



Yizkor - Yom Kippur 5770
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Breaking down the barriers before we are gone

It was Shabbat morning, just two weeks ago. We just finished Shabbat services in the library and I had a few things to do to prepare for Selichot and changing our Torah mantles that night. I remembered that the Holocaust scroll in the middle of our ark needed to be tightened. I came in to the empty sanctuary, took the Holocaust scroll from the ark and carefully removed the beautiful cover, crowns and plate. I couldn't just tighten the scroll and put it away, something called me to open it gently and explore.

This beautiful scroll has always called to me. I am an historian of the Holocaust and since childhood have found myself always attracted to the powerful stories of survival and despair of these most tragic moments in Jewish modern life. I have always been in awe of this scroll's beauty in her tall straight stature that seems to remain strong even with her body so thin – almost emaciated compared to the other scrolls in our ark. Yet, this scroll stands taller than all the others.

I opened the scroll and carefully allowed my fingers to gently pass over the creases and bumps on her parchment. I examined the patches that covered her torn body and was sad at the holes and tears in her skin. I couldn't help but take in her scent as I closed my eyes and wondered about the journey she experienced so many years ago – first as a new scroll being danced into the synagogue and lovingly placed in the ark but then, one day, amidst the shouts, the fire and smoke, she was torn from her protective home and thrown out into the dust to simply disappear like her people who were sent into the fire to vanish like smoke.

As I opened my eyes I read the words before me and they were the very words we read just moments ago – *K'doshim t'hi'yu ki kadosh Ani ADONAI Eloheichem* “You shall be holy for I ADONAI your God am holy.”

I then carefully closed the scroll, gently wrapped her in the mantle, placed the plate and yad around the atzei chayim, and placed the crowns once again. I gently returned her to this place of honor in our ark and felt at peace that this scroll was once again in a safe and revered place once again.

Two hours later, I got a disturbing message – my teacher, my rabbinic thesis advisor, the Chancellor of the Hebrew Union College, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk had died. His life came to a close at the same moments that I was so engrossed in our scroll. His life was now like the words on our scroll, etched as memories and stories that now must be carried by his colleagues, his friends, his students.

Dr. Gottschalk's life reflected our scroll and his story was much the same as the story of our scroll.

Born in Oberwesel, Germany, in 1930, Alfred Gottschalk was named after his uncle who fought and died as a German officer in World War I. His family lived in this small Rhineland area for several hundred years but it all came to an abrupt end when his father escaped the Gestapo in 1938, making his way to New York.

Alfred Gottschalk remained in Germany with his mother and family. One day as a nine year old boy in school, the Nazis barged into his class and yelled, "All Jewish children – Raus! Get out! Raus, RAUS! RAUS!!!" Soon after, on November 9, the night of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, the Germans entered his synagogue, removed the scrolls from the ark, tore them to pieces and cast them in the river. In the morning after this obscene destruction, he along with his grandfather fished the wet and torn parchments of these holy scrolls from the river and he was told by his grandfather that it was his obligation to preserve and protect those pieces of parchments and sew them back together. Indeed, this story provides the metaphor for comprehending his life. It was the narrative that would provide the framework for his being, for his would ever after be a career of repair and preservation for the Jewish people and humanity.

Alfred and his mother joined his father in 1939 on a special "above quota" visa created to try and save some of the children in Nazi Germany. But he lost 55 family members in the years to follow. He would have to put the pieces of his life and his people back together again.

Dr. Gottschalk went on to serve the Jewish people and the Reform movement.

He earned a Bachelors degree from Brooklyn College, simultaneously attending the Jewish Institute of Religion's pre-rabbinic courses, entered HUC-JIR in New York in 1952, and transferred to the Cincinnati campus in 1954. Following his ordination and graduation with honors in 1957, Rabbi Gottschalk joined the faculty and administration of HUC-JIR, becoming the Dean of the California School in 1959. He earned his Ph.D. degree in 1965 from the University of Southern California.

As Dean of the Los Angeles campus (1959-1971), he pioneered the establishment of innovative programs: the School of Jewish Communal Service (the first of its kind in America), the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, the Skirball Museum (the second largest Jewish museum collection in America), and the Magnin School of Graduate Studies.

In 1971 succeeded Dr. Nelson Glueck as President of the College-Institute and for the next twenty-five years led HUC-JIR's exponential growth of campuses, programs, and enrollment. In 1996 Gottschalk was named to the newly created position of Chancellor, a position he held through 2000.

Gottschalk's tenure as President (1971-1996) and Chancellor (1996-2000) effected historic milestones. He ordained the first woman rabbi in America (1972), the first woman cantor in America (1975), the first Reform rabbi in Israel (1980), and the first woman rabbi in Israel (1992).[\[i\]](#)

These accomplishments were how many people knew Dr. Gottschalk. Yet, I was very fortunate to know another side to this man who had piercing blue eyes and a gentleness that poured forth from his grand stature. While intimidating at first because of his greatness in size and stature, I found a gentler, caring and compassionate man while I had the opportunity to work very closely with him during my 5th and final year of Rabbinic School.

