

This is a sermon about names.

My father, he has a name. To some he's Jerry. To some he's Rabbi. My daughter calls him Saba.

His office has become like a museum over the years. It is a testament, almost living, to places he's been and people he's met. He has a collection of dreidels from all over the world. There are books from floor to ceiling.

Growing up I would go in there after Hebrew school or after services or even during services. I would look around and I would feel safe. I would gaze up at all the pictures. I found comfort in knowing that other people have also experienced the sometimes messy, sometimes glorious elements of life.

Even the dreidels told the story of survival.

All of these pieces, somehow, they gave me peace.

On his wall was a fragment I only noticed when I was much older. Maybe it was just another artifact or another gift someone had given him along the way. When I finally learned the story of the fragment I realized it's not just another anything.

Here is the story of the fragment:

My family comes from Germany. One section of the family lived in the town of Worms. And there one of my family members was the president of the synagogue.

Some knew him as President, some knew him as father, others as brother. He went often by his last name, Kefir.

It was a large synagogue, a thriving synagogue, with a thriving school, their own Torah scrolls and holiday gatherings. Big meals, big music.

In November of 1938 the Nazis raided the synagogue. Actually they raided close to three hundred German synagogues on November 9th and 10th. All of these holy sites ransacked. Burned. So much glass broken. It became in time the Night of Broken Glass. *Kristallnacht*.

Kefir, he was an uncle of my grandfather, he hid with his family at home. Home was meant to be peaceful, especially for the kids, but now it was a place of such uncertainty, a kind of fear that they could feel pressing on their shoulders and in the darkened eyes of loved ones across the table.

Finally the light of all those fires gave way to the light of the early morning. Kefir made his way to the synagogue. He found the front door totally charred. There were two SS guards lingering outside.

They mocked him. They mocked his building. They had helped destroy it. I need to go in. I need to see the remnants of my Temple. This is my home. His place of peace had become a place of pieces.

Inside the pews were toppled. The windows were shattered. The wood floor was now ashes. And amidst the ashes there were thousands of fragments. He looked closely. He realized in horror that they were tiny pieces of Torah.

He saw the parchment that so many Bar and Bat Mitzvah students had seen, the parchment the Rabbi had read to the congregation for years, the parchment that had survived the generations, like the Israelites, like Judaism.

The black now on the parchment, these vicious marks of such close-mindedness and rage, they were like bruises on God Himself.

The guards urged him. Enough. Time for you to get out Jew. To them he was nameless. He bent over and with his trembling hand he quickly picked up *just one tiny fragment*. Without looking at it he put it in his pocket and he walked out and the guards slammed the doors behind him.

The synagogue was closed and closed Kefir thought for good.

He left and some of the kids finally left and his brother and my own grandparents, those that could they left Germany. They made it out. They were like modern day Israelites but with heavy German names and hearts heavier still.

They left the ridiculous and tragic hatred behind them on lands that were now swollen with death.

The fragment went from his pocket to the inside of a book. A safe place, a home for it. And he brought the fragment with him to America.

Eventually my grandparents had a daughter, my mother. And my mother married my father and my father soon received a new name: Rabbi.

Kefir, before he died, he had given his small collection of books to his children and those children eventually met my father, this rabbi, and they said: We'd like for you to see what was taken from Germany. We want you to see. They took so much from us, all of the hope and the normalcy and the trajectory of life that is supposed to go from happiness to greater happiness, they took it all.

With their hands they took so much from our hands.

But we, we took this.

They handed my father the parchment.

The parchment was not framed. It still smelled of fire. It had touched so few hands but so many lives.

My father's hand touched the parchment and it was as if all the souls were reaching out to him and by extension now to us and those souls were pleading: Remember us. Please. Please. Do not forget us.

My father looked down at the parchment. He turned it over in his hands. He said I know this portion. This was my son's Bar Mitzvah portion. It's true: It was my Bar Mitzvah portion once upon a time.

It's the first portion from the Book of Exodus. In Hebrew the portion is called *Shemot*, the portion of names. These are the names of the Israelites, it begins.

You know the portion: Where the Jews must flee, at all costs, this evil tyrant, this Pharaoh.

They had come to Egypt with such optimism. There had such been such promise of life and future there.

It is in so many ways our story, it is your story, a story of up and down, standing tall, being knocked down, and rising tall again and again and again against all the odds.

They wanted my father to keep the fragment. I can't he said. It was meant for you they said. It's meant for all of us he said. You must they said.

He vowed to take care of it, to guard *Shemot*, guard the names, forever.

Now the story gets good.

My father took the fragment to be framed on a Friday. He spoke with a young woman at the framing store. He showed her the portion, told her the story. With her hand she touched the fragment and was halfway to tears. Hand to hand to hand.

