

Be a Good Ancestor

Yom Kippur Morning
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I'd like to tell you a true story about Rabbi Bernard Lipnick who retired after 40 years of distinguished service at B'nai Amoona, the premier Conservative synagogue in my hometown of St. Louis, MO.¹ Upon retirement, he and his wife Harriet decided to move to Idyllwild, CA -- and they quite literally *made* their home there. They chose a site in the midst of the San Jacinto mountains, and Bernie hand-built their home on the forested side of a mountain at an altitude of 6,000 feet. He did the designing, the carpentry, the lighting -- all with the help of just a few workers. The process took two years, during which time the Lipnicks lived in an R.V., a farewell gift from his congregation after his tremendous tenure -- again, true story.

The Lipnicks paid attention to every detail -- measuring all of their furniture, the things that would make a "house" feel like "home"; planning windows and skylights to capture the most natural light and the best of their scenic views. Rabbi Lipnick's greatest wish was to be able to get up in the morning, settle down on the couch in the living room to read his newspapers, and look up to see the canopy of trees through the skylights. But without walls, a ceiling or a couch, he had to make his best guess as to where that would be.

When the house was finally finished -- the skylight installed and the couch in its place, the first pot of coffee made and the newspaper delivered -- Rabbi Lipnick lay down on the couch, let out a deep sigh, and looked up expectantly after all of his hard work to the beautiful sight of ... a *dead* tree. Imagine his deep disappointment. Actually, he was beyond disappointed -- he was upset! It's a depressing thing to have to look out every morning and see a dead tree. But there wasn't much he could do about it. He thought of cutting down the tree, but its trunk was located on a part of the mountain that wasn't his to touch. He considered several different ways of obscuring the view -- a curtain over the skylight, a shutter -- but that would defeat the whole purpose of having a skylight in the first place. Could he move the couch? Not easy when the whole house has been designed around it. Move the skylight? Even harder.

That dead tree was a constant source of irritation to Rabbi Lipnick. Every morning when he sat down on the couch to read his paper, it bothered and depressed him. He tried to put it behind him and move on, but no matter what he did, he couldn't escape it.

Then one day he went on a group hike with a forest ranger who, when they came to a dead tree, began discussing the life cycles of nature.

The ranger asked, "Does anyone know what this is?"

Bernie smirked. "I know all too well," he said. "It's a dead tree."

¹Thank you to Jack Riemer for first introducing me to Rabbi Lipnick's story.

But the ranger corrected him. "No," he said. "Out here, it's what we call a snag. You may think this is just a dead tree, but there's really no such thing as death in nature. This tree performs extremely important functions even though it is dead, because there is a whole class of creatures -- flora and fauna, and critters as we call them -- who depend on these snags for their homes. Some of these animals and birds can't make their homes in living trees because the bark is too hard. But they *can* make their homes in these snags.

"And so a tree, after it dies, becomes a city of refuge for many living creatures. Its bark, its wood, its crevices -- all become home, and provide shelter and food, to all kinds of living things. In fact, if there were no such thing as a snag, a whole classification of plants and many different kinds of critters wouldn't exist; the chain of forest ecology would break.

"Eventually," the ranger continued, "after a long time (for nature is never in a hurry), the snag falls to the earth. Gradually, it decomposes, becoming inseparable from the rest of the soil around it -- but enriching it, enabling still other living things to grow out of it and be nurtured by it."

While the other hikers gazed around the mountain during the ranger's spiel, Bernie listened in rapt attention. For the first time, he understood that the dead tree he'd been looking at every morning, the reason for his profound annoyance and irritation, had a beauty and purpose that had escaped his awareness. The next morning, he looked at his tree differently. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that it taught a lesson -- not only about nature, but about human nature. *I'm in the waning stages of my life*, he considered. *Someday, I too will be like that dead tree. And I wonder, will I be able to provide nurture and nourishment and shelter to those around me after I'm gone? Will I be a snag, or just a dead tree?*

Rabbi Bernard Lipnick died just over two years ago. Judging by the overflow crowd that attended his funeral service at the congregation in St. Louis he had served for forty years; judging by the preschool he founded, which later developed into the Solomon Schechter Day School on what is now the Bernard Lipnick Campus of B'nai Amoona; judging by the two camping programs he developed that continue to cultivate positive and strong Jewish identities in Jewish youth, both in the St. Louis area and in Israel, I don't think there's any doubt as to the answer to his question.

Another true story: Herbert Zipper was a renowned conductor and composer. As a young musician, he was interned by the Nazis in Dachau where he formed a secret orchestra to play for his ravaged fellow inmates. Clandestinely, he put together eleven makeshift boxes wrapped with taught strings to form musical instruments. Later, as an accomplished conductor -- first in New York, then Chicago and Los Angeles -- he organized musicians, year after year, to play concerts for underprivileged children.

