything is sadly monetized, connection to community is about dues and assessments and salaries and compensation. I don't think the early clergy saw it that way—however the biblical priests did do pretty well from those sacred communal BBQ's held in the Temple environs. But the tragedy and shortsightedness of monetizing "membership" can never replace the relationships that existed, and which continue to exist even in abstentia. As I was walking [this morning](#) and remembering Catie B. riding her bike and getting from place to place on her own, exuding a kindness that was evident behind her sometimes sullenness, I kept hearing a paraphrasing of a Joni Mitchell song in my mind. Joni sings, "*Love is touching souls, for surely you touched mine, 'cause part of you pours out of me in these lines from time to time.*" What I heard in my mind was "the rabbinate (or any clergy) is touching souls for surely you touched mine 'cause part of you pours out of me in these lines from time to time." I realized at some point in my life that the continued daily engagement with a religious community was compromising my soul in that I couldn't always feel the soul of the other whose trust was given over to me simply as a result of my position in their life. And yet, I treasure all the relationships and the souls that I touched—and I imagine that until the end of my days, the death notices of a person whose soul I was able to touch, will still touch my very own. May Catie B's memory only be for a blessing. In the brevity of her life, she taught me about the values of blessing. May her family find comfort and may all of us be grateful for the interconnectedness of our lives that these webs have created. Morris

(For new readers, these are daily musings written in an unedited fashion immediately after finishing my morning walk. I simply write about what occupies my mind during the 45 or 50 minutes of walking)

Sent by my iPad