

Boston Workmen's Circle Yom Kippur D'var 2017
Norman Berman

L'shana Tova

I'm honored to be here this morning and I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you.

I joined WC to sing with the chorus 20 years ago – the attraction for me was Yiddish, my first language, an opportunity to use it outside of my home and beyond my family and to introduce it to my daughter, Rachel, who at the time was 9. But I quickly came to love that we were singing for justice. My involvement in the WC grew from there and I'm forever grateful to have found my way into this wonderful community. I'm an attorney. I formed a law firm in Boston 35 years ago which focuses on economic justice.

My parents, Misha and Bluma, were born in Poland, both grew up in tiny *Shtetlakh*. Holocaust survivors. They saw evil up close. Two kinds. Institutional – the Nazis, the Nuremberg laws, the “final solution,” and personal - their neighbors who turned on them. My parents were intimately familiar with the consequences of hate, supremacy, racism and anti-Semitism. In their homes in Poland they watched with horror how their neighbors were easily turned against them when the local authorities legitimized long held animosities.

Over seventy members of my family were murdered. Not in gas chambers – but in and around their villages. My parents thought they left all that hate behind when they came to America. They would be heart broken by today's ugly and divisive politics.

Misha and Bluma met and married in DP camp Foehrenwald just south of Munich – I was born there. We came to US in 1949. We landed in Boston and we were greeted by members of the Workmen's Circle. After a few years in the Bronx, we moved to CT to a chicken farm that my parents ran for the next 35 years. Berman Eggs. Misha and Bluma went to night school, studied English and civics and proudly became American citizens. They embraced America and all that it stood for, law, justice, equality and, most important, a fresh start.

As a child, I recognized early on that my parents were different from the other kids' parents. We were immigrants. We were the only Jewish family in my town. It was straight out of Herman Wouk's *Inside Outside* – we spoke Yiddish and observed rituals at home, then I ventured out into the world as a young American boy. We held dual citizenship - *Shtetle* and American.

I got the message early on that being Jewish was not cool so it was something I kept to myself. Word got out and I was picked on and taunted. Fortunately, I was big for my age but that resulted in several visits with my parents and the principal.

We were observant. but my parents were understandably skeptical about God. I would not consider them “believers.” But ritual - ritual was so important. I remember watching my mother cleaning, cooking and preparing for the holidays, reciting the psalms in Yiddish, lighting candles. It was like she was preparing for a very special guest. And my dad, Misha, had a beautiful voice, he was our lay cantor in our shul in CT and he taught me the services.

On the farm, the work was 24/7. Livestock doesn't know from holidays. The chickens needed to be fed and watered, the eggs needed to be collected three times a day. But when the high holidays came along, we worked into the night, we worked early in the morning and then it was off to shul dressed in our best. We observed the fast from the moment of sundown to beyond sundown the next day. And there was the high drama - the cry of the shofar, the prayer shawls, *Uneh Taneh Tokef*, *Yizkor*, the ancient melodies, the promise of starting the year with a clean slate after the closing of the gates of *Neila*. And always the tears.

My job as a child of survivors was to make things right for my parents – and to comfort them. So, I did everything to try to help on the farm. Now I had a knack for machines and farm equipment. My mother would regale anyone who would listen in her heavy Yiddish accent – “Oh that *Nokhim*, he can fix anything.” Years later, I realized that wasn't true. My parents carried their trauma for their entire lives.

There is a story about Foehrenwald, that has affected me in a very powerful way. It's an account of the first Yom Kippur observance in the camp after the liberation.

The story was told by Reb Leibel Zisman who was in the DP camp, he was 14 at the time. My parents would have just arrived in the camp which opened its gates in June 1945. Germany had surrendered in May. A few months earlier my mother was starving and freezing in the Stutthof concentration camp surrounded by death and my dad was somewhere in the forests.

The sun was about to set on Yom Kippur eve. And they were in a huge hall, a makeshift shul with nearly 5,000 other survivors. And the Klausenburger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, who had lost his wife and 11 children, stood on the bimah in the center of the hall before Kol Nidrei.

With tears in his eyes he began by thanking God for saving the survivors' lives. He then pointed to his kittel – the white linen robe that is traditionally worn on Yom Kippur and spoke in Yiddish, slowly and tearfully. “One of the reasons we wear this kittel is because it is the traditional burial garment, in which we wrap a body before laying it to rest in the ground, as we do when we bury our parents and those that came before us.

He said: “Wearing a kittel on Yom Kippur reminds us of our final day of judgment when we will be laid to rest. It therefore humbles us, stirring us to do complete *Teshuvah*. The

white, linen kittel is a symbol of purity that we achieve through our introspection and efforts to forgive, be forgiven and repair all our wrongs.”

Since the kittel reminds us of the burial shroud of those that passed on before us, why are we wearing it today? Our parents and loved ones were just slaughtered without *tachrichim* (burial shrouds). They were buried, with or without clothes, in mass graves, or in no graves at all...”

Then, suddenly, the Klausenberger Rebbe began tearing off his own kittel - he cried in an anguished voice.,. “NO KITTEL” Let us be like our parents. Let us remove our kittels, so that they can recognize us. They won’t recognize us in kittels because they are not wrapped in kittels.

Everyone in the shul began to weep uncontrollably. All the anguish, all the unbearable losses, all the humiliation and dehumanization came spilling out. Then the Rebbe chanted Kol Nidre and I imagine my parents standing there crying in that shul.

There is an entire section of the traditional Yom Kippur service entitled *Ayleh Ezk’ra*, These I Remember. And the focus is on remembering the humanity, the virtues, the lives of those who came before. Artists of the soul, architects of redemption – the activists and advocates of justice and beauty, exemplars of *tikkun olam*. The prayer concludes with “On Yom Kippur the voice of sacred history calls to us: These you shall remember – their lives, their deaths, their legacy. Their legacy is in your hands.

As I take the time on Yom Kippur to think about my parents – their lives, I realize that I’m not alone. Yom Kippur pushes me to think about my place in the world. Contemplating my shortcomings, vulnerability and my responsibilities on Yom Kippur seems to bring me closer all of humanity. It gives rise to a powerful empathy. My heart goes out to anyone who has experienced injustice. I feel a kinship with immigrants. I realize that all of us – are bound together in one inextricable chain, and we do recognize each other despite our different, garments, cultures and backgrounds.

These holidays remind me that I am part of a world that is much greater than I can see. And when I go about my business, I have a responsibility, not only to *those I must remember* but to everyone. I am reminded how important it is to have you around me.

Neila happens at sundown tonight. Another chapter of reckoning will be done. And a new year will start. I hope this new year will be one of health and strength for us all. I wish you meaningful, timely, connected and effective action. I wish you empathy.

A gut yor, a gezunt yor, a freilakhn yor.