A few months before his death, at age ninety-two, an interviewer asked: "What's your most important goal?" Maestro Zipper smiled gently, then answered: "My ambition is to be a good ancestor."

To be a good ancestor -- to look through the leafless branches of a snag and ask, what will I leave behind to nurture those that come after me? What a perspective. In an age threatening to drown us in technology, to bury us with a house full of junk and time squandered, what an ambition. To be a good ancestor means consciously deciding that our children, and our children's children, will bear more than just our genes. That they'll bear the fruit of our hearts and minds, the legacy of our souls. That they'll come looking for us, listening for us for when we're gone ... and they'll find us, in the values we have bequeathed to them and the institutions that safeguard and perpetuate them.

Rabbi Harvey Fields tells of a man who was taken by his grandfather for his fifteenth birthday celebration to participate in the civil rights March on Montgomery in 1965. Not a day goes by that he doesn't hear his grandfather telling him, "Louis, to be a Jew is to act for social justice." And so he pushes himself to do just that.

He tells of another woman who sent her three daughters an unforgettable boxed invitation. It included a wire hanger, a round-trip ticket to Washington, D.C., and this note: "Join me for the Women's Walk for Choice on the Mall. I want my grandchildren to know that we stood together for the right of women to have a choice, and never to be put through the pain I once suffered." Each of her daughters and grandchildren, including the boys, has a framed copy of that invitation. "It reminds us of who is looking through our eyes," one of her daughters told Rabbi Fields.

Of course there are many others who have deliberately decided to become "good ancestors", to leave a remarkable presence living in others. Some have taken their families to Israel. Others are creating ethical wills. Some have generously attached their names to important visions and causes. Others are leaving their imprint on institutions. They all understand, as author Albert Pine has written, that "what we have done for ourselves dies with us. What we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal."

I remember my great-grandpa Ben as a sweet man with a quiet sense of humor. I have memories of family brunches when he would teach me to play cards, the den where he would settle in to watch pro-wrestling on TV, and the substantial collection of clown figurines he had amassed over the years. But my most enduring memory is of his involvement with the Shriners. For as long as anyone can remember, Grandpa Ben marched in the Shriners band and every year the family would go to watch him and the other performers in the Shriner Circus. By the time I was old enough to remember those events, Grandpa Ben was no longer able to walk the full perimeter of the stadium. He would begin playing with the band and then cut across to meet up with them again at the end. But eventually, the big highlight, he would come join us in the stands where we sat, letting the great-grandkids take turns trying on his *real* Shriners fez. Too cool.

Grandpa Ben died when I was in fifth grade. I've come to have his clarinet -- though I can't play it (yet) -- as well as one of my favorite monkeys from his collection. But here's the inheritance I treasure most: The memory of his commitment to the children of Shriners Hospital who benefited from his involvement. It inspired me, when becoming Bat Mitzvah, to dedicate my mitzvah project helping the same cause. It pushed me, while looking for a place in Israel where I could practice my Hebrew, to spend regular visits with an Israeli youth receiving ongoing

medical treatment. And it reminds me, when I consider how my son is forming *his* earliest memories, of the importance of involving him now, and throughout his life, in the causes that matter to me most.

Rabbi Chaim Stern has written: "I am not alone on the journey. My loved ones are with me; the teachers of my youth are a real presence in me. O that I may be such a presence for those who come after me."

Midrash teaches that before God was willing to give us the Torah, he asked those gathered at the base of Sinai what they could offer as guaranty that they would uphold and cherish the tradition they were about to receive. The Israelites instinctively said, "Our ancestors. None were more righteous than Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob, Leah and Rachel. We'll remember them and cherish the Torah." But God said, no. "It is because of their righteousness that you merit the Torah, but they are not sufficient guaranty that you will uphold it."

So the Israelites huddled together and offered instead their scholars and sages, but again God was not satisfied. "It is through their study and teaching that you will come to understand the Torah and appreciate the wisdom of its guidance," God said, "but they are not sufficient guaranty that you will uphold it."

So the Israelites caucused one more time to consider what else they might offer. And in one last attempt, they said, "Our children." This time God was pleased. For we might learn Torah from our teachers, merit it because of our ancestors, but only when we see *ourselves* as teachers and strive to *be* good ancestors can we ensure that our Jewish tradition, the principles and commitments we value so deeply, will outlast us and endure.

As we use this sacred day of Yom Kippur to glean perspective and inspiration for the year to come, may we commit to use our days such that, both living and beyond, we will provide nurture and nourishment to those around us. May our actions be guided by the desire to leave something for those who will come after us and remember our names -- something that makes our names worth remembering. May it be our ambition to be good ancestors. And let us say: Amen.