

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

Hunting for the Joy, Beauty, Trust and Faith of Our Childhood Years

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One of the biggest surprises we found when we moved to New York 11 years ago was that New York is not just about skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, and Times Square. I guess that in order to simplify tourist experiences, prospective travelers identify places by a few landmarks "you must see," like the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Buckingham Palace in London, a Tango show in Buenos Aires, and Times Square in New York.

Silvia and I discovered, after settling in New York, that the south and north shore of Long Island has been blessed with great beaches like Robert Moses and Fire Island, among others, and little villages like Port Jefferson and Huntington Bay. A couple of years ago Silvia and I found another fascinating world ready to be discovered by us that existed in upstate New York and Connecticut, only one or two hours away from home. Since then we visited Nyack, Sleepy Hollow, Mystic, and Greenwich.

This year we decided to think big and spend a couple of days in New Paltz, NY and its surrounding areas.

Not knowing what to expect or what exactly to do, we asked Zoe Baker, who lived there for four years, and she suggested Minewaska State Park, a couple of vegan restaurants, and just walking through the town of New Paltz. So we traveled north, stayed one night in Poughkeepsie, walked through the town of New Paltz, ate at the two vegan restaurants Zoe recommended, hiked in Minewaska State Park, and we went *antiquing*, which is what many people do in New Paltz.

I didn't know antiquing was a word, but apparently it is one and its meaning is: to shop for or collect antiques.

I do love antiques but I never knew it was such an established pastime, hobby, or even passion. New Paltz not only has little shops specializing in antiques but an entire building where you can walk for a couple of hours hunting for the particular piece you are looking for.

Now, Silvia and I were not looking for anything in particular and yet we were fascinated by the experience. We saw, for example, an old Underwood typewriter which brought memories from my dactylography course in high school. The typewriter had a sign: "don't press the keys of the typewriter," and I understood why, because all I wanted to do was to try the typewriter, which was going to bring me 40 years back in history. We saw an old pinball machine from the 70s, audiotapes with music from the 80s, a wooden school bench with a hole for an inkpot, non-digital photographic cameras (remember them?), and many more treasures that brought back many good memories.



Even though Silvia and I are not antique experts and didn't buy too many things (a couple of CDs from the 80s, that's all), we did enjoy the antiquing experience.

Speaking later on with friends, I discovered that we are not the only ones who find the activity exciting. I even spoke with many people who watch *Pawn Stars*, an American reality television series, that chronicles the daily activities at the World Famous Gold & Silver Pawn Shop. The series depicts the staff's interactions with customers, who bring in a variety of artifacts to sell or pawn, and who are shown haggling over the price and discussing its historical background,

Why are so many people hunting for antiques, or fascinated with old stuff?

While I don't have a fully developed theory on the subject, I believe that people enjoy the antiquing experience -even if they don't buy anything at the end- because walking through the aisles of an antique shop brings memories from the past, and especially, from our childhood. It is not coincidental that toys are among the most coveted and expensive items in antique shops, usually displayed behind a glass in a locked cabinet.

While "antiquing" in New Paltz, not only did I see a school bench similar to the one I sat on throughout elementary school, and the aforementioned typewriter, but an old wash board similar to the one my mother had, a few childhood games, and gadgets from the early 80s, my teen years.

If you are like me, a person who enjoys looking at old family pictures; if you get emotional when you listen to music from your childhood; if you are among those who upon entering my office for the first time, see the pinball machine and say: "wow!! A pinball machine. Does it work? May I play?" you are an incurable romantic; and you are in good company.

Most people look back to their childhood years with nostalgia, remembering those years as mostly beautiful ones, lacking the sometimes overwhelming complexity of our adult years. When I go back to Buenos Aires I always visit the street where I grew up. This year I visited my elementary school, taking pictures and trying to capture places, places linked to memories, memories linked to feelings....

Now, a caveat is in order: not everybody looks back at their childhood years with nostalgia. Some people, and I am sure some among us as well, had very difficult childhood years, filled with pain, anxiety and loss. If that is your case, I am really sorry and yet I believe you will see the point I am trying to convey.

Childhood years (and many times teenage years as well) are full of wonder. Everything is new, everything is full of excitement. Just look at the four Rozic boys playing with the locks and keys that Harold so kindly gives them, or at Vera and

Brianna begging me to “play monster” and chase them around the Moreida. Waiting for the “Tooth Fairy,” finding the Afikoman, receiving Hanukah gifts, dressing up in Purim costumes, sitting under the Sukkah, or trying to get a sound out of the shofar, are priceless activities when you are 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10 years old.

Children are more innocent, more resilient, less presumptuous, more forgetful and hence more forgiving. Children are simpler, happier, less sophisticated, less cynical, they hold less grudges and they pick less battles. Children are full of faith and trust, faith and trust in their parents, faith and trust in their teachers, faith and trust in God...

"I remember for your sake the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days, your following after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2: 2), says the Prophet to the children of Israel. God remembers the youth years of the People Israel with nostalgia, when we followed after God in the wilderness, in a land not sown.

I like to suggest that God also remembers with nostalgia our own youth years as well, when we were filled with awe at God’s creation, when squirrels, flowers, elephants, and trees, made us laugh with joy; when measuring our height against the wall and celebrating our growth by making little marks, was a constant reminder that a miracle was happening within us, within our own bodies.

But then we grew up, went out to the competitive and sometimes merciless adult world, and learned to be practical, and responsible, but also skeptical and cynical. As Roger Hodgson, co-founder of Supertramp expressed it so clearly:

*When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful
A miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical
And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily
Oh joyfully, playfully watching me
But then they send me away to teach me how to be sensible
Logical, oh responsible, practical*

*And they showed me a world where I could be so dependable
Oh clinical, oh intellectual, cynical¹*

Deep inside our soul, we all long, if not for the childhood years themselves, at least for the joy, beauty, and trust those childhood years evoke. Deep inside we yearn to believe in you, Hashem. We read the stories of patriarchs and matriarchs, kings and prophets who lived very complex lives and yet possessed a simpler, less sophisticated faith. Look at Jonah, for example; he runs away from God and yet even when he runs away, God is always present in his life.

Despite the common saying, I believe an old dog can learn new tricks and therefore I will try to work in this coming year on re-learning to appreciate beauty, to marvel at the universe, to trust in others even though I know I will be hurt occasionally, and to recover the simple faith I used to have in You, Hashem, when I was a child.

The High Holy Days might be nothing more, but nothing less, than an opportunity to reconnect to what is pure, beautiful, wonderful, and magical within us. Teshuvah is less about repentance than about returning to a good place within us, to a *Paradise Lost*, using the title of Milton's epic poem, to a place from where we can truly reconnect with others and with God.

May this coming year be one of connections, a year of hunting for beautiful "antique moments," a year of reclaiming the joy and beauty of simple faith and trust, in those around us, in the noble ideals of our nation, in the constructive instinct of humanity, and in You, Hashem, our God.

And may all of us and our loved ones be blessed with a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year. Amen.

¹ Supertramp: The Logical Song. The lyrics are about how the innocence and wonder of childhood can quickly give way to worry and cynicism as children are taught to be responsible adults. It makes the point that logic can restrict creativity and passion. Supertramp keyboard player Roger Hodgson, who wrote this song and sang the lead vocals, said in our 2012 interview: "I think it was very relevant when I wrote it, and actually I think it's even more relevant today. <http://www.songfacts.com>