Because it's not just a fragment of Torah. It's a fragment of wedding celebrations and Sukkot celebrations. It's a fragment of so much love and so much humanity in the face of everything, in the face of too many skeptics and pessimists. It's a grand list of names. It's a narrative of courage.

It's a piece of a larger scroll, a piece of this spinning dreidel of survival, this winding tale of little miracles and massive miracles. Life after floods. Life after slavery. Life after loss. Always marching onward. A relentless and astonishing brand of faith and fortitude.

The woman wasn't Jewish yet she felt pulled to this fragment, as my dad did, as I do, as maybe you're starting to feel pulled toward this fragment.

I'll need your name she said. Who was he in that moment? A rabbi? Was he a son or a brother? Was he a messenger of some kind? A carrier of names from generation to generation? In that moment was he somehow the six million? Are we the six million? Are we the million and a half children? Are you carrying their torch?

Who beyond you do you live for? Who beyond you?

He gave her his first and his last name.

I'm Beth she said. My name's Beth.

She said she would need to work on it over the weekend. My dad was reluctant. How could he leave it there? How could he trust this precious fragment to a stranger?

She reassured him. He wavered. She reassured him. He breathed deep. He decided to leave it there. Before he left she said: This is the most important project I have ever worked on. I have to tell you. I have been waiting for you and a project like this.

All weekend my father counted the hours. Finally Monday came. He went back to the store. By now he was all anxiety and nerves. He hoped and he prayed everything was OK.

He approached the storefront and there he saw a sign: Closed Indefinitely. My dad panicked. He checked around the back. No one. He called. No answer. No. No. No. My God. Please. He heard the fragment. He heard Kefir. It cannot end this way.

He called again. He returned later. He checked the phone book for a home listing, maybe the owner, maybe the woman. He scanned all the *names*. Nothing. There was nothing.

The store was closed and closed he thought for good.

Finally, days later, well past anxious, he came back and found the door open. He rushed in: Where's my fragment? I was so worried. A young woman was helping me with it. Beth.

I know it the man said with a tear in his eye. I know your fragment. Then there was a long pause.

The young woman, my daughter, was killed in an accident this weekend. She was nineteen. The funeral was Monday.

There was another long pause. He handed my dad the framed fragment. The man would accept no money. It was the last project she would ever work on.

This perfectly framed fragment, this emblem of so much, it was to be her legacy.

My dad put the newly framed fragment in his office.

Some of Kefir's children and grandchildren attended the rededication of the synagogue. It has been rebuilt. It has new Torah scrolls.

At this very moment, right now, Yom Kippur is being observed there. It's a real place. It's back from the dead.

And the dead, Beth plus six million, maybe they too are observing a kind of Yom Kippur, from the heavens themselves, with our *Shema* and *Avinu Malkeinu* echoing in their ears far above like a lullaby, soothing them, reassuring them that we will go on for them.

With our hands and our names we will raise high their legacy. We will use our *yad v'shem*, our hand and name, for them.

We could ask: Where is Yom Kippur in this story?

In a word, everywhere.

I believe it's a story that teaches us about memory. On a day during which we remember. We vow to always remember those we have lost. More than remember them actually. Live for them. Those for whom you were named. Those names you carry right next to your heart. Today is about those who are here, yes, but maybe it's even more about those who are not here.

I believe it's a story that teaches us about family. As families we can honor those families that came before us. We honor their trials and victories and pain and perseverance with our own commitment to doing what's right, teaching our children to do what's right. Teaching them the value of values.

I believe it's a story that teaches us about legacy. What fragments of yours will be handed from generation to generation? How will the sacred scroll that is you be remembered? What stories will your children and their children tell? What will be passed on and what simply will pass on?

I believe it's a story that teaches us about hope. On a day when we reaffirm our commitment to hope. Today is about not buying into greed and doubt. Today is about holding onto faith, holding onto hope, holding onto love and righteousness, fearlessly holding onto light and compassion amidst darkness and hate.

I believe it's a story that teaches us about the opening of closed doors. What doors might we open this year? Are there doors of regret, doors of forgiveness, doors of acceptance that have been sealed shut by time or by resentment or by stubbornness that we now need to just pry open for the sake of our own well being and the for the sake of moving from a place of pieces to a place of peace.

I believe it's a story that teaches us about community. We are all fragments of Torah in the end. But together we are an awesome and holy scroll. Together we are strong, we many names that make up Israel, we souls that make up Temple Sinai. When it's about more than me, when it's about our family, our community, our people, we become so much more than.

Maybe this is a story about all of these things.

Or maybe it's a story that reminds us to be thankful for where we are, how there are so many who would just never know the blessings that we know, so many Jews who were never able to live a Jewish life, or a full life, or a life of contentment and learning and doing and getting up in the morning and putting our feet on the ground and greeting a new day with verve and with gusto.

Maybe it's meant to remind us to say, on this holiest day of the year, as we sit beside friends and family, even if we just say it in a whisper: Thank you God.

Amen.