

Viva's Speech at Mikhael's Bar Mitzva

April 4, 2011

Rosh Hodesh Nisan

I thought I'd impress everyone tonight with a learned and complex talk on something like the taxation of credit default swaps or Jewish law on the mother's duties for her bar mitzvah boy. But I look around and see that almost everyone here is more qualified than I am to expound on one or other of these subjects. So rather than embarrass myself, I will talk about the only thing I am surely most qualified to talk, and that is the content of my heart.

And my heart struggles within me; two warring poems battle for speech: one a dirge for those who were not saved and who were shown no mercy, the other a song of redemption.

My son, my only son, is named for my uncle, my father's brother Mihaly, born in the Hungarian countryside shortly after World War One. He was firstborn of seven, named for his father's father. Much was expected of him. He was short but vain and he lifted stacks of chairs to build in width what he lacked in height. He lifted books too, great tomes of Talmud preparing for entrance to the fiercely competitive Rabbinic Seminary in Budapest, the only way a healthy Jewish male could avoid the draft.

Mihaly was the leader of the family; as food became scarce under Facism, he had the idea to raise pigeons for sustenance and would coax my father out of his fear of the dark with shadow puppet plays and taught him Maimonides, Jewish philosophy and mathematics. He wasn't frightened to fight anti-semitic hooligans, "unlike me," my father says, "it never *occurred* to me to fight back, I just ran away."

Mihaly was admitted to the Budapest Seminary, and the fashion was to become expert in a non-curriculum subject, the more obscure the better. Sanskrit, and dead languages were popular but Mihaly chose French. Most of the boys in the Seminary had to

support themselves and Mihaly was appointed Minister of Finance so to speak, responsible for finding each student a job, so they could be both educated and fed.

When the Nazis invaded Hungary and the Rabbinic Seminary was dissolved, Mihaly disguised himself as a French prisoner of war and worked in a bakery. One morning, when Mihaly's father, my grandfather, woke in a German slave labor camp, he told his family "I dreamed my father came to me and said Michl ist chai," but it was a false dream; just about then Mihaly was murdered. Jews discovered in Budapest were grabbed by the Arrow Cross and shot into the Danube, a river running red blood as the Nile of Egypt.

My father put up a stone, a matseiva, for his brother when he returned from the camps, and when my father joined the Budapest Rabbinic Seminary the few who could remember, called my father the "little Hammer" even when he grew taller and lived to a greater age than his oldest brother ever could.

This is my dirge, my winter song.

But my redemption song flows forth from it.

My son Mikhael and I also wished a matseiva, a memorial to our uncle. We wanted to erect something that would honor his young work, and so we have created a program to give abandoned teens a chance to be educated and to be fed, and from that chance, to form themselves a life.

Mikhael and I visited the program, and heard hard stories. We heard of children runaways, drug addicts, prostitutes, with criminal but no educational records. We heard of one girl who had not left her bed for 2 years, not for school, not for work. And then one day she turned 18 and she said to herself "now is the time for Service." In Israel, religious girls and consciencious objectors and others do community work instead of military work. All their childhood kids chat about their service, what they are going to

do when they grow up. And so, this girl woke up out of a 2 year slumber and contacted the National Service system, but the system is not able to absorb volunteers who need more than they can give.

So there are private organizations that find a way for every volunteer to contribute. “What do you have to give?” the social worker asked the girl who had been abed for 2 years. What indeed! But they found her a position with autistic children and she learned the latest methods and she got out of bed every day and became an expert and she is too busy now to join the reunions of her National Service class, she has a job, a vocation, a meaning, a reason to keep getting out of bed.

I told the social workers I did not believe their stories, how children without hope can become one by one, with loving guidance and work that is appropriate for them, can become full and discard self-hating ways. They laughed at me for my cynicism.

There are societies where children who wake up from their slumber at 18 go and kill other children of the same age. There are others where at 18 years they old seal themselves in monasteries and study obscure texts, and there are those where children wake and say “Now it is time to give.” And scholars of the human mind have discovered this remarkable thing: that one sure route to happiness is through helping others, that giving of yourself to people heals the healer. When you give, you are the greatest receiver.

After Moses took the Children of Israel of Egypt and split the Sea and crossed it on dry land, he and they burst out in song, the song of the sea, “I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously”. And Miriam, too, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron and Moses, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

The preeminent Biblical commentator Rashi notices the differences: the men praise God with their words and voices, the women praise God with their words, their voices, their bodies and their musical instruments. Moses' song, Rashi says *ala al libo* popped into his heart, inspired by the moment.

And the women, how did slave women learn to dance a dance of freedom and where did they get the musical instruments? They had just left Egypt in a terrible hurry, they couldn't even let the dough rise, they ran at midnight with the Egyptians at their heels. Who had the care, the thought even to carry instruments with them?

Rashi says this: *muvtachot hayu tsadkaniot shebador* the righteous women of the generation were certain that the Holy One blessed be He did miracles for them and so they took timbrels out of Egypt. Several hundred years before, those same women had defied the murderous Pharaoh's order to kill the male children of Israel. And the moment they knew they had been saved from death despite their infamy, they started collecting instruments, planning the song of their redemption.

Beni, yechidi asher ahavti, my son, my only son, that I have loved, I tell you this. **Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.** Those things we inherit from our fathers we must earn in order to possess them. But those things we have from our mothers come free, just like her milk. And this is what I bequeath to you.

When the darkness comes, and darkness will surely come in your life, as it does in every life on earth, at that very moment, begin to search the tools to build the instrument that will be played in the song sung at the redemption. It may not be you who plays that instrument, it may be a grandchild or a nephew or a child a hundred generations removed, but if you build the instrument, the song will be sung.