Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Bouquet of Music

Richard Klin · Wednesday, August 10th, 2022

It was impossible for Ezzy to remember a time without the Grandfather and the Grandmother. He was so little during those confusing, menacing years of the Second World War; the grandparents an abstract concept lodged in a faraway, terrifying realm. After the war he and his younger sister, Deborah, were presented with a grandmother, a grandfather, both of whom had seemingly materialized out of nowhere. A short time later he found himself walking in the direction of the squat, yet surprisingly spacious building that was Shaarei Rachamim, the Orthodox shul, hand in hand with a taciturn, Yiddish-speaking old man with ramrod-straight posture.

The bond with the Grandfather and Grandmother had been effected rapidly. It was the Grandfather's idea that Ezzy costume himself as King Ahasuerus for the Purim carnival, an elaborate success that incorporated a long cape culled from the House of Pants's remnants—the House of Pants being the Father and Mother's modest, but profitable, business that catered mainly to the congregants of Shaarei Rachamim, some Italians from Huron Street, and members of a Serbian fraternal association– a turban constructed from a towel, a shiny silver cardboard sword, and elaborate whiskers drawn right onto his face, courtesy of the Mother's eyebrow pencil.

And then it felt as if the grandparents had always been there.

***

In the summers, the Grandfather, Ezzy, and Deborah undertook almost daily excursions to the little storefront ice cream place a short block away, the Grandmother positioned by the front window of their house on Jarrow Boulevard, gazing out in apprehension at the nebulous dangers one could encounter on this quick journey. The owner was Ukrainian, not Jewish, he and the Grandfather always conversing politely in Ukrainian, the owner unfailingly clad in the same sleeveless undershirt, his broad smile revealing sparkling gold teeth.

Shaarei Rachamim had no rabbi. It was the Grandfather himself who did the *leining*, the elaborate chanting of the shabbes prayers, standing tall and imposing up on the bimah, tallis draped around his shoulders, his strong voice carrying throughout the entire synagogue.

Ensconced amid the women's section, the Grandmother would gaze down at her husband with pride. All the eyes of the shul were upon him. And she could not help but to notice how handsome he was, such a contrast to the other men: Mr. Applebaum, for example, with his well-worn suit and traces of stubble. Mr. Applebaum was the gabbai of Shaarei Rachamim. A gabbai usually functioned as an all-around assistant, but Mr. Applebaum's sole function as gabbai consisted of

vainly trying to quiet down the noisy women's section during shabbes prayers. This was done by yelling out "*Qviet! Qviet!*" in his thick accent and piercing voice.

The Grandfather brimmed with refinement, erudition, sartorial elegance. His eyes were a blazing blue, a not-incidental physical feature that had certainly factored into his survival during the war years, when—separated from the Grandmother and other family members—he had used his goyishe complexion and proficiency in the German language to evade the Angel of Death.

The Grandfather had a long-ago first wife who had died in childbirth. This wife was never mentioned. The Grandfather had an adult daughter and two grandchildren in Poland, their existence never mentioned, their names unknown, lost in the war. The Grandfather also had siblings, nieces and nephews, business partners.

All these people had disappeared. The Grandfather, at times, referred to some of them in brief, oblique asides. One knew not to press for details, to glean bits of information by inference. He had more yahrzeits—the commemorative memorial for family members—than anyone else at Shaarei Rachamim. These were regular parts of the shul's routine; yahrzeit upon yarhzeit for the Grandfather.

The Grandfather stood, completely immersed in his chanting. From his position up on the bimah, he seemed to blend in with the large paintings of Eretz Yisrael—the Land of Israel–that ringed the walls of the shul: The lush, rolling hills of the Galilee. Olive trees. A desert scene. The Western Wall amid the tangle of Jerusalem's alleyways.

The Children of Israel wandered the desert for years upon years. Moses was in direct contact with God. The walls of Jericho fell. Angels appeared. There were prophets, kings, flawed heroes, miracles. It was as if the Grandfather had stepped straight out of that world, an emissary from an ancient, holy time.

