

**Ultimate Choices**  
**Choosing in Life and After**  
***Yom Kippur 5783 (2022)***  
**R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel**

Last January our shul received a request from a former member. In the email, the individual explained that she and her siblings grew up in our community in the 70s. She also mentioned that her father, Abraham Kagan [I have changed original names], was an active member of the congregation until his death in the late sixties.

I have never heard of this family and so I turned to a few CBI old timers for help. Shortly after I received this response from one of our members:

“ABSOLUTELY YES. [...] I recall getting to know Abraham Kagan well during the short time before his tragic death in summer 1969. He was one of a small number of established folks in the congregation whom I got to know early-on. [...]

I also vividly recall [his son] Jacob's Bar Mitzvah [this name has been changed as well] in January 1975. It was a very difficult and tragic time. About a week before, [a] child [in the community] had been hit by a car in front of their house, and was critically injured. He lingered perhaps a week before he died. The entire congregation was in a terrible shock, beyond description in words. Then he died. But during that period of about a week everybody was "paralyzed" emotionally, hoping he'd ultimately recover but then facing the reality that he wouldn't... Well, poor Jacob Kagan's Bar Mitzvah was right then, either just before or just after the boy's death. I recall it vividly. Jacob was of course trying to "do the right thing," the congregants trying to "celebrate," but we were finding it all-too-hard.

I also recall something wonderful. [...] He had practiced leading Adon Olam at the end of the service to a very special tune, the tune of "Greensleeves," a tune we all knew but a tune that had never been used in the Shul until then. He had it "down pat," and he did it, and the congregation sang along, and it was GREAT, and Jacob felt triumphant. That memory sticks with me all these years later!”

I have been in this community for sixteen years and I have never heard this story before. It had an overwhelming effect on me, most likely because of some of the tragedies and hardships that some of our own members have faced in recent years.

More than anything, it left a comforting and strengthening impression. A precious piece of our communal story was unexpectedly bequeathed to me and with it, I had suddenly realized the depths of courage and resilience flowing through the annals of our past. It was as though I had forgotten something critical about the strength and ability of our communal heart and was all at once reminded of it.

Shortly after that initial response, we received another email from that very same longstanding member:

“The congregation did a modest remodel of the interior just around the time when Abraham Kagan died (1969-1970), and part of it was building an office for the rabbi. (Remember that this was in the old building!). I recall that there was a plaque on the door as you entered that rabbinic office saying that its reconstruction had been donated by his family in memory of Abraham Kagan. That plaque stayed there until we took the building down around 2002 in the course of constructing our new synagogue building.”

I immediately wrote our office administrator, Joelle Yzquierdo, inquiring after the plaque's whereabouts. And as though reading my mind, Joelle wrote back:

“I’ve already asked [our custodians] to check [in the shul’s attic].”

Sure enough the plaque was found. We wrote the family letting them know that we are happy to ship the plaque back to them or to have it on display in my office.

An email came back that filled me with unexpected joy:

“My brothers and I would be honored if you could mount the plaque in the rabbi’s office. Thank you so much.”

The plaque has been on display in my office now for more than six months. Like many memorial items, it has mostly receded to the background. And yet, from time to time, especially when a difficulty comes up, I look at that very plaque and it offers me comfort and guidance.

It is a two-way gift. A gift from those who passed and a gift from the living to the deceased.

This past July, the Forward published an article that deeply resonated with this story.

Many of us are likely familiar with Philip Birnbaum, the writer, translator, and editor of “Ha-Siddur ha-Shalem” — Hebrew for “the full prayer book” — this siddur was used at CBI for decades and is considered one of the best-selling Jewish books of the previous century.

The Forward reported: “When the author Philip Birnbaum died in 1988 at the age of 83, he was buried in the Westchester County cemetery of Manhattan’s Jewish Center synagogue. [Birnbaum never married and had no progeny]. Months later, a monument company installed a headstone that misspelled his name. “Phillip Birnbaum” the stone said, adding an extra “l” to Philip. The stone sat, undisturbed and largely unnoticed, for 34 years.” (<https://forward.com/culture/511038/philip-birnbaum-author-translator-prayer-book-siddur-gravestone-correction/>).

This past year, Yosef Lindell, a young lawyer and scholar came across a photo of Birnbaum’s headstone on Twitter. He noticed a few other errors. In addition to the extra “l,” the stone misspelled the word “renowned” (using the letter “u” instead of “w”). It also misstated Birnbaum’s birth year. As importantly, the headstone had no Hebrew words, a shocking omission given Birnbaum’s masterful body of work as a translator.

The discovery sprung Lindell into action. Lindell reached out to R. Jacob J. Schacter, who served as the rabbi of Birnbaum’s shul towards the end of his life. Within weeks, the congregation raised funds to replace the stone.

According to the Forward the new headstone “not only corrects the mistakes but adds a Hebrew verse adapted from the High Holiday liturgy.”

“He instructed the mouths of his nation,” the verse says, “so that they should not err in their language or falter in their speech.”

