

Three Lives
Yom Kippur 5769
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Last night, I shared this year's version of our annual Kol Nidre tradition, which is a list of people who passed away since last Yom Kippur whose lives impacted ours or whose lives contributed in some meaningful or memorable way to the world as we know it. And when I finished reading it I mentioned that there were three people who were not on that list who I would be talking about this morning, and invited you to go home and talk about who that might be. I have no doubt that you got one of them. You may have gotten another. But I doubt you got the third, though it was not a trick question. It's not always a good strategy to give away the end of the speech at the beginning, but here I think it is fair to do just that. The three people not on last night's list but who I'm going to dedicate some time to this morning are Tim Russert, Randy Pausch, and Irena Sendler.

There is injustice in the world and there is unfairness and there are things we don't understand. We have proof of this in our own lives. And we have this question: How is it possible that of all people, Tim Russert is missing out on this presidential election? Now I'll admit a little bias here. I'm going to tell you something about myself you might have a hard time believing. When I was growing up, if I had a free Sunday morning (which wasn't often because I was always in Hebrew school, which is probably not something you might have a hard time believing!) I watched, not Meet the Press which was not as highly regarded way back then, but This Week with David Brinkley. It was one of my favorite shows. More recently I'm usually at minyan on Sunday mornings so I wasn't as up to date on Meet the Press as I otherwise would have might have been, but from the election coverage, and the white boards, and the insightful commentary that he always seemed to be ready to share, I was a big fan of Tim Russert.

He was, and you don't need me to tell you, a titan of his medium, and he became a television news star with, as one friend noted, a face that looked like it had been carved out of potatoes. He was anti-glitz – he would joke that he had three personal tailors who

went by the names L, L, and Bean. His style on his show was legendary – tough questions, backed up by long quotes and often controversial or contradictory statements from the mouth of the guests, with the simple invitation to them to “explain that.” Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin said that the only politician she knew that would give Tim the answer he was seeking was Abraham Lincoln, which was “Yes, you’re right. I have changed my position. I’d like to believe I’m smarter today than yesterday.” Tim Russert worked in a medium increasingly defined by glitz and glamour, and stood all of that on its head to be the most respected guy at his network or any other, and he did it, as his friend Al Hunt said, by turning to “the oldest virtues and verities in the profession: preparation, integrity, fairness, accountability, chalkboards, tough but civil, and an enormous respect for his viewers and the noble calling of politics. He made it informative, interesting, compelling.”

But this is not a tribute, it’s not the forum for a tribute. It’s an opportunity to look at the lives lived by those who are now gone and to absorb the lessons they exemplified. Most of us will not, and don’t want to and aren’t called to be newsmen or newswomen. And while we can certainly learn from the legendary dedication Tim Russert showed for his profession, his wife, his son, and his many friends and millions of fans, and while we can and should be inspired by his feelings for his dad, Big Russ, and for dads everywhere, there is something else. The tributes to Tim Russert went beyond his professionalism and workplace accomplishment to something else which I thought was profound and inspirational, something that those of us outside of his newsroom community had little knowledge of before his death in June. A couple of quotes will deliver the point.

Mike Barnacle said that his friend Tim Russert was “a guy who was uniquely without envy. Tim enjoyed your success, took pride in your accomplishments. Maria Shriver said ‘he loved helping people. He loved helping people who worked for him. He loved helping strangers. He loved anybody who he thought he could help. And with that same Russert radar, he just knew who among us needed his help.’” Doris Kearns Goodwin said ‘it is the character of the man that tells the bigger story, the warmth, sensitivity, integrity, fairness, and fundamental decency. His capacity to transmit his cheerful strength to

others, reach out to people, pick up their emotions, put himself in their shoes, inspire their trust...’ He told Maria Shriver on the day she started working at NBC after having been fired by her previous network, “Look, I was also educated by the nuns. I was educated by the Jesuits. I’m Irish Catholic, too. There aren’t that many of us here in this building. But if we stick together, we’ll be just fine.”

The next time I’m tempted to think that someone else’s accomplishments somehow diminish mine, the next time I try to take the easy way out of a hard question about our tradition or about my life, the next time an opportunity comes up to block someone else from achieving what they want to because it seems that their getting what they want will limit my ability to get what I want – those are the moments I’m going to try to think of the lessons of this life which could only be taught by those who knew him well.

