

Rosh Hashanah Evening
Sinai Temple
Springfield, Massachusetts
2 October 2016

Five Who Taught

Years after I lived in the South, I returned to Charlotte, North Carolina, to collaborate with a friend on a scholarly project. One day, taking a break from our work, the two of us went out for lunch. We went to a typical Southern eatery, one similar to some of the dives I had frequented when I lived in Columbia, South Carolina, dives like the Lizard's Thicket, where food and people are like what you'd imagine

We were deeply engrossed in lunchtime conversation that day. Suddenly I looked up. A youngish man was standing by our table. "Rabbi," he said in an unmistakably local drawl, "I just want you to know. You changed my life."

I didn't recognize him. And from my trying-to-figure-out-who-you-are expression, he knew it. "I was one of your students at USC. I'm not Jewish, but what I learned in your Judaism course changed the whole way I look at the world. And I want to thank you for what you gave me."

We exchanged pleasantries — that's the Southern way — and then he reminded me of some things I had taught him. To me they weren't earth-shattering or even remarkable. But to him they were. And they *were* things that helped him look at life differently.

That felt good to me, of course. But what my former student didn't know was that not only had I changed his life. He, in that chance interaction that day, changed my life too. He made me realize that at all times, even when we least expect it, and even when we might be totally unaware of it, we might, by what we say — and/or do — be impacting upon others in life-changing, long-lasting ways.

That's important, especially on Rosh Hashanah, as we both look back and take stock and also look forward and plan out our changes for the future.

Are there people who impacted so powerfully upon you that they literally changed your life? And are you impacting that way upon others?.

People of tremendous impact... I've encountered people who have had such an impact upon me. What they taught me continues to affect my life to this day.

Tonight I'll tell you about a few of them. They imparted messages that I think are important to us all.

Now it happens that the people I'll tell you about all share two things in common: first, they all were/are Jewish; second, none of them sought to make the impact that they did. But in each case something about their life was so dynamic that what they said, or did, changed me. And inasmuch as they inspired my life to go in the direction it did, in a real way they are likely affecting the people whom I interact with.

These then are *my* heroes, those who occupy pages in *my* book of life.

The first was a woman I met when I was nine. Her name was Sonja Shames, though I didn't learn her first name until many years later. In fact, I didn't even know she *had* a first name then. It was just "Mrs." Mrs. Shames and I hit it off the very first time we met. That was when I walked into my first Hebrew class in the neighborhood Reform congregation my parents had joined. Mrs. Shames was my Hebrew school teacher that year, just as she continued to be for three of the next four years. From the first time she called on me that starting day in Hebrew school, it was, for me, love at first sight.

It was Mrs. Shames who that day translated my name from the Yiddish name I received at my *brit milah* to its Hebrew equivalent. "We don't use those Yiddish names anymore. There is a State of Israel now where we speak the language of our ancestors. You are Tzvi now."

Now I had never been in a Hebrew class before that. And I was there then under extreme duress. Give up my afternoon, after-school play to sit in Hebrew school? And then another three and a quarter hours of Sunday morning playtime to be studying a thing called Judaism?

Maybe Mrs. Shames sensed the conflict that lay within the nine-year-old kid that I was. Maybe she was just nice. But when I was with her, I felt special, and something clicked within me because of her. It was but a couple of days later that I came home and announced that when I grew up, I was going to be a rabbi, a path that from then on I never veered from for more than two days. It was Mrs. Shames who ignited within me a love for anything Jewish, something that at that time I virtually knew little about. It was also Mrs. Shames who ignited within me a passion for Hebrew that of itself was a language that really did possess a unique holiness. And from that point on Judaism was the path of my life.

Are we, by our lives, igniting a passion for our faith within others?

The second was the rabbi of my congregation, Rabbi Morton M. Berman. With him too it was not until years later that I found out he had a first name and a middle initial. To me he was just "Rabbi." If he had a first name, it was "The."

Morton M. Berman was a firebrand...one of those silver-tongued orators whose pulpit career spanned parts of four decades and whose thundering harangues against injustice anywhere were to me, literally, a hammer splitting rock. His was a voice that championed the underdog, and whether he was fighting for the survival of some far-off, endangered community of Jews, or fighting the eviction notice of a down-and-out soul in the community, I knew of none that he feared.

But he didn't preach from nowhere. He was a voice of God. Words of Torah were in his mouth as in his heart. There was a small, fully-kosher torah in the *aron hakodesh* of our congregation. It was the smallest torah I have ever seen. They said he carried it with him throughout his marine days during World War II when as he was a battlefield rabbi.