At the end of the article, Yosef Lindell offers a powerful reflection:

“‘When I first asked the cemetery if I could change the headstone, they said that I didn’t even need permission,’ said Lindell, who is 37. ‘There was no one to ask. But now, if you need to change it, you have to get my permission.’”

He let that sink in and added: ‘And I never even met the man.’”

This too is a two-way gift. A gift from those who passed and a gift from the living to the deceased.

Late this summer, Dr. Michelle Friedman, head of pastoral counselling at YCT Rabbinical School, and my dear teacher, published an article in the New York Times about the recent passing of her brother.

A few months ago, she received a message from a nurse in Seattle: “Looking to find the sister of my patient, Jay Friedman.”

Michelle and Jay have not been in contact for decades.

Michelle explains that “they were raised by secular Holocaust survivor parents who stumbled into raising chickens. Their histories, coupled with the isolation and poverty of the farm, rendered [their] father brutal, especially to his only son.”

But now 65 years old, Jay had advanced pancreatic cancer. Michelle reached out to him, knowing his prognosis was dire, but Jay turned down her offer for support.

[...] The hospital discharged Jay with a bag hanging from his chest to drain bile from his tumor-blocked liver. A few days later the doctor called again. Jay wanted [his sister’s] help.”

For the next few weeks, Michelle took care of her brother. Initially she stayed at a hotel, eventually she moved into his apartment, and ultimately, she slept on the floor of his bedroom.

Michelle tenderly recalls those final days:

“Jay quietly slipped away. He told me that his dream was to buy a house on a lake with a few acres of land.

‘That’s such a nice idea, Jay,’ I said. ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too.’”

And then Michelle made a desperate plea: “Send me a sign, Jay. Please send me a sign from the other side.”

“Early Thursday morning [Michelle] woke up inches from [her] brother to find him gone. No labored breathing, no death rattle. His skin had cooled, his limbs stiffened.”

Jay, who had rejected Jewish practice, had arranged for cremation prior to his passing, a wish that Michelle could not violate. And yet, prior to his cremation, Michelle had arranged for *Taharah*. She also made sure that his ashes would be buried in a cemetery.

On the very day that Jay passed away, Michelle boarded a van for the airport.

Michelle writes, “Only one other person got on, a white-haired woman in a sweater set. I saw that she bid a sorrowful farewell to the man seeing her off. She sat a few rows behind me. Drizzle and traffic caused delays, but our elfin driver navigated the trip and asked us which terminals we needed.

‘American,’ she said, turning mournfully in my direction. ‘It’s a sad trip. My brother is dying of brain cancer in Florida.’

‘United,’ [Michelle] said, and to her [Michelle said]: ‘I just left after taking care of my brother, who died

this morning. I hope you get there in time.’

We reached across the aisle and held hands. Jay had made good on his sign.”

And this too is a two-way gift. A gift from those who passed and a gift from the living to the deceased.

(‘A Last Act of Intimate Kindness’, By Michelle Friedman, Aug. 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/style/modern-love-cancer-last-act-of-intimate-kindness.html>).

A final story.

The father of a personal friend passed away this year. He was a complicated man, limited by a growing list of health challenges, and weighed down by emotional difficulties as well. He came across as unreachable and it was hard to be with him. His way of being prevented him from cultivating deep connections with friends and family, and most notably, with his own children.

The father was also known for blasting opera at home, a world of music that drew him in, in absolute ways. Music that he tried to share with his son to no end, and hoped that he would love it as well, with little success.

After his passing, my friend felt relieved, even released. The relationship was burdensome and unexpectedly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it seemed to have carried its complexities into his own relationships. Now, after his passing, his father was no longer taking up that mental and emotional space.

But something else transpired as well: My friend started listening to opera. Regularly. Almost religiously. Opera became a second kaddish for him.

In a conversation that he agreed for me to share, he explained that after his father’s passing, he gradually came to understand that opera was the place in which his father found expression for his feelings, for his pain, for his burdens, and for the regrets he did not know how to express.

In opera, my friend found his father. And in the music of his father, he now finds solace and consolation.

Another two-way gift. A gift from those who passed and a gift from the living to the deceased.

Teshuvah – repentance, or more aptly, our ability to return, is stronger than death.

Repentance could happen when the door seems to have been long shut – even after a memorial plaque has been hung and a headstone has been set.

Sometimes, we return to our loved ones close to the very end – even when only a few weeks remain for them in this world.

Sometimes, we return to them even after they are gone. And at rare occasions, those who have departed from this world seem to also find their way back – like a melody penetrating the depths of our heart.

This Yom Kippur, we may be seeking ways to make amends with the past, make amends with the present, and surely, make amends for the sake of the future.

We may find ourselves needing to return to those who are no longer here. Or maybe we need to return to those who are exactly here, right now, in this very space.

Let us remember – Teshuvah is stronger than death.

The gate is open. Even when it seems to have been shut, there is yet a possibility to find a way back, or a way out, or a way in.

The choice is up to us.

What stories do we choose to tell?

What signs do we choose to seek out?

How might we choose to open up?

Teshuvah is more than a two-way gift. It is an eternal gift...if only we choose to receive it, and if only we choose to give it out.