

A Cemetery Plot: My 60th Birthday Present to Myself

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Fear abounds in this week's double portion of Torah, *Chukat-Balak*.

First, the Children of Israel find themselves without water, legitimate cause for concern. Among all the options available to them, though, the Israelites jump directly to despair. They ask Moses, "Why have you brought the Eternal's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, ...? There is not even water to drink!"¹ Never mind that Moses has successfully called upon God to get the Israelites out of multiple mortal threats before this one. The people are scared to death.

If Torah were a novel that we were reading for the first time, even the most untrained reader would know how that one ends: God provides the water. The Israelites survive.

Still, we can understand the Israelites' fear. The prospect of death is frightening. Admittedly, people frequently tell me that they aren't afraid of death. At least not their own. I'm not so convinced.

Contemporary American society has erected effective strategies to facilitate powerful death denial. The funeral industry employs euphemisms to avoid the word "death." Preparation of corpses for viewing further enables denial, as bodies are displayed in such a way that people exclaim, "She looks so peaceful," or, "He looks just like he is sleeping." Most Jewish families don't avail themselves of that kind of viewing, but we are nonetheless influenced by its impact.

Many of us rightly engage in a variety of strategies aimed at achieving longevity—that is, to delay our deaths. Whether avoiding tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful substances, exercising regularly, striving to eat healthy, or dodging places and activities we deem to be dangerous, we are rationally engaged in preserving the bodies God has granted to us. We are eager to extend our time to enjoy our families, to explore the world, to pursue our life's work. At the same time, we may also be trying, at least subconsciously, to exert some control over death. That, too, is a form of denial.

Birthdays, and particularly the ones we call “milestones,” make that denial more difficult—unless, for example, you happen to turn sixty while both of your parents are living and in darned good health and amidst a congregation blessed with scores of vibrant octogenarians and nonagenarians, not to mention a healthy handful over the age of one hundred. If one were given to denial, one could be deluded into imagining a guarantee of another quarter century or more of life and good health. One can hope, and one can work at it. And one may be right. But guaranteed? No.

I have referred to myself, only half-joking, as the denial buster. As a Mussar student, when I consider the *middah* of *emet*, the soul-trait of truth, I have learned that I err on a side that most do not. I am unlikely to lie. The downside is that I tend to confront myself and others with truths that we might prefer to avoid. That inclination is tempered by a generally positive outlook. Facing reality is critical if one would plan for the future effectively.

I learned to prepare for death at an early age. I have often quipped that, although he is proudly Jewish, my father’s most fervent religious devotion is to estate planning. By the time I went to college, I had executed a Will—and more importantly, I had a Living Will, a medical power of attorney, and an organ donor card. At a later age—one might say, for example, age sixty—I recommend that folks determine what they will want done for them when they die. Families should not be left wondering where or whether we wish to be buried or scrambling to purchase plots and make funeral arrangements at time of need.

Congregation B’nai Israel is blessed that our forebears established a magnificent cemetery. We will mark its sesquicentennial next year. In our own generation, volunteers and donors have assured its beauty and perpetuity. Most recently, Richard Estelita, supported by Larry Alman, Eileen Hamilton, and our Cemetery Foundation, have digitized cemetery records and made the location of graves in the Temple cemetery searchable online. Plots are available by contacting Richard or the Temple office, and most will find the price quite reasonable.

I do not, however, plan to be buried here. I love being your rabbi, and I hope to continue to age sixty-five. Five years from tonight, I pray that the congregation will be prepared, for the first time since 1963, to welcome a new spiritual leader at a time of transition but not of congregational trauma. Aware as I am of the challenges of serving even a sizeable congregation in a small and geographically isolated Jewish community, I plan to move away—probably to my hometown, Houston. I will get out of my successor’s way, even as I’ll be eager to return to visit beloved friends and to provide rabbinic coverage at my successor’s request.

In December, Robert, Daniel, and I visited Houston and New Orleans. Robert and I had done some interesting genealogical research, and we wanted to visit cemeteries where our ancestors are buried, many of them in those two cities.

Though I was born and raised in Houston, and I had driven past Congregation Beth Yeshurun's old cemetery hundreds of times on the way to and from downtown, I had never been inside that cemetery, where one of my great-grandmothers is interred. My paternal grandfather's mother died when my grandfather was a young child. His father is buried with his second wife, my dad's *de facto* grandmother, beside my grandparents, in another cemetery. Bessie Davis Block was rarely mentioned in my childhood, but she was my great-grandmother, and I knew she was buried with her parents, so I thought it worth a look. It was.

Then, we found a Block family plot nearby. My great-great-grandparents, Mary and Aaron Block, are buried there, along with their granddaughter who died as a child and a first cousin of my father's who died as an infant. It looked to me, though, like there could be available spaces. The last interment there was in 1934. I was not shopping for a cemetery plot, but I had found one, which I purchased from the distant relative who owned it.

I plan to be buried next to my great-great-grandmother. Mary Block died in 1929, but she lives on in family lore. After the family immigrated to New York in 1883, she is said to have exclaimed, "I did not leave the *shtetl* in Lithuania to come to a *shtetl* in America!" In 1888, the family decamped to Houston.

All four of my grandparents' final resting places are in Houston. The oldest grave the boys and I visited in New Orleans is that of my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, Katherine LaBatt—born in Germany, of Sephardic heritage and died in New Orleans after having given raised two sons in Charleston, South Carolina.

The first time I visited Little Rock was *in utero*. My family never lived in Arkansas, but in all the states that border it to the south. However, my maternal grandparents grew up in Monroe, Louisiana, not far from Arkansas, and cherished a close relationship, both personal and in a business partnership, with Dave Sherman, who was a member of this congregation. I have been privileged to serve in this region throughout my rabbinic career, and I have found blessing in Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana, having lived in them all—and of course, at another "home," Jacobs Camp, in Mississippi.

The Children of Israel aren't the only ones who are scared to death in this week's Torah reading. Balak, King of Moab, is terrified as the Israelites approach his land. Like so many antisemites to come after him, Balak and the Moabites fear

that the Israelites are too numerous. They imagine mortal danger from a people who are merely passing through, not eager to conquer Moab, but only to reach their own Promised Land. Balak sends a sorcerer, Balaam, to curse the Israelites. It's a long and fascinating story; there's even a talking donkey. In the end, with God's help, Balaam blesses the people: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk'notecha Yisrael*, "How good are your tents, Jacob; your dwellings, Israel" With honest confrontation of our fears, overcoming denial, we, too, can vanquish even the most existential dread, finding blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 20:2-5. (The quoted passage is verses 4-5.)