***

When it came time for Ezzy's bar mitzvah, Shaarei Rachamim found itself in an odd perch. In Poland, a bar mitzvah was strictly a religious commemoration. While certainly not devoid of a celebratory aspect, a bar mitzvah was a coming of age only in the delineated religious sense: The age when the boy became a member of the adult religious community and assumed the responsibilities of a religious male. A large-scale, festive bar mitzvah was alien to Shaarei Rachamim. The shul drew heavily on immigrants; especially on immigrants who had come after the war, like the Grandfather and the Grandmother. Younger congregants, like Ezzy, were in short supply.

The larger, more modern Emeth Shalom was really the fertile terrain for celebratory bar mitzvahs, not Shaarei Rachamim. Emeth Shalom's rabbi reeked of cologne and a false bonhomie. Most unforgivably, he wore flashy rings. In honor of these gaudy rings and his irritating, pompous demeanor, some had dubbed him Rabbi Liberace.

And the Grandfather was very aware that many of Emeth Shalom's congregants, in direct contravention of the laws pertaining to shabbes observance, drove to the synagogue. Some parked their cars a few blocks away and made a show of walking the remaining distance. Those sort of tricks fooled nobody. This was all the Grandfather needed to know about Emeth Shalom.

In theory, Shaarei Rachamim was certainly not opposed to the more festive bar mitzvah, nor was it an absolutely foreign concept. Emeth Shalom and its goings-on were not completely terra incognita. Shaarei Rachamim, in fact, had been the site of the bar mitzvah of the older brother of Ezzy's friend, Lenny. This had transpired when Ezzy was much younger and the memories of it were fleeting.

He certainly remembered Lenny's brother, a completely humorless didact who, after his bar mitzvah, became determined to move to Israel and join a kibbutz. Accordingly, he ponderously insisted on using his Hebrew name, Yitzhak, on all occasions, lecturing anyone within listening distance on the Jewish nation's rebirth after 2000 years and quoting Herzl or Ben-Gurion. Even Lenny, his sisters, and his mother and father were required to address him as Yitzhak. And then Yitzhak had taken umbrage at the traditional Ashkenazi mode of Hebrew pronunciation that predominated Shaarei Rachamim. For a time, his loud, exaggerated modern Israeli Hebrew could be heard above the shul's shtetl diction. Yitzhak, in fact, refused to say the word *shul* at all, taking to referring to Shaarei Rachamim by the Hebrew word for synagogue, *beyt knesset*. He refused to utter the standard Yiddish *gut shabbes*, practically yelling out the Hebrew *shabbat shalom* at the least prompting. Yitzhak, as anyone might have foreseen, had never made it to the kibbutz. And as far as Ezzy knew, he'd never been to Israel at all, finishing college, working as an accountant, and getting engaged.

Ezzy's own bar mitzvah, he came to realize some time after the fact, could be viewed as a bookend, coming right at the end of his childhood and before the advent of the new, vibrant era of his teen life that was just around the corner: Enlightenment in the form of Elvis, the Electrono-tones, Buck and Wing's "Atomic Passion," a song that was quite possibly the very pinnacle in the history of music. A whole new world was to be ushered in, which even had its own iconography: The green, orange, and yellow of Vik records. The red and black of Quality records. The simple black-and-white of Fawn. Carlton Records. Mercury. Apex. Bo-Kay: *Each record a bouquet of music.* All of this, of course, was to come.

***

A *chazzan*–a cantor–was employed to teach him the complicated, twisty haftorah portion he was required to chant. For months there were steady visits to Cantor Wissotsky's house, an overly friendly man who made an endless series of incomprehensible jokes, like the one about the man who asked the best way to get to Carnegie Hall. Cantor Wissotsky's two little kids, a boy and girl, sat glued to the television in the living room, mesmerized by Professor Poltroon's show, which Ezzy remembered from radio. Professor Poltroon always concluded his show with an endlessly futile attempt to soup up his old clunker of a jalopy, resorting to pouring a container of soup on his own head. It was something that Ezzy had found very funny when he was younger and, deep down, still found amusing. Cantor Wissotsky's two kids, as far as Ezzy could tell, cracked not a smile, nor seemed remotely amused when Professor Poltroon dramatically souped up his car, the two children staring fixedly at the television screen.