Years later, when I was in rabbinical school, I read an article he wrote shortly after I was born. In it, as a consequence of what were challenging times, and even as we rabbis are still doing today, he was questioning the legitimacy of the rabbinate. What he wrote

was that the position of the rabbi is that of legitimizer and Judaizer of the lives of the congregation and community and people the rabbi leads and servers. And the rabbi's sole basis for being able to do that is through his (now his/her) knowledge of Torah.

Was there any wonder, therefore, that Rabbi Berman, my rabbi, was constantly challenging me to learn Hebrew and study Jewish text, more and more and more? His prodigal — the echo of his voice yet rings in my ears — continues to push me to grow as a student of Judaism to this day.

Is the depth of our knowledge of Torah enough to legitimize what we give to others? And as he encouraged me to do, do we set a fix time to learn Torah? And then do we look for ways to live Torah in our daily lives?

The third was a man named Judah Wolfson. He was my Hebrew High School teacher at the neighborhood Conservative congregation I went off to learn at because my own Reform congregation didn't offer any Hebrew beyond eighth grade. Judah Wolfson, too, was one of those Europeans who in that different time made a difference in the lives of his students. Maybe one of the things that was *really* different was that in that not-so-long-ago time, people could make a living out of being a Hebrew teacher, which is why our best talent went into Hebrew School teaching as a profession. We called him *Mar* Wolfson. *Mar*, means "mister." It also means "master." God, Mar Wolfson had mastered so much Hebrew! And, he, as two other of my Hebrew teachers, knew the entire Torah by heart!

Mar Wolfson grew up as a *yeshivah bochur*, a seminary student, in Russia. But he had been kicked out, kicked out because he was caught reading Maimonides' philosophic treatise, *Guide of the Perplexed*, behind the tome of Talmud he was supposed to be studying.

They used to learn at a *schtender* in those days. A *schtender* is a reading stand, big enough to support a volume of Talmud.

But supporting a volume of Talmud is one thing, the *Guide of the Perplexed* quite another. The *Guide of the Perplexed* is Maimonides' attempt to reconcile Torah with Aristotelian philosophy. For all of the legalistic material that Maimonides wrote, the *Guide* was considered heresy even in his lifetime, just as in some circles it remained for centuries after.

The first time the Rosh Yeshivah caught Mar Wolfson reading the *Guide of the Perplexed* behind his Talmud, he took the little book, slammed it shut, and placed it under the leg of the *schtender*. The second time he caught him reading it, he expelled him from the *yeshivah*.

Now when I heard Mar Wolfson tell the story, it sounded ludicrous. We hid comic books behind our school texts, not philosophical treatises. But the *Guide of the Perplexed* is the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and when Mar Wolfson was expelled he came to the United States, highly competent and highly knowledgeable.

He told me he had considered entering HUC. He visited the College even, sometime in the 1920's. "But," he said, "I made the mistake of thinking, 'What could the College

possibly teach me?' Later," he said, "I found out. The College could have taught me a lot."

Now Mar Wolfson led a very Orthodox lifestyle. He taught in a Conservative congregation, but people then didn't have the denominational hang-ups some of us do now. And he knew that I, even in high school, had designs on entering the HUC. "You want to enter the HUC? Fine! But never forget that the College is only as good as what you bring to it. Study! Study! Study! Learn! Learn! Learn! It's all about Hebrew. Being a student of Judaism is about knowing Hebrew. And learning it and growing in it is a lifelong pursuit. Do not ever forget that!"

This Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of my 66th year as a student of Hebrew. And when I think of the extent of Mar Wolfson's knowledge of Hebrew, I feel woefully inadequate to this day. But I am learning. I am learning.

Is our growth as a student of our tradition something to which we have made a lifetime commitment?

Sy Dresner was the next. I met him shortly after I celebrated becoming Bar Mitzvah. He had just been discharged from the army after service during the Korean War. and he was working on a doctorate at the University of Chicago. My Temple had hired him as a sort of *kol bo*, an eclectic who fills a variety of roles. Among his many services, he was also a teacher. Sy, somewhere along the line, had picked up a *tremendous* knowledge of Hebrew. The Rabbi had asked him to teach me, "just to see how far I could go." We did *Pirkei Avot*.

Later on, Sy taught my post-confirmation class, a *weekly* Sunday morning lox-and-bagel gathering of shul stars who sometimes had to wake him up and pour coffee down him after his heavy-duty Saturday drinking parties just so he would come and teach us. I have never had a more challenging, engaging teacher anywhere, in any subject.

But it was not Sy's brilliant teaching that made the impact upon my life. It was that he shared with us that in the late 1940's he had been a gunrunner, part of an important smuggling operation that got weapons to Israel in all sorts of fictitious containers during Israel's War of Independence. "This too is Judaism," he taught us. "Sometimes, when laws are illegal, you have to break them."

