

## Josh

Lin and I joined this congregation a little over twenty-seven years ago, just in time for the high holidays. She was pregnant at the time. Rabbi Sack gave a sermon that began, “I need to talk about Jed.” I don’t have a sermon, but I do need to be here. I want to tell you about the experience of being Joshua’s father.

In reflecting on my son’s short life, I was reminded of a column by Russell Baker in the Times Magazine years ago that stayed with me, about the lost distinction in meaning between two adjectives, *serious* and *solemn*. Shakespeare, according to Baker, is serious; David Susskind is solemn. (This was a while ago.) New York and Chicago are serious cities; Washington, Miami Beach, and all of California are solemn. Humphrey Bogart movies about private eyes are serious; contemporary movies that are sophisticated jokes about Humphrey Bogart movies are solemn.

Children at the beginning of life are often serious, and it is precisely this quality that makes them a far more interesting class of people than adults, who are, by and large, solemn. Adolescence is a stage of development in which the organism struggles to regain its dignity by recovering what Baker calls “childhood’s genius for seriousness”. The struggle is generally a lost cause, ending in solemnity.

“Childhood’s genius for seriousness”. If you knew Josh at all, you know that he was a bit of a clown. If you knew him a little better, you know that his unique and original sense of humor was at once silly and serious, and at times obscure. “I’m Josh. No, I’m Josh. No, I’m Josh.”

The humor, such as it was, was always there. You may recall that he was articulate at an early age. For his parents, it was a profound blessing to have such a clear window into that pure and precious mind. You may not have known that in the beginning, his Spanish was stronger than his English, thanks to Enedina, who took care of him when Lin and I were at work. Dede, he called her. “Vaminos afuera, Dede.” I remember an evening when Dede’s boy friend picked her up at the house. I greeted him, “Hi, Jose.” Joshua laughed and said, “Jose [in his native accent], Daddy call you ‘Jose’ [mimicking mine].” Of course, this was for my benefit, or he would have said it in Spanish.

His favorite movie at that time was *Home Alone*. He watched it over and over—and we watched with him—always laughing at the same spots as if he were seeing it for the first time. He inherited from his mother, and from my father, a taste for slapstick, an undeniably serious art form. “Uh-oh, bad man hurt the penis!”

Then there was *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. This one fed Josh’s fascination with the city, for which I claim some responsibility. On his first visit to New York, we took a long walk through the Lower East Side (Orchard Street, Delancey Street), Joshua strapped to my chest. I wanted him to know his roots. (I really had no idea what I was doing, at any point during those twenty-six years, eight-and-a-half months.) Anyway, he had the Home Alone 2 poster hanging in his room—Kevin, the protagonist, with the Statue of Liberty, which for some reason was an important icon for Josh.

So on our next trip, I took him to the top of the World Trade Center, because I knew he’d be thrilled by the view of the city and the harbor. In fact, he was stupefied with boredom. We rode the elevator back down to the lobby. There was a mural of the harbor. Joshua’s eyes

opened wide. He pointed. “Daddy! Statue of Liberty! Statue of Liberty!” It was only much later that it dawned on me: he saw my frustration and wanted to make the most of it. This two-year-old was playing me, and it was neither the first time nor the last.

I loved taking him to movies, just to watch him watch. Lin did not always approve of my choices, but I had a foolish notion that nothing could hurt him as long as I was with him. When he was three, we saw *Geronimo*, a thoughtful film full of contradictions, and some violence. In fact, I remember sitting next to him thinking, maybe Lin was right about this one, but he seemed okay. A few days later, he was in the car with me, looking pensive. Finally, he said, “I still can’t decide if Geronimo was a good guy or a bad guy.”

In another serious moment, a few years later, he had this to say: “Mommy believes in G-d. You told me I have to make up my own mind. I don’t think you believe in G-d, but I don’t know why you go to shul.” Yes, I had heard all this somewhere before, and one of the perquisites of having children is that it allows us to plagiarize with impunity. So I paraphrased Harry Golden’s father: “Well, Josh, people go to shul for different reasons. Goldblatt goes to talk to G-d. I go to talk to Goldblatt.” I think I got away with one there.

Maybe our best time together was Memorial Day weekend after his eleventh birthday—a weekend for just the two of us, in New York of course. We went to a ball game. Josh had decided he was a Mets fan because his old man was a Mets fan. He wanted a real baseball cap—he held in contempt the standard issue little league cap with the adjustable strap in back. He needed a cap that was designed for his head. We found such a cap in a shop on 42nd Street—a splendid black felt cap with blue Mets logo. He wore it to the game the next day. Mike Piazza hit a walk-off three-run homer.

