

MOVING ON
By
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Before his illness, after which he didn't care, my father went to temple every Saturday. Jewish Orthodox before his marriage, he was a member of a conservative congregation thereafter. But, during his illness, when he wanted answers, comfort and relief, his faith deserted him and he dropped his temple membership, never to return. He died suddenly in 1980 from an aneurism that lodged in his brain.

It is 1990. I have returned to the temple of my father for the gaiety and adventure of a singles dance, ready to swap widowhood for marriage. It is here, at Temple Israel, in White Plains, NY, where I received my religious education, celebrated my Bat Mitzvah and married Michael, who died in 1988. Entering the building, I shelve the past, focus on the singles dance in the social hall and look forward to the beginning of my "next" life.

Round tables, adorned with a white paper cloths and a tiny vase containing a mum and a fern, are set up in a semi-circle on the inlaid marble floor. Completing the circle are three six foot rectangular tables echoing the round table motif. Sodas, water and a pink punch are set up on one, two large cookie platters on the next and on the last, paper products, cream and sugar plus three 24 cup coffee urns for coffee, decaf and hot water. The DJ is on the raised stage playing fifties and sixties music, with a few forties hits for the older singles.

Bravely entering this altered reality, I take a seat at the nearest table and check out the singles. The scene is reminiscent of junior high school. There were men on one side and women on the other. Of the people dancing, the women were at least fifteen years younger than I and their partners were men my age and younger. The seated men, all of whom looked like my grandfather, were watching the couples on the dance floor and ignoring the seated women, who were my age and older. My anticipation evaporates when I realize that I am too old for the younger men and too young for the rest. I retreat into myself and move away from the crowd.

From my vantage point, I can see the closed, ornate, carved wood doors of the synagogue. After a moment of indecision, I go inside. My reaction is immediate and visceral. I am overwhelmed by vivid memories, magnified by the stillness and the majesty of the sanctuary. In a deep part of my soul, I feel at home and safe. My dad is here.

Without hesitation, I sit in the first seat in the second to last row on the right hand side of the center aisle, where my father sat every Saturday. The moon lit stained glass windows, are a shadow of their glorious colors that glow in the morning light during services. I can hear the ancient Hebrew hymns, my father singing from memory, echoing off the deep toned wood walls. Looking up, I see the bemah where, on the night of my Bat Mitzvah, I lit the candles and chanted my Haftorah. In front of and below the bemah is the first of the many rows of deep maroon velvet seats. It is where my mother and father, Roslyn and Noah Levine, sat, their faces mirroring their joy. Not only was I their daughter, I was the first girl in both families to be Bat Mitzvah'd.

In the back of the bemaah are two huge modern brass menorahs, sentries for the Ark, home of the sacred Torahs and the Eternal Light. I can't remember how often I watched my father honored with an aliyah (a prayer over the open Torah), an hagbah (holding the Torah) or a gelilah (dressing the Torah). Or, as a Torah holder, he would carry the Torah in the procession around the synagogue. Most of the time, however, he was an usher, with a ladybug.

I don't know when the ladybug tiepin first appeared, but he always wore it on Saturdays. A smart dresser, he would take care to put it in a different place every week. It looked real. So real, in fact, that when he greeted all his friends and guests of the congregation, many would try to flick the Ladybug off. Dad would counter with wave and move on to the next group of people.

On Saturdays, my mother drove me and my siblings to Temple and left. She never went to service unless she had to. Her job was to prepare the Sabbath meal for us after Temple.

When my father saw us in our in our Shabbat clothes, he would be so proud. He would wave us over to him and the seats he had saved. His kissing, hugging, smiling, and fussing would give way to shushing as we settled in.

I can see him standing tall with thinning light brown hair, twinkling blue eyes behind thick glasses and somewhat portly. He always carried himself with a bearing of achievement, confidence and contentment. I can hear voice reading passages from the prayer book and his quiet snoring during the sermon. "Nudge me if I start to make noise," he would say just before he began to nod off. And I always did.

After the service, we would gather with all the worshipers for a repast that would vary in quantity and quality depending on the celebration being held on that particular Saturday. The Rabbi and Cantor would say the prayers over the wine and bread, and everyone would partake. We children would look for the bowtie cookies, eating one or two and stuffing another one or two into our pockets for the walk home.

We lived a little over a mile away, and although my dad walked to temple alone, we always walked home with him. This was a very special time, his time just for us. We would talk and look for "finds," odd bits and pieces along the side of the road.

Of all our walks, my favorites were when my father would tell us stories. "Once upon a time there was a blue princess who decreed everything she looked upon should be blue, including the grass, trees and flowers, until one day..." or "In a little village, Shimmel, a small man with a nose so big he used tablecloths for handkerchiefs, caught a cold and had to sneeze..." And, that sneeze, which threatened to decimate a whole village, didn't happen for a good thirty-five minutes until we were almost home.

During the story, without warning, he'd pause and point to the gutter. "What's that?" We'd stop, check out the tossed or lost treasure like a colorful bottle cap, pencil, stone or key and then he'd continue his story. To this day, when I walk, I still look for treasures along the roadside.

He must have looked like a pied piper, walking tall with four children in tow. It was a wonderful time and the hour walk was often over too soon.

As we got older, the stories changed to talks about the events and concerns in our lives. Then, when my children were able to join us, the stories began anew and we were all young again.

The tickling sensation of tears streaming down my face distracts me and brings me back to the present. I miss the sense of security I had, when things were ordered, predictable and safe; when my father could take care of anything and everything.

My very first car was an old Buick with a large shiny grate in front, protecting the engine. It was built like a truck and had manual drive. It was blue and it was mine. I was driving during my first weeks as a licensed driver, when I turned a corner, over-corrected on the steering, and side-swiped a little Datsun, parked on the side of the road. Screaming owners, blaring sirens, blinking lights and police interrogation overwhelmed me.

Shaking and terrified, I inched my way home, trying not to break any rules or, God forbid, get into another accident. As soon as I could, I called my father, prepared for his screaming rage and the end of my driving career. Instead, he was calm and compassionate. He didn't yell or accuse me of anything. He made sure I was okay and said he'd be home at his usual time and he would take care of everything. After I hung up the phone, I cried from relief and gratitude.

My father made me feel special. Both he and my husband were always there for me and when they needed me, I was there for them. My sense of loss and aloneness is intensified by the muffled sounds of music and merriment in the adjoining room.

I look around once more and close my eyes in silent communion with all that was. I cannot bear to go and yet I cannot stay. I stand, wipe my eyes and say the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. A few more tears and I decide to leave, pausing at the door for one last look. In that moment, the air changed, my energy surged and my mind focused. I can't tell you why or how, but in less than a millisecond I knew – it is time. I am ready. I am moving on.