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Parashat Eikev

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He Changed His Mind at 91: The Blessing

I first heard about it when I was with Rabbi Camille Angel. It had been a great morning. We had just converted this thoughtful person, and we were having breakfast.

"I just got back from New York," she said. "I saw Dr. Borowitz."

I put down my fork. Dr. Eugene Borowitz was our dignified, well-regarded and well loved professor of Jewish theology. He was known for his rigor, his writing and his formidable presence. He had a towering authority in the classroom and didn't put up with any fluff. Papers had to be well argued, ideas thought through. He was in his seventies when I was in his classroom and I remembered how he pushed us, how he always sat in the same seat in the sanctuary, and how the room always changed whenever he walked in.

In fact, the room where I remembered him most vividly was where 'Sermon Review' took place. No matter how old or established a rabbi you are, if you went to my rabbinic school, the words 'Sermon Review' will cause a shiver to go down your spine. That's because Sermon Review was when, in your 4th or 5th year, you had to give a sermon to all your rabbinic school classmates, not an easy going bunch, along with the entire faculty. As if that weren't bad enough, following your teaching, a public conversation would then take place about your ideas and choice of images and whether or not you were effective. In any case, in that space, in front of the whole school, Dr. Borowitz would regularly hold court, sometimes putting the fear of God, quite literally, into that day's rabbinic student. Other times Dr. Borowitz would segue the conversation to the world around us. I remember vividly the day we learned what had happened in Columbine, a morning we can now pinpoint as the moment when a new kind of violent darkness would enter our lives with an alarming regularity. We didn't yet understand that gravity of what had happened, but Dr. Borowitz was in full form, composed but stricken, reminding us of the implications. He taught us in that public forum that this was not just a random conflation of events but was a breakdown of significant proportions, a watershed moment.

I remembered another day, in the classroom, when one of the rabbinic students was railing against the world's injustices and the tragedies, the many illness and natural disasters that regularly occur. The student was grandstanding, as we all tended to do,

and we were easily swept up with his anger against the world and the pathetic God who would allow these kinds of things to happen. When the student had finished, Dr. Borowitz stood up and quietly looked at him. He asked, "Are you saying then, are you prepared to say, that there is *no* divine justice? No evidence of God *at all* in the world?" And just like that, in the blink of an eye, we went from victims of a vindictive, careless God to people who remembered that it is our work to seek righteousness where we could find it. Dr. Borowitz could do that.

I had a unique family connection to Dr. Borowitz, and while I would like to say he singled me out solely for my theological prowess, I'm sure his kind attention was also because my father had studied with him. He knew who I was early on. In fact, he not only knew my father, he had even officiated at the wedding of my parents. From the time I can remember, there was a photo of him on the wall of my father's study.

Overall though, whether he was joking or serious, and most of the time he was serious, one thing was clear. Life was not to be approached in a cavalier, haphazard, laissez-faire fashion. And while Dr. Borowitz wrote most of his books about theology, articulating careful positions on God, Torah, and Israel, it was clear from being around him that actions, both public and personal, also mattered deeply to him.

And so, when I heard as a rabbinic student in 1996 that Dr. Borowitz had made a policy of sorts to withhold his signature from the the ordination certificates of LGBTQ students, on the basis of an argument that was out of date at best, I was crushed. I went to see him, like so many others, to try to ask him questions and to challenge him in order to change his mind. And after, when I was unsuccessful, like so many others, I told him I would not ask him to sign my ordination certificate. This was the position that almost all the students of any sexual orientation took. It was not an especially daring thing for me to do. It was so routine that by the time my ordination came around, Dr. Borowitz had heard many, many students tell him they would not be asking him to sign their ordination certificates. My visit was no surprise. But it wasn't any less painful. A sad day, a tragic situation. And years, a whole generation went by, more, and he hardly signed a single one.

Which is why, when I was having lunch with Rabbi Angel, a respected colleague, a mother who happens to be gay, and she told me she had just seen Dr. Borowitz, my mind snapped to attention. "He signed my *קְמִיָּצָה* / ordination certificate," she said. I was speechless. I just stared at her. "He's now ninety one," she said. "He is ninety one and he's changed his mind."

This past summer, we drove to the Grand Canyon with the girls. Besides being completely blown away by the scale of everything, not to mention its beauty, I was stunned to find out that the layers that make up the current Grand Canyon, that is, the actual earth that made up the mountains that were eventually carved away to make the Grand Canyon, was originally from the tip of what we now call *South Africa*. It took me a long while to get my head around the fact that over millions and millions of years, land that seems so completely distinct now, was once joined. And as I watched the video in the visitors center about how the canyon was formed, twice, just to make sure I understood, I realized that everything I took for granted as "here" used to be "there," that what was north was once south, and up used to be down. It just took a few million years to do it.

This was the image that went through my head when I heard Dr. Borowitz was signing all ordination certificates at age ninety one. Over time, south was becoming north. Over time, even things we have come to accept as permanent can move.

Rabbi Angel said, "When I heard, I went to New York to see him, and others have been going too. And when I got there, Dr. Borowitz told me he wanted to sign my *קְמִיכָה* / my ordination certificate after Sermon Review, when everyone would be there, because, he said, he wanted to experience a degree of the humiliation that he had caused me. So I went, and he signed big and in the middle and then he put my hand on top of the signature and he put his hand over mine."