Ezzy and Cantor Wissotsky sat crammed in the little kitchen, going over the haftorah portion, with the kids occupying the larger living room. Sometimes Mrs. Wissotsky made the crowded kitchen even more cramped; opening drawers, putting plates away, getting her kids a snack.

Ezzy's parents did take steps to ensure that his bar mitzvah–governed as it was by Shaarei Rachamim's traditional strictures–was not devoid of celebration. The Father, with appropriate

solemnity, took Ezzy to the House of Pants for new slacks. There was a good deal of time spent picking out an appropriate suit jacket, shirt, tie. Most of the shopping commenced at the mammoth Levenson's department store on Tecumseh Avenue. Levenson's carried everything, featuring a drab lunch counter, always presided over by the same unfriendly middle-aged waitresses who seemed fanatically withholding when it came to the dispensing of napkins.

The Mother, Deborah, and the Grandmother required brand-new dresses. The dresses had been purchased–where else–at Levenson's, and were the product of endless debate and a series of consultations with the aged Mrs. Levenson and her croaking, old lady voice. When Ezzy was forced to go to Levenson's, it felt as if he'd been consigned there for eternity, kidnapped by space aliens and trapped forever by some mystical twist of time, like in those movies he'd see at the Skyway Drive-in.

***

Ezzy was set to receive his own tallis and tefillin, courtesy of the Grandfather, who had taken a great deal of care in his selection, even traveling out of town–something that the Grandfather rarely did–to a special religious store that specialized in such items. This was a mild revelation to Ezzy. It had never occurred to him that a tallis and tefillin could be purchased. He had always assumed those sort of things simply appeared as if by magic, like gefilte fish.

And so, right before the ceremony itself, the Grandfather solemnly presented Ezzy with his very own tallis and tefillin, in the form of two sturdy pouches of crushed blue velvet with an elaborate crown of intricate gold stitching. It was very much like the Grandfather's own, but newer and of a more elaborate design.

He labored long and hard to complete his bar mitzvah speech, thanking one and all, endeavoring not to exclude anyone from mention, delineating the epoch of Jewish suffering, the endless trials and tribulations. The Chosen People, it needed to be kept in mind, were also chosen to suffer. And to suffer greatly. But there was also hope, rebirth. As he set upon practicing his speech, more than aware of his penchant for stringing one cliché after another, word came from the Mother, who had received word from the Grandmother, that perhaps some of the portions relating to the epoch of Jewish suffering and misery, of these endless trials and tribulations, be scaled down just a bit. The strong implication was that this was for the Grandfather's benefit, although the Grandmother did not come right out and say this.

Licensed under CC BY 2.0

During the hoopla of the bar mitzvah itself–and to Ezzy's vast relief–it was forgotten that he had been required to make a speech. He managed to complete the entire ceremony without having to deliver a single word of his embarrassingly stilted speech, which was a major coup.

Standing at the bima, Ezzy looked down upon his parents, Deborah, some of his friends. Mr. Teplitzky, as was his custom, sat in the very front row, a tiny, shriveled man well into his nineties who rarely spoke, his tallis swallowing him up. Despite his advanced age and seeming frailty, Mr. Teplitzky had an extraordinary appetite that was legendary at Shaarei Rachamim and was capable of wolfing down gargantuan portions of gefilte fish and honey cake at all the shul's functions, at which he was a faithful attendee. The Grandmother would say that the laws of kashruth should be amended to include meat, dairy,

and Mr. Teplitzky.

He flawlessly chanted the haftorah portion he had worked on so diligently; the jagged rhythms, the piercing cadence that sometimes waded into pure vocal melody. It was his voice and his voice alone that was filling up Shaarei Rachamim.

When it was entirely completed, when he had concluded this long, difficult endeavor, the Grandfather approached him. He clasped both of his hands on each side of Ezzy's face. It was something the Grandfather had never done before, nor ever did subsequently. He clasped both hands on Ezzy's face, the Grandfather's shining bright blue eyes boring into his.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 10th, 2022 at 6:58 am and is filed under Fiction, Prose
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.