

## SAILING SECRETS

*Yom Kippur Yizkor – Wednesday, September 23, 2015*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, KS*

*Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

This past year, like many of you, I became a mourner. My step-father, David Dalke, died in December. You may remember David. He always sat right there. (POINT) He had bushy sideburns, a big beard, and a head full of white hair. He wore a Bulgarian kipa I gave him a number of years ago. And he draped his big, white and blue-stripped tallit over his 6'4" frame. These seats didn't fit him quite right, so he would spread his legs out into the aisles, just a bit. Especially, these last few years, whenever I would glance over at him from this vantage point, I would catch him sleeping...or at least I thought he was.

There were three things I looked forward to during the High Holidays with David. The first...when I walked down the aisle, carrying the Torah for the hakafah, he would take his tallit, kiss the Torah, and say: "Love you, boychik." The second... after every sermon I gave – and I mean every – he engaged me in a discussion about it. It felt more like a debate, at times. And it was always lively. And third, he never failed to tell me after Yom Kippur that he was proud of me.

I share all this with you today, not because David was better or more special than any of your loved ones who died since last Yom Kippur. Rather, I speak about David to help you know

the man who taught me one of the most important Yizkor lessons I ever learned. It is, in his honor and in his memory, that I share that lesson today.

My step-father, David, was a sailor. Ever since joining the Navy when he was 17, he loved the water. My guess is that – if he could have convinced my mom – he would have lived onboard a sailboat year round.

Growing up here in Kansas City, I was never exposed to the oceans, and definitely not to sailing. So, it was with feigned interest I would listen to David wax poetic about the virtues and lessons of sailing.

Over thirty years ago, I was visiting them in Miami. David had just acquired a 34' sailboat, which became his passion and joy. On my last day visiting, David asked if I wanted to go for a sail. So, David, my mom, and I set off. While fascinated with all that went into sailing, it just seemed a lot of work and not a great way to relax. But, I helped out where I could and definitely enjoyed the salt air and open water. Eventually, though, we had to head back so I could catch my plane.

That's when David asked if I would like to take the helm and steer the boat. Readily, I accepted. He pointed out me a land feature and told me to keep the

bow of the boat directly in line with that marker. Thirty minutes later – and ten minutes after that – and ten minutes after that, David kept asking me if I was doing as he asked...keeping the front of the boat pointed directly toward the group of hotels he had earlier indicated. Each time, I responded positively. And each time, I commented that we weren't getting any closer to land. He assured me we were. Eventually, my mother chimed in...letting David know that he was wrong and I was right. We were no closer to land than we had been an hour and a half earlier.

It was then that David realized that the cross winds were just strong enough that we were at full sail, but between the currents and the wind, we were literally going nowhere fast! Now, I was worried that I would miss my flight. So, we lowered the sails, and powered in to the harbor. I made my flight with 5 minutes to spare, and we had a good laugh on the phone afterwards.

Over the years, David and I talked about that adventure, recalling how I almost missed my plane. A couple of years ago, we were reminiscing and I asked him how he knew what to do when the winds and the water were so unpredictable? His response is our lesson today.

Paraphrasing, this is what David told me:

When you are out at sea, there is an illusion of control. It is so vast and powerful, you are merely a drop in the ocean...you are meaningless. Especially with sailboats. You really have no control. You cannot control the weather or the water. All you can do, he said, is

control yourself. If you understand that one principle, then sailing is the most wonderful experience of all.

When I asked him what he meant, he offered this explanation:

When I am in a sailboat, what do I control? I control only the boat and what I do. I can decide how far out I let the sails. I decide where to tie the sails. I can bring the sails down. I choose what direction the rudder is facing. If there are a few of us on board, I can shift the weight to one side or the other. What I control is how I react to the weather. I have complete control over what I do to respond. But, really, that's it. The rest is up to God. So, when I am on the water no matter what occurs, I work with the weather and the water and it is not a burden but a blessing. It is an exhilarating ride.

It was that last statement that impacted me the most. And it was surprising to hear David say it. "I have complete control over what I do to respond. But, really, that's it. The rest is up to God."

How does this all apply to us, today, at this time of Yizkor, of remembrance?

Our lives are like the ocean. We sail upon this sea we call life. Sometimes, there are storms. Sometimes it is calm. We have an illusion that we control what life is about. But, truth be told...we don't. How do we know this? Ask any of us here. Was anyone able to control what happened to our loved ones? Could we stop the illness, the accident, the aging process? We have no control. The idea that we do is a figment of our imaginations, our fears, our

hopes. Rather, we are just a mere drop in the ocean we call life.

Does that mean we despair? Of course not. Rather, we learn the lesson of the experienced sailor. We can control ourselves. We can master how **we** react to life, especially when faced with the loss of one whom we have loved. Do we collapse our sails, sitting forlorn and unmoving, virtually frozen and stuck in the moment? Do we rail against what has happened, throwing our sails up, trying to race to some unknown place that is free of pain or somehow awash with answers to our questions and doubts? Or perhaps, instead, we navigate our way slowly, allowing the weight of our emotions to lead us in one direction or another, permitting our experiences and our innate skills to propel ourselves forward one hour – one day – one year at a time?

To explore David's lesson a bit more, there are two corollaries to remember: First, when sailing, white caps and turbulence make things challenging, but are seldom fatal. The same is true with mourning. We are buffeted about in ways for which we are often unprepared...but we do survive. We don't always know how long we will be overwhelmed by our loss but eventually – like the storms at sea – the storms surrounding our losses calm and we are able to continue on our journeys.

Second, in sailing, when you think the boat is going to keel over, there is ballast – both built in the structure of the boat and in your own body – that can bring it back to steady. So, too, with our losses, we often feel that our lives are turned upside down and we do not know how we will survive. That is where the

ballast of life comes in. We do get through it. It's messy. We get rained on, for sure. We get tossed and turned. But we do get through. We don't always know how or why. But that ballast is there...and it keeps us afloat.

Our loved ones have left this life journey to us. In their passing, we are left with questions and pain. As my step-father taught me, we best cope with our loss when we realize we only control ourselves. The rest is up to God. If we recognize that principle, then the journey can still be exhilarating and filled with blessings. How? Because our loved ones will still be with us, guiding us, inspiring us.

May we take the lessons of sailing and apply them to our own mourning. And like a turbulent night at sea, may each of us awaken to a dawn filled with calm waters in which we can experience the gifts our loved ones gave to us in life. And may those gifts and memories carry us forward on our journeys.

Now, let us turn in our prayerbooks to p. 492, and rise as a community. Let us recite Kaddish and thank God for holding us and our loved ones along our journey.