The minute I heard the words coming out of Rabbi Angel's mouth, I knew I would go. It was a few weeks before the high holidays, terrible timing, but the opportunity to see my teacher in his moment of *תְּשׁוּבָה* / repentance, the teacher who left his family one Sunday afternoon to stand under a *huppah* / wedding canopy with my parents so that, in no small way I might eventually come into the world, the teacher who taught us that what we do matters, this was not an opportunity I would miss.

I bought my ticket that day for a thirty-six hour trip to New York.

Although I have been to New York many times since I was ordained, I had not been to morning services back at school. I was early. After a few students came in, Dr. Borowitz walked slowly into the room, his imposing frame now stooped over. His daughter, in one of many acts of kindness I witnessed, was helping him get slowly over to his chair. Once he was there, she draped his *tallit* / prayer shawl over his shoulders.

The sanctuary where the service takes place is a beautiful and modern room, right on a busy corner of West 4th and Broadway, but inside, you'd never know. The ceilings

are extremely high and there is some kind of modern warm wood covering all the walls and floors. The ark is made of translucent material, lit from within, and it is suspended on the wall as if defying the laws of gravity. Everything seemed like it was floating. Surely I was over tired, but by now I was having almost an out-of-body experience. I felt like I was in the heavenly court.

Dr. Borowitz acknowledged me and I sat close by. And then, of course – why hadn't I thought of it? – *all* my teachers came into the room, many of the people, I now understood, who had raised me, who taught me Torah, who taught me that I could never know enough but led me to the places where I might learn more, the ones who knew who I might be even before I could imagine it myself, they were sitting behind me, around me, older, yes, but still very much themselves, and whether they were singing off key or perfectly, I swear they seemed like angels.

I realized for the first time in that moment that these teachers would not live forever, that they would surely die, as we all will. And as I took in the fact of their age and death, I also realized this meant I was getting closer to the front of the line. One day I would be the older teacher. And it became clear to me in that moment that the work of life is knowing what line, what chain, that we're going to choose. Because, like it or not, we are, each of us, cueing up, every day, with every word, and every action. Whether we like it or not, we're choosing our line, our group, the place where we stand. And one day we'll be at the front of that group, with nothing between us and death. And, in that moment, the only thing that will comfort us is if we are indeed in the right line, if we can look ahead and realize we have followed those whom we respect, and look back and take a measure of pride in who we have brought along behind us.

We all went downstairs. We were in the Sermon Review room. Everyone was there. Dr. Borowitz was as purposeful and dignified as ever. He thanked me for coming. I couldn't wait to ask him what happened, what it was that made him change his mind. The words tumbled out of my mouth. I was waiting for the theological shift, the epiphany, a story. But all he said was, "It was time." He said it simply and quietly. "Time and experience, and seeing the people around me and the knowledge that we never know or not if we are right." He did not try to construct a persuasive argument to save face or to explain. Now he simply wanted undo what he had done, one public signature at a time. He was still teaching that great Torah, that what we do matters. That it is never too late.

I was flooded with relief to be there, to have made the trip. I took out the cardboard tube I had been carrying with me since San Francisco, unfurled the rolled up parchment paper, my קְמִיכָה / my ordination, and waited for Dr. Borowitz to sign.

Yet, when I looked, I saw, to my deep surprise, that Dr. Borowitz was not signing. He was writing something, he was writing a blessing. You have to understand, I have never heard of this, no one has ever heard of this. The teachers, they sign, they never bless. But as I watched he wrote, *May God's blessing come to you with this small effort of my heart and soul.* And then he signed his name.

When I was a little girl, my father used to tell me stories about a rebbe who would send a hasid on an adventure, a long winding journey in order to retrieve one of the hidden names of God. After chapters and chapters, high seas and secret islands, we the listeners and the hasid would have forgotten this initial aim entirely, only to be reminded at the very end of the story when the rebbe suddenly reappeared and reminded his hasid why he was sent in the first place. It was only then that we would remember, that while we were worried about this student's prospects or wealth, he was on a holy and purposeful mission, whether he knew it or not, to bring the name of God into the world, and return it to its rightful place.

We are that hasid, going through the world, often forgetting why, and I know I was that hasid, at least for thirty six hours in New York. See, I went on the journey because I thought I was giving my teacher a chance to make his תְּשׁוּבָה / repentance. I thought, if my teacher can publicly change his mind at ninety one, I can get on a plane. But now I know I went to understand my place in line, with my teachers in front of me and whomever else I may be fortunate enough to help bring along in back. And I know I went to receive that blessing so that I could give it to you, the ones who I hope will stand in this line with me, so that we might all give this blessing, so the teachings of this great line will live on. And so I say to you, to us, I inscribe in each one of our hearts:

May God's blessing come to you, with the hundreds upon thousands of small efforts of our parents, their parents, of our teachers and their teachers and their teachers' teachers, with all the efforts of their hearts and souls, and with mine. Now this blessing is yours, now it is ours, may we add to its light and strength.