

Rabbi Clifford Kulwin— Yom Kippur AM 5771

Later today, in the traditional Haftorah for the afternoon of Yom Kippur we read the story of Jonah.

God, you will recall, calls out to Jonah, and tells him to “go to Nineveh, to that great city, and proclaim judgment against the people there.” We do not really know anything about Jonah. This is how we meet him.

The people of Nineveh are clearly acting in some way offensive to God. He dispatches Jonah to tell them to mend their ways, before it is too late. Even though we do not know anything about Jonah, God must clearly believe him to have the right stuff. However, as we learn, it appears God has misjudged His man.

Instead of heading directly to Nineveh to fulfill God’s words, Jonah instead goes to the port of Jaffa, from which he boards a boat to Tarshish. Tarshish does not seem to have any special significance....it was probably just the destination of the first boat Jonah could find going anywhere but Nineveh.

God is not pleased. He sends a huge storm to capsize the ship. The sailors do all they can to secure the ship but the situation only gets more and more precarious. The captain gathers all the passengers together and he notices that Jonah is missing. He goes down into the hold where, amazingly, he discovers Jonah asleep in the midst of the violence of the storm!

All on board gather to determine whose fault this storm is. They throw lots...and the lots fall on Jonah. Jonah confesses to the others that he was on the ship because he was fleeing a direct commandment from his God, and that to save themselves, the others had to throw him overboard. This they did, and almost immediately, the waters became still. The source of the problem had been identified.

We know the rest of the story, that Jonah eventually makes it to Nineveh, that he calls out to the population to repent, and that, sadly for them, they do not pay attention. But my attention has always been seized by the part of Jonah’s tale that takes place on board the boat. The storm begins. Everyone on board is scared. The passengers sit down together to determine what to do. What must it have been like in that room at that moment....

We Kulwins like to read obituaries. I realize that may sound a bit macabre, but I suspect we are not alone in this pursuit. Obituaries are interesting. Obituaries are real life. Obituaries tell the story of individuals whose lives may have been similar to or different from our own.

I tend to be less interested in the larger than life obits in *the New York Times* and enjoy the much more democratic – with a small d! – presentations to be found in the *Star Ledger*, and especially in some of the small town Adirondack newspapers we read in the summer. The world is a diverse place.

Several months ago, sitting in a waiting room, I happened to pick up a copy of the February 21 *Record*. I came across perhaps the most fascinating obituary it has ever been my pleasure to read.

Patricia Travers, born in 1927 in Clifton, started playing the violin at 4. At age 11 she preformed the Mendelssohn concerto “to a rapturous and prolonged demonstration” said the *New York Times*. Over the next dozen years she played with the New York and Berlin Philharmonics. She soloed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. She gained a reputation, in the words of one reviewer, as playing with “dashing bravura...it is good to encounter a young artist who makes music adventurous.”

Patricia Travers’ name was on the lips of everyone in the music world and she seemed on track to become as great and widely known as her contemporary Isaac Stern. And then, when she was about 25, something happened.

She stopped playing. No one knows why. She returned home to Clifton, to the second floor apartment on Allwood Road that, an only child, she shared with her parents. She remained there, took care of her parents until their death, and took over management of the Allwood property, the rents of whose first floor retail shops provided her livelihood. For the next sixty or so years, she lived very quietly. She went to church, had few friends. As she moved on into adulthood fewer and fewer people knew her history, and for decades prior to her death, it was never spoken of.

The obituary mentioned the address of this Allwood property and I did a double take. I knew it. One of the tenants is the Allwood Pet Center, a small store where a lovely and kind woman named Lydia periodically gives our dog Zoe a hair cut.

I went to see Lydia. She told the same story as the obituary. She had no idea of Ms. Travers’ past. She knew nothing about the music. She knew nothing about the fame and the world wide attention. All she knew was that her landlord was a very nice, soft spoken woman, who genuinely cared about her tenants.

“Imagine, Lydia said. “Imagine having someone like that living so close, and I did not even know.” Indeed. Imagine living that close to someone with that kind of history, and not even knowing.

I do not wish to imply that this obituary changed my life. But I confess. It did have an impact. Ever since reading it, I think I look at the people around me a little bit differently and, neighbors, colleagues, people I see on the street...I wonder what I do not know, what secret achievements, what personal grandeur, what exceptional characteristics lurk out there that I do not know and likely will never know.

There is of course another way of looking at this. What must Adolf Eichman’s neighbors in Buenos Aires have thought when the Mossad captured him in 1960? During his decade in Argentina he had worked as a factory foreman, a water engineer, and a rabbit

farmer. He lived modestly. How surprised his neighbors must have been when they learned who was living next door.

But that is not the perspective that interests me. Not because there might not be hidden criminals out there because of course there are. Rather, it is alas often our natural inclination to think less of the one we do not know, and the less of who they might be. Yet when we do that, oh can we be wrong..

In 1953, when the Israeli Knesset established Yad V'shem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, it charged the new entity with identifying and honoring haste *umot ha-olam*, Righteous Gentiles. The term specifically refers to non-Jews who, during the Shoah, risked their own and their families' lives to save Jews. A grove of trees in Yad V'shem is dedicated to the Righteous Gentiles and it is moving to visit.

One sees some familiar names while strolling through the trees. Irena Sendler, Prince Konstantin of Romania, and of course, Oskar Schindler. But the large majority of the names...we have no idea who they are. They include Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul in Bordeaux who, during a feverish three days in 1940, and against the express directive of his government, granted 30,000 visas to Jews in France.