That night, we saw *Cabaret* on Broadway. We were walking down the sidewalk toward the theater, both of us in our new suits. We passed two young women, in their twenties, pretty. They were both staring at Josh, smiling, giggling. I said, “Josh, I think those girls were looking at you.” He said, “I think they were looking at us.” Maybe that was my favorite moment of all. I wish that all of you could have experienced that genuine love and compassion. (I know that some of you did.)

The bar mitzvah. Here I’ll just remind you that he did it all—what kid does birchat hachodesh?—and he davened like an angel. He and I learned the services together—just fifteen minutes every morning, in the car on the way to school. I think many of you will agree that the greatest gift a son can give his father is to surpass him in his abilities and achievements. In this regard I’ve been fortunate, between Joshua’s flair for languages and Solomon’s uncanny knack for all things mechanical and electronic.

But it was about the time of the bar mitzvah when things took a bad turn. You may want to blame me for this. I was worried that he wasn’t learning enough at the Day School, maybe too much Hebrew and not enough Latin. We talked about Kealing Junior High, the magnet school. His only question was, “Can I take algebra there?” So Kealing it was. My own failure to see this coming, or to do anything about it, was colossal, given that I had gone through something similar forty years earlier. Suddenly, in the seventh grade, you find that it’s no longer enough to be smart. Algebra requires discipline. A whole new skill set is needed, and if it’s not there, your world comes crashing down. It’s frightening and humiliating. And the magnet school, it seems to me, is designed for disaster. Much more pressure than I ever knew as a kid. I think he looked around and said, “I guess I’m not really one of these kids; maybe

I'm one of those kids." And that was that.

Drug addiction is the most solemn of human conditions, and heroin is in a class by itself. Of course, it takes a while to get there, but for Josh, that's where it was always headed—he was all in with everything he did. This was Joshua's adolescent struggle for dignity. A wretched cycle: detox, rehab, a new beginning, the fight, the surrender, and so on. There were times when he lived on the street. On each iteration, he fell to a new low. Countless therapists, counselors, and out-patient clinics along the way. In the end, he decided that none of this was of any value—he had to make it on his own.

In June, he checked into Shoal Creek Hospital for a brief period of withdrawal. When he got out, he was shaky, but positive and determined, with a new vision of the future. We had heard all this before many times, but we listened. He told me that he had decided that one thing he wanted in life was a lot of money, and that he had found an interest in finance. In fact, he did some research and sketched an ambitious curriculum, beginning in the Fall semester with some on-line courses. At the end of August, he and Lin drove up to Rhode Island, to our home on Block Island, where we hoped he would be safe. The course work was more rigorous than you might imagine. A lot of reading, writing papers, tests administered by the island librarian. He worked hard and excelled. As the weeks passed, we watched his confidence grow, as did our hope and our pride. We had not seen this before. I visited when I could, but mostly we communicated by phone, email, text. For the first time in years, he had much to say—I couldn't get off the phone. At one point, he told me he was a bit frustrated because he wasn't learning as quickly as he would like. The next week, he showed me a paper he had written and said, "I realized there was no way I could have done anything like this a couple of months ago." He finally saw himself succeeding, and this was always what he needed. He was winning the struggle.

The work was not his only serious activity on the island. He was passionate about fishing; he went out every day, whatever the weather, all over the island, at whatever odd hours he deemed optimal. It was not a good season and he would go for days, maybe weeks, without a catch, but he stayed with it. When I was assembling a minyan for the funeral, I called Sol, who works at the bait shop and was Joshua's fishing mentor. I had to tell him what had happened. He said, "Josh was so hard on himself. When they weren't biting, he was sure he was doing something wrong. But when he finally caught the big striper, it was all worth it." If you want to see that fish, by the way, it's tattooed on Solomon's arm.

I don't expect that we'll ever really understand what happened. It makes no sense. And I don't know where it goes from here. But I do know this, and this is what I want to tell you: Lin and I are grateful that we were able to see him winning the struggle and looking to the future, and that we are now able to remember our Joshua the way he deserves to be remembered. And I am very fortunate to have an extraordinary son who still needs me.

A few of you were able to stay in contact with Josh during these last months. To the rest of you, I would say that if you didn't know him thirteen years or so ago, then you didn't know the real Josh. That is, I would say that if I hadn't attended a gathering of his contemporaries last week and read what they've written on his Facebook page. We have learned that our son was a man who touched many people, deeply, even in his pain. For that we are also grateful.

I'm Josh.