According to them, Tim Russert valued your dreams as much as he valued his own, and he was willing to help you achieve yours without the expectation that you would do the same for him. It seems to me that this impression that his friends had of him are as important, if not more important, than the on-air personality who many Americans will still miss especially on election night.

If there is someone the world lost this year who will be remembered under the banner of empowering the dreams of others, it is Professor Randy Pausch. Pausch became a Youtube sensation, generating now over 7 million viewings, for his so-called Last Lecture, a common event on college campuses all over in which a favorite professor is called on to give his or her ideal last lecture. As you probably know, when Pausch gave his, it really was his last lecture, his legacy, to his students and to his children. He had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer shortly before he was slated to give the speech. Though many counseled him to back out, he embraced the opportunity and gave a riveting and engaging lecture which he began with two anecdotes.

First he said that shortly before his lecture he had been told that the lecture series name was being changed from Last Lecture to Journeys. And he thought ‘darn, just when I thought I had nailed the format they go and change it on me.’ This gives you a sense of

his attitude going into the presentation, and if that doesn't, this will. He said that although he knew that his family was more important than anything else he could talk about, that wouldn't be his topic. And, the talk wouldn't be about religion or spirituality, although, he admitted, "I recently underwent a deathbed conversion. I bought a Mac." And he said that if "I'm not as depressed as you were expecting – I'm sorry to disappoint you." In an incredible hour, he gave detail by detail his guide to how he had tried to live his life before his diagnosis, and it was clear to everyone watching that his illness had changed nothing about his approach to the time he had left. Talk about a yardstick by which to measure ourselves. What would you do differently if you had this or if you had that, or, God forbid, if you were diagnosed with this or diagnosed with that? When the answer is nothing, you are probably doing something right.

He talked about his own childhood dreams and how he was able to achieve or come close to achieving many of them. He wanted to be an astronaut – he got to go on the plane that creates a few seconds of zero gravity. He wanted to be in the NFL, and although he didn't achieve it he learned so much from playing for coaches he learned to trust that he walked away with life lessons that informed his work as a teacher. He wanted to write a Worldbook article, and the entry on Virtual Reality is now his. He wanted to be Captain Kirk, later revised to 'I want to meet Captain Kirk' and he collaborated on a book with William Shatner and even got a line in a Star Trek movie. And he wanted to win stuffed animals at the carnival. I don't know how much ring-toss practice it took, but with him on that stage at Carnegie Mellon were some of the biggest stuffed animals around.

As he checked the achievement of these dreams off of his list he began to realize something which became much more the heart of his last lecture. Helping others to achieve their dreams is often even more meaningful than achieving your own. And in watching the full version of the lecture I realized that Russert and Pausch share at least two of the same strands of DNA – they both couldn't believe their good fortune that they got to wake up every single day to do exactly what they loved to do, and they were as concerned and oftentimes more concerned with helping other people to fulfill their dreams than they were with fulfilling their own. Gratitude and selflessness are two traits

that any community, and any individual, would be hard-pressed to possess in sufficient quantity. Out of these two, they overflowed.

What did Pausch do to actualize his desire to enable the dreams of others? He took on students, in a way that was above and beyond the requirements of his tenured position. And when he realized that taking students was too small a scale for his liking, he worked with his students to develop an interdisciplinary course that would engage people in the process that he loved to be involved with – to get people with different backgrounds and skill sets to collaborate to create something better than they ever could have come up with on their own. And when he saw that teaching one course at a time was too small a scale for his liking he took some more of his students and they developed a teaching tool called Alice (as in Alice in Wonderland) which exposes elementary school aged children to computer programming through playing games and telling stories. It is still being improved and he didn't live to see its latest incarnation, but he did know that an early version of the program had already touched many kids. And about that he said, "I, like Moses, get to see the promised land, but I won't get to set foot in it. And that's OK, because I can see it. And the vision is clear. Millions of kids having fun while learning something hard. That's pretty cool. I can deal with that as a legacy." Pretty cool indeed.