And Maria Mendez McClure, a Chilean woman living in Europe who personally saved scores of children. Despite being interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, she continued her work throughout the war.

And the Polish couple Jerzy and Irena Krepec, who hid some 50 Jews on their farm, and who ever after, received regular shipments of oranges sent from Israel by those they had helped; the only compensation of any kind they would accept.

But especially, we think of, during the war and after, those living next door to these people. Those who knew them, saw them on the street once in a while, perhaps exchanged an occasional few words, a comment on the weather. Do we think they had any idea how extraordinary these individuals were? I suspect not.

The person whose amazing story we do not know may be an individual upstairs or around the corner who has simply chosen a path of quiet and stillness. The person whose amazing story we do not know may be someone whose personal history is so extraordinary that it defies description or even belief.

And sometimes, the person whose amazing story we do not know can be someone who lives under the same roof.

The Temple B'nai Abraham book groups meets on the first Thursday evening of every month. We started meeting a dozen years ago and by now have read over one hundred books together. It is a lot of fun.

In June of 2009, we read *My Father's Paradise* by Ariel Sabar.

On the surface, the book was an account of Sabar's search to discover his father's lost roots in his native Kurdistan, where he was among the last of a Jewish community that was centuries old and rich in tradition. Under the surface, however, while this was not Sabar's intention, the book became a voyage of discovery about a man Ariel Sabar found he really knew very little about.

Growing up in Los Angeles, where his father Yona was a professor of Near East Languages at UCLA, Ariel found his father what we can only politely call "a pain." His clothes were years out of date. His cars even more so. It wasn't money. His father had an immigrant's mentality, and despite decades in America never picked up on the rhythm of American life. He was an autocratic and dictatorial presence, yet distant as well, as if he lived in a different place and time from his son.

Ariel Sabar set out to the Near East to learn the history of his father's people, the Jews of Kurdistan. As a result, he came to know that the man who had so irked him as a child and teenager, the man whose strange immigrant heritage he once wanted nothing to do with, had lived an amazing life.

Ariel learned about life in Zakho, where Jews and Muslims lived peacefully side by side for centuries. He learned about his great grandfather, the village cloth dyer whose greatest joy was to pray through the night in the tiny mud and brick synagogue. His quietly heroic grandmother, who never recovered from the kidnapping of her first born, his own aunt. He learns about his grandfather, who upon making aliyah – because there was no other option – more and more found himself beaten down by the poverty, the discrimination, the prejudice, against the so called Oriental Jews, especially those with no money or skills, especially those who could not seem to learn the language.

And he learned about his own father, the last Bar Mitzvah before the Jews were ousted from Zakho, who was slapped in the face by an Iraqi customs official for having trying to take three ordinary Iraqi stamps with him when his family left for Israel; who as an Israeli teenager rose before dawn every day to fight others boys for Hebrew newspapers to sell on the street; who impressed the great Aramaic scholar Polotsky at the Hebrew University enough that Polotsky wrote to another great scholar at Yale who arranged a fellowship to cover all graduate study at Yale; who totally befuddled in the United States still managed to make a pretty girl he saw in Central Park laugh and agree to have coffee with him...and eventually become his wife. He learned about the father who grew up in a place that was like living in the twelfth century, and became one of the greatest linguistic scholars in the world.

This was the man Ariel Sabar lived under the same roof with...only he did not know.

Jacob flees his brother Esau, to the desert, where he lies down one night to sleep. Divine angels come to him in a dream, going up and down a ladder. In the morning Jacob opens his eyes, starts, and says to himself, "God is in this place, and I did not know it.

There are so many people, in each of our lives, who have stories we do not know.

Back on Jonah's ship, the storm is getting worse, and the passengers gather together. When the lot falls on Jonah, what happens? How do his shipmates respond?

Yes, they do throw him over, but only after he tells them they must do that. Why don't they do so at immediately? Because they are dumbstruck. Shocked. Amazed.

Yes, Jonah is running away from what God told him to do...but that's minor stuff. The others clearly see. Jonah is a man of God. He is someone God spoke to. He is someone God sent on a mission. This guy is a man of God. And he is sitting right next to them. And they did not even know it. He could have been anyone. And that is the point.

The person next door might be Jonah. The person next door might be a world famous violinist who gave up the stage. The person next door might be an unknown hero who saved lives. The person next door might be someone with whom we share blood, but whose own amazing story is unknown.

Every day, we live among people whose stories we do not know. But as we now realize...that does not mean the stories aren't there. So in the absence of certainty, let us assume the stories are there. Let us act as if we knew that. Let us treat each person around us with honor and awe for that about them which we do not know, for that about them which might be so very great.

I may have a story. You may have a story. Only one, knows them all.

Hasidic tradition reminds us of the legend of the lamed vovniks, at any time the 36 righteous men by whose grace the world exists. The legend teaches quite clearly that we never know who they are. Nevertheless, they are here.

The Baal Shem Tov explained that we are not to know who they are because it is better we remain open to the possibility that anybody might be one. Across the street, next door, under our own roofs.

The New Year is upon us. May it be a year of peace and joy, a year of good health and prosperity. And perhaps most of all, may it be a year in which we regard everyone around us as someone with marvelous possibilities, and an amazing story to tell.