

תמידן תמיד
Eternal Flames
Yom Kippur 5782 (2021)
R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel

During the year of sheltering in place, while we held outdoor services in the CBI field, I didn't think that I missed the actual Beth Israel building. By nature, I have a positive outlook on life. I like praying outdoors. I appreciated the opportunity to do things differently, to shake things up, and to be shaken up.

Then we returned to our sanctuary.

During the pandemic, my family moved to a home on Frost Street (for privacy reasons, I am not including the name of my street in this version).

Fifteen years ago, I spent quite a bit of time on Frost Street. A family in our shul moved to a home on Frost Street, right outside the Eruv, and just a block east of where my family now lives.

At the time Sam Ginsburg, of blessed memory, was the Eruv's jack of all trades. Sam Ginsburg was the person who first identified the original route of our Berkeley Eruv, together with R. Silverman. He walked block by block, "poking around," as he would say, until he found electric wires that stretched continuously from one pole to another.

Once, Sam told me how he got involved in the Berkeley Eruv. "A young woman got up at the end of Shabbat services and announced that she's starting an Eruv committee and that a meeting will be held during the week. I had no idea what an Eruv was but I was deeply concerned that this young woman would organize this meeting and that no one would show up, so I showed up." The rest, of course, is history.

Sam and I spent weeks walking on Frost St. to try to accommodate this family, until we finally found a way to include their home in the Eruv.

Years later, Sam and I walked on Frost St. once again, looking for ways to expand the Eruv from Frost further into South Berkeley. It took five years to identify a route that allowed for our Eruv's expansion. During those years, Sam and I would always begin our walk on Frost Street.

And yes, a few years later, I personally benefited from that very expansion, finding our home inside of the Eruv, at its very edge, on Frost Street.

If you walk up Frost Street, from my home to shul, you'll walk past several electric poles/*lechis* that once marked the boundary of our old Eruv. These poles/*lechis* no longer serve a Halakhic purpose. They are just there, witnesses and reminders, like mezuzahs on door posts.

I walked by those poles/*lechis* on that first Shabbat, the Shabbos we finally returned to shul. Each of them reminded me of my countless walks with Sam on Frost Street. My memories of those walks animated the boundaries of our old Eruv. Through these connected lines, I felt like Sam was holding our community from above with a heavenly hug.

Yitgadal ve'yitkadash shemei rabba – Magnified and sanctified may His great name be...

I spontaneously mumbled the opening lines of the mourner's kaddish, meditating in wonderment on the creative achievement of our Berkeley Eruv, which Sam, among others, willed into existence.

Be'alma dibera khirutei – in the world He created by His will.

On that first Shabbat we offered Aliyot to the Torah to elderly men in our community who have not been to services for over a year. One such man slowly shuffled his feet as he made his way up to the bimah.

I immediately had a vision of Sam Haber, of blessed memory, making his way up for an Aliyah to the Torah.

Sam Haber's tenure at CBI goes back to the early days of our community, the Beth Israel of the mid-60s. By the time I came to CBI, Sam was an elder, and then eventually an old man. Sam was legally blind. Each and every time he made his way up to the bimah felt like a miracle. He just knew the way. He was led by his feet and not by his eyes. Or perhaps his *neshamah*, his soul, led him there.

At his granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah, Sam Haber insisted on reading the Haftorah. His dedicated daughters made photocopies of the Haftorah that showed about ten words per page. That Shabbat, when Sam read from the Haftorah, the words of the prophets appeared like protest signs. They looked and sounded the way they were meant to be seen and heard.

Many of you might remember Sam Haber's last High Holiday at CBI. He was already in hospice but he insisted on coming to shul. He walked in right in the middle of the Yizkor Drasha. The shul was crowded and he walked into people and he walked into chairs and created a bit of a commotion. I paused the Drash and asked everyone to rise in honor of this precious elder, a sort of prophet walking in our midst.

Since our return to CBI, I often see Sam Haber in our midst...

Be'chayechun uv'yomeichon – in our lifetime and in our days...and in our midst.

For many, many years Sam Haber sat next to Harry Rubin, of blessed memory, in shul. When I envision Sam Haber returning to his seat, I then see Harry sitting right next to him.

Sam once told me that he would like to be buried next to Harry Rubin when they pass from this world. "We sit next to each other in shul, and we should be next to each other in death", he said to me. Ultimately, Sam was buried next to his beloved wife, Jan Haber, of blessed memory, who left this world before Sam did. And that made a lot of sense. And yet for me, Sam and Harry still sit next to each other in shul.