Who is the third person – who is Irena Sendler? Irena Sendler is all of what we just spoke about multiplied by the highest number you can think of. When David Wolpe gave a sermon about her life to his synagogue in Los Angeles he started by saying, "I know this seems presumptuous to say but you are very lucky to be here this morning, to hear about one of the greatest people of the 20th century, Irena Sendler, who died on May 12th, at the age of 98. You may not have appreciated how unbelievable this human being was, how much we owe her, and how we should not only know her name but our children and grandchildren should know her name as well." When David Wolpe, one of the finest orators in the rabbinic world, starts a sermon with the words 'you are lucky to be in synagogue today because of what I'm about to tell you,' you listen and you listen well.

He described her life. She wasn't Jewish, she was Polish. She was a social worker and when at the age of 30 WW II broke out and hundreds of thousands of Jews were trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, she decided that she and a group of 30 people she organized all by herself would save the children of the Warsaw Ghetto.

How do you do this when no one is allowed in and no one is allowed out? Her ally was typhus, a disease which killed Germans and Jews alike. To prevent non-Jews from being infected, the Germans allowed medicine in and out of the ghetto to combat the disease. This was how she and her team got in – but then what? She developed a rescue system. First she had to go to Jewish parents and convince them to give her their children. Sometimes they did, and sometimes they didn't. Second, she had to smuggle them out of the ghetto and she used a variety of means including through underground tunnels that ran under the Warsaw courthouse. And then she had to decide where to put them. She put them in sympathetic homes, convents, and in countries that had not yet been invaded. And she made a plan as to how to reunite them when the war ended: she wrote down characteristics of parents and children on slips of paper and she buried those papers and they were uncovered after the war. She did not escape her work unscathed, but she survived.

Irena Sendler saved over 2500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto. And that's not all. She saved their children and their grandchildren through all the generations. Tens of thousands of Jews are in the world today who wouldn't have been here if it weren't for her. She had good role modeling from her own family. Her father treated Typhus victims including Jews who no one else would treat. At the university she attended she refused to sit on the benches reserved for Aryans and instead sat with the Jewish students. But the strength of conviction that led her to do what she did, to risk everything, even though she herself had a husband and children, that strength was her own.

And this is what she said about her own heroism: "Every child saved by my help is a justification of my presence on earth and not a title to glory." She did what she did because that is what she thought that was what she was supposed to do. She said if she

were able to write a book about her experiences it wouldn't be about what she did but about the heroism of the Jewish mothers of the ghetto who entrusted their children to her.

How did the world start learning about Irena Sendler? In the fall of 1999, a rural Kansas teacher encouraged four students to work on a year long National History Day project which would among other things; extend the boundaries of the classroom to families in the community, contribute to history learning, teach respect and tolerance, and meet their classroom motto, "He who changes one person, changes the entire world". Their teacher showed them a short clipping from a March 1994 issue of U.S. News and World Report, which said, 'Irena Sendler saved 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942-43'. He told the girls that this might be a typographical error, since he had not heard of this woman or this story.

The students began their research and looked for primary and secondary sources throughout the year. And they found out it was not a typo, it was real, Irena Sendler was real...and she was still alive. And they wrote letters to her and they got meaningful letters back and eventually they got to meet her and to interview her. And they wrote a play called Life in a Jar which has been brought to dozens of communities in the United States and is scheduled to come to Boca on November 8th in Zinman Hall and I hope you'll go and I hope you'll take your kids too.

It's critical that they hear stories of great heroism, and it's critical that we are inspired by the right kind of hero. The life and the work of Tim Russert and the exceptional optimism of Randy Pausch are exemplary and we should remember them with pride and we should pray for their families as well. They changed many lives and inspired others to pursue their own dreams. And the name Irena Sendler has to be on our lips because she was able to accomplish something absolutely real that practically defies description – she, on her own, a little Polish lady, gave rise to thousands of Jewish lives and the dreams they would have a chance to fulfill because of her dedication, her courage, and her sacrifice.

The people we remember during Yizkor had their own dreams and for many of them those dreams sit right here in this room, they are tucked into comfortable beds in our homes each and every night. They gave us the opportunity to dream our own dreams, and I'm not sure there is any greater gift in the world to receive than that. If we pursue our meaningful dreams with effort, with dedication and with passion, and if we in turn empower others to fulfill their dreams as well, then we will have accepted a sacred task, we will have continued a sacred journey, and our lives too will be remembered as a blessing.

G'mar chatimah tovah.