Before completing our education, rabbis are required to write a Rabbinic thesis. Even before beginning my rabbinic studies, I knew I wanted to write a thesis based on Holocaust education. And after hearing Dr. Gottschalk's story of his own life and having the opportunity to explore his personal library, I knew I wanted to write with him. Yet no student worked with Dr. Gottschalk – he was very committed to his work with the College Institute and could not commit the time to work individually with a student on a thesis. But it was the right time and moment for me to approach him as he was settled in his new role as Chancellor and my thesis proposal intrigued him.

Over the next year, I was able to break through a barrier that many never reached – I was able to spend time with not only Dr. Gottschalk, but Fred, the name he invited me to call him as we explored the complexity of Holocaust education in our world today. I felt honored to see a side of this man who few never met or took the time to uncover for he seemed to be too great a giant to uncover. Fred became more than a teacher, he became a friend – but always a highly revered friend that no matter what would still be held high on a pedestal in my mind.

Each of us meet those who we revere and place on a pedestal. They are those who we wish to emulate, those who we respect greatly, those who we wish to know yet those who we conceive are beyond our reach of having the opportunity to know in a deeper way.

How do we break down the barriers that surround those who touch our lives in order to make a deeper connection? There have been those who have passed this year that were so great and for you and me, we would never know on a personal level. From Walter Cronkite to Farrah Fawcett, to Patrick Swayze and even Michael Jackson, who eluded everyone. These are people who we wanted to know more about their lives and had a strange curiosity about who they really were. Some were very private and their lives remained a mystery, and some, like Farrah Fawcett put their lives on film in order to tell the most private stories of battles and struggles.

Closer to home, there were those who were great in our community whose absence is deeply felt today. Two of our great temple presidents, leaders and visionaries, Alex Sherman and Don Devor left us this year. For decades, both of these men devoted their time, energy and talent to build our congregation and set us on a path to be the congregational family we are today and to dream of what we can become tomorrow. Their lives were accessible to many of us and we were blessed to be brought into their living rooms and get to know the true essence of their beings.

Yet in our own lives, in our own families, or in our own community, there are those whose presence eludes us. Whose story is carefully unfolded only to reveal a small part of who they are. Like the child's game of the carefully folded paper, held between thumb and first fingers of both hands, we count off a number and then carefully only open the flap to the number called to carefully reveal only that which is written on the small space. All other details are left covered, only to be shared when the number is called.

So too might be our lives or the lives of those we love. Pieces covered only to be revealed in certain moments, only to be shared when asked, only to be given when the time is right.

One of the most precious gifts I am given as a rabbi are the opportunities to sit with families at the time when a loved one passes. During these precious moments, the family shares with me stories and antidotes of their loved one in order that I might retell through hesped or eulogy as we begin the process of saying goodbye. So often it happens that stories are shared between family members that were never fully revealed and put together like a puzzle whose pieces are finally all collected in one place. Each family member shares memories and moments that were unique to the relationship shared throughout their life. And now it is, at this time of final farewells that all the pieces are revealed, that all the barriers are broken down and we are presented with the raw story of our loved one's life before us.

But no one wants to wait for the funeral to weave the tapestry of our loved one's life. Why not be able to share it before, be able to expose all of the colors and textures with our loved ones now?

Earlier this summer, I had the opportunity to participate in such a weaving. Don Devor's family gathered one Sunday morning at his and Judy's home. Plates filled with bagels and cups with coffee, we gathered around the living room with Don, Judy, his children and grandchildren. There I sat with pad and pen at the ready, but as fast as I could write, it was hard to keep up with the many stories of Don's life. Minutes turned to two hours and the stories swirled through the memories of each of his loved ones. Throughout the morning, Don and Judy would share their own midrash to each memory and elaborate each detail with their memories. Finally, exhausted from the excitement and the energy expounded to share these precious moments, Don said, "thank you. You all gave me the gift of a dream realized. I always wanted to hear what might be said after I die and you all have shared with me the stories and memories that have shaped your lives." It was a dream come true for him and the whole family to not wait until he was no longer physically able to sit with us and share these stories. It was the gift of his allowing us to break the barrier and truly expose the man he was and the man he would remain in our lives after he was gone. The pieces of Don's Torah were collected that day and sewn together by his family.

So too can each of us, like Don's family, like Dr. Gottschalk when he was a boy, wade through the river of time and collect the precious pieces of life, memory and blessings, carefully place them in their order and sew them lovingly into a tapestry to reveal the great color and life that we hold dear in our hearts. And it is not only during these yizkor moments that we can collect these pieces of parchment, rather it is throughout our entire life that we are able to find them and sew them together. It should not only wait for when our loved ones are gone, but rather, now that we should sew the Torah of our lives into one whole scroll so that we might read it now, chant its words together, and create the midrashim of our lives that are beautiful and precious.

May each of us wade into the river and allow the narrative of memory of those who have gone before and each of us who sit here today, preserve the dreams and visions so that our tapestry might grow and inspire tomorrow's generation of artists. And may God continue to provide us with the thread that weaves through each panel making us stronger and more complete with every memory. And may God bless the memories of our teachers, our friends, and our family who we hold dear in our hearts.

Amen v' Amen

[i] Provided by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.
<http://www.huc.edu/newspubs/pressroom/article.php?pressroomid=567>

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