

These Are a Few of My Favorite... Columns



One of my themes for this year is "A Few of My Favorite..." Many congregants are studying with me as I review some of my favorite teachings and lessons. In each issue of the Newsletter, I am reprising some of my favorite Perspective Columns from the last thirty-five years.

This issue's column originally appeared in October 1997. In the Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, there is a statement attributed to the sage Rabbi Hanina. He taught, "I have learned much from my teachers, and even more from my friends. But most of all, I have learned from my students." As a rabbi, I have often learned more from my students than from any other sources. Sometimes the insight comes in a class setting where I am nominally the instructor. And often the learning comes through experience, shared conversation or moments. In this column I describe just such an experience that has stayed with me to this day. It is representative of so many lessons I have learned, great and small, from members of Congregation Adath Jeshurun.

Kol Nidre in the Hospital

We are taught that sometimes the best teachers are our students.

As a rabbi, I am always learning. About the impact of my role as a rabbi-pastor. About how to serve my congregation better.

At this season, I vividly remember something I learned a few years ago on Erev Yom Kippur at the Fox Chase Cancer Center. It was the eve of the holiest day of the Jewish year. Aaron Gold, a devoted member of our congregation and a personal friend, was dying. (The refurbished synagogue foyer has been dedicated in Aaron's memory by his family.)

I had been with him just about every day of his hospitalization. I had prayed with him. Cried with him. It had been a long, valiant struggle. But now he was in a coma. It would end soon.

As I stood beside his bed, his heart was racing at almost 200 beats per minute. Tachycardia. It would not be long now.

Hi wife turned to me, "You know, Rabbi, Aaron has never missed a Kol Nidre service since the day we were married. Tonight will be the first."

I put my arm around her as she sobbed. In an instant, I got an idea.

"Claire," I said, "Would you like me to chant the Kol Nidre now. Here. For Aaron and you?"

"That would be wonderful," she gasped.

We called in all the children. We stood around Aaron and I chanted the Kol Nidre in a tremulous voice. I was overwhelmed myself. I could barely complete the prayer through my own tears. When I finished, we stood silently for a few moments holding hands.

I glanced up at the monitor. "Look," I exclaimed. "Aaron's heart rate has converted back to a normal rhythm!"

And so it had. He held on for a few more hours. Until midnight. Long after the hour we had chanted Kol Nidre in the synagogue. He made it through his last Kol Nidre!

Ever since, I have made it a point on the eve of Yom Kippur to visit at least one patient, hospitalized or at home, who would not be able to come to services, and chant the Kol Nidre for him or her.

Because of what Aaron taught me with his dying breath.

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