Harry Rubin returned to Judaism relatively late in life. He read a book by the theologian Franz Rosenzweig, which led him to Levinas, which led him to Rav Soloveitchik, which led him to other thinkers, which ultimately brought him to CBI.

When I arrived in Berkeley fifteen years ago, it was so surprising to meet an 80-year-old man who was still looking for God. Harry continued to be that way until the very day he died, close to his mid-nineties. Still seeking, still searching, for an understanding and a connection to a transcendent, incomprehensible, eternal God.

Yeheh shemeih raba mevorach le'olam u'leulmei almay – May God's name be blessed forever and all time.

Our return to CBI was fraught with questions and uncertainties. I normally try not to second guess myself too much, but throughout the pandemic I've been hearing Jane Falk, of blessed memory, challenging me from within. I know that Joelle and Maharat Sutton hear Jane's challenging voice as well.

When I first met Jane, she wanted me to know that she was from New-York. "I live here," she would say, "But I'm very much a New-Yorker. I'm direct. You won't find me doing that passive, passive, passive, aggressive stuff." And she was right about that. She was direct, oftentimes even too direct.

And Jane, of blessed memory, was quite direct with me during the pandemic.

In my *kishkes*, I would hear her say from the heavens, "So you're asking people to spend Seder on their own, in isolation...easy for you to say with your wife and four children."

"Not so easy to shelter in place with four children," I would think of saying to her, and still I heard every word she would say.

"So you're insisting on masks?"

“So how long are you keeping those windows open. You know the cold will kill me before Covid will?”

“So you’re splitting the shul for the High Holidays, who will decide who’s in and who’s out?”

Her questions were always a slight exaggeration of a truth I still needed to hear. Only after she passed, I came to understand that she attempted to challenge us to be better.

As a linguist, she had a way of saying the same thing, over and over again, using different words.

Yitbarach ve’yishtabach ve’yitpa’ar ve’yitromam, ve’yitnaseh, ve’yithadar, ve’yitaaleh, ve’yithallal – Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, raised and honored, uplifted and lauded.

And now I hear her say, “Rabbi, all those words for me?!? Please don’t trouble yourself so much.”

I catch Yonim Schweig, of blessed memory, standing outside the window on the men’s side. In his late teens, he would sometimes daven there. And that’s where I find him from time to time. *Esh tukad be’kirbi*. A fire burning within me. I get tempted by the vision. I pause. I fall silent. I try to daven with him. A *ner tamid*, an eternal light.

Yonim came to CBI for the very last indoor service we held prior to sheltering in place. We got into a strange conversation by the hand washing station. On one foot, we somehow covered the promise and/or downfall of Orthodoxy, the future of feminism and Halakha, as well Israel/Palestine politics and relations. I can’t really remember what was said, but I remember that we didn’t really see eye to eye. Yonim made me feel old and cynical and I probably made him feel naïve and young. Yonim smiled and said to me, “Just wait and see what we will do!”

During this past year of mourning for Yonim, at each and every memorial, I wait and see. I hear his friends and the people he influenced, touched, and transformed. I form a deeper

connection with some of them too. I wait and see. I wait and I see. I see the world he began to change and the world that he is still changing, somehow through his friends, somehow from above, somehow in our midst.

Le'eila min kol birchata, ve'shirata, toshbechata, ve'nechemata – beyond any blessing, beyond any song, beyond any praise, beyond any consolation.

Our actions in this world echo beyond any blessing, song, praise, and consolation....

Be'alma – in the world. *Le'alam u'leulmei alamaya* – and into eternity.

Our actions can hold up an entire community, like Sam Ginsburg's Eruv still does.

Our presence in the sanctuary can be prophet-like, as Sam Haber's presence was.

Our words can offer challenge and rebuke...and hold up lofty standards and ideals as Jane Falk's words sometimes did.

Whether you are Harry's age or younger, and still looking for God...or whether you are Yonim's age or older, and still insisting on changing the world below...and the world above...I want you to know that your life has infinite meaning and value – *be'einey Elohim ve'adam* – both in the eyes of God and humankind. Your legacy can be eternal and your presence everlasting.

Yeheh shelama raba min shemaya, ve'chayim aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael – May there be great peace from heaven, and life for us and all Israel.

Ve'chayim – and life. *Ve'chayim* – and eternal life.

Oseh shalom bimromav, ho yaaseh shalom aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael – May He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us and all Israel.

And all Beth Israel.

Ve'nomar amen. And let us say: Amen.