Then, I learned later after I had gone off to university, he got himself arrested down in St. Augustine, Florida, during a Civil Rights sit-in. He had been sentenced either to a \$50 fine or to two weeks in jail on a disturbing-the-peace charge. He took the two weeks. People from all over offered to pay his \$50 fine. He refused over and over again and embarrassed the city of St. Augustine terribly. The eyes of the entire Movement and country were on him the whole time. And as a consequence of his act of civil disobedience, as well as that of others in the Movement, the walls of intolerance and segregation began tumbling down. Yes, "Sometimes when laws are illegal, you have to break them."

Sy Dresner was my *real* teacher in the lifetime course on Social Action. He taught me that Torah doesn't *really* come alive until you live it in your life. Study, for the Reform

Jew, is not something that is to remain only in the classroom. It is something whose lessons need further to be carried into the town.

Do we carry our Judaism into the workplace and the world?

The last was my *rav u'moreh*, my rabbi and teacher. *Rav u'moreh* is the term we reserve only for the person from whom we learned the most. My *rav u'moreh* was/is Alexander Guttmann, *alav hashalom*. Others called him Alex. To me he was always -- as he remains to this day -- Dr. Guttmann. Dr. Guttmann was my teacher of Talmud and Codes at the College. By the later years of my stay there, I was often taking one-student electives with him. Sometimes as we studied, he had me running up and down getting books for us to trace ideas in. But I always felt -- every minute -- that it was an honor for me to be doing so.

Dr. Guttmann was a Hungarian. He had been Professor of Talmud at Leo Baeck's Hochschule fuer des Judentums, which was Berlin's liberal rabbinic seminary before the war.

How did he get to the States and survive the Holocaust? He was one of a number of liberal Jewish scholars that the College literally plucked up out of Europe at the end of the 30's and brought here, that they, and their incredible scholarly talents, might survive.

By virtue of his ordination from Breslau, Dr. Guttmann was a Reform rabbi. From his own daily religious practices, including the shuls where he davened in Cincinnati, most today would say he was something else. But he was Reform. He followed the practices he did because they had meaning. And from him I learned that one is not defined Reform by the extent of his/her religious practices. It really is true that, as our seminary proclaimed, nothing of Jewish tradition is foreign to our interests.

But more than that, what I learned from Dr. Guttmann was the technique of learning itself. He was not the product of the Eastern European *yeshivah*, where *pilpul*, that kind of peppery, hairsplitting, mental gymnastics was *de rigueur*. He came from Hungary, and he grew up, son of Michael Guttmann, the father of modern, scientific Talmud study, with a totally different sort of understanding of Judaism. For him, the starting point of any text was to understand -- *really* understand -- in simplest and basic terms, what the text means. Why did the author of a text say what he said? And what did he *really* say? Without that understanding, as you start to interpret a text and make it come alive as something relevant to today, you are often making things up as you go along. You aren't necessarily *grounding* yourself in Judaism. And without that, what you have in the end might not be Judaism at all. His *shitah*, his method, has been my starting point ever since. Start with the simple. Then go on. Anchor yourself in the basic, and then, if you wish, go off and try to find the profound.

Do we concern ourselves with what Judaism *really* had to say?

My five teachers. Each gave me something so life-changing, so integral to *my* book of life.

Have you had such teachers? Of course you have! We all have had such teachers. I did not talk about them, but my parents too were such teachers. Your parents were such teachers.

They were all people who impacted upon you so powerfully that your life is different because of it.

What kind of teachers are we, you and I? Do we live our lives in such a way that our children, and the other people with whom we come into contact, are somehow *more* than they would be without us?

Beginning tonight and during these next High Holy Days, we shall be encountering strong spiritual messages coming down to us from across the ages. We shall be seeing and hearing the very words that our forebears heard at this season of year that encouraged them, somehow, to make changes in their lives that would raise their lives to a higher spiritual level. As we encounter those messages again, let us think of the people whom we have known who really have lived their lives in ways embodied in those messages. And then let us seek for ourselves ways to follow their example.

If we look at the holy days in that light, the impact of the holidays will magnify and intensify. And our lives, and the lives of those who come after us, really will be made different because of these holy days.

The Talmud, quoting R. Yochanan, teaches: If someone learns Torah but does not teach it to others, it is like a myrtle in the wilderness [that is, where no one enjoys its fragrance] (R. H. 23a).

Let us look, on these High Holy Days, at the sources from whence we have received. Then let us look at how we may pass them on.

Let us seek to be better parents to our children and grandparents to our grandchildren, better guides to our students and better models to those whom we encounter day by day. Let us seek to be better students within the realm of the sacred, and let us find ways to become holy vessels that will contain sparks that will inspire others to walk in paths in which they will find light. And then may we, in the process, all become true teachers to one another, that we grow, and that those who come after us flourish, and that all the world, created anew each Rosh Hashanah, finds wholeness and peace. Amen.