



A Sermon by
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

Father's Day 2009

Some of you may be old enough to remember the Jewish comedian Sam Levenson. He observed that insanity is hereditary. You get it, he said, from your children.

An appropriate thought and reflection as tomorrow is Father's Day.

There is a significant difference between Father's Day and Mother's Day. On Mother's Day the phone companies used to note that more long distance calls are made than any other day of the year. On Father's Day, however, more collect calls were made than any other day of the year. (I will take a moment so the adults in the congregation can explain to the young people the meaning of the term: "collect call.")

The first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are the letters alef and bet. They form the word *av*, meaning father. Benjamin Blech in his book, "The Secret of Hebrew Words," notes that aleph and bet together, in gematria, are the numbers 1 and 2, which equals three, reminding us of the three patriarchs of our people, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He notes that it is appropriate for the word father to come from the first two letters of the alphabet, for a father is the beginning of family life. Furthermore, a father introduces and teaches the oneness of God, symbolized by Aleph, the first letter. The bet, the second letter of the alphabet, and of the word, *av*, represents the centrality of the home. This is the very foundation of family life: God and the home.

So today on this day before Yom HaAv, Father's Day, when our thoughts turn to fatherhood, family life, and home, I want to talk about a family that will mark the day without their father, and a family who will mark the day without a son.

Before I do, let me share a story with you.

When I was a teenager I spent one summer working in a factory not far from my home. My parents wanted me to have a taste of the real world, and so I worked as a blue collar worker sweeping, lifting, schlepping and doing all kinds of odd jobs in a fabric factory. One day during our 10 am coffee break, a newly hired day worker started spewing all kinds of anti Semitic filth and vindictive. It was 10 in the morning, and he was stone drunk. What he didn't realize was that the factory was owned by a Jewish man, a friend of my parents. By the time the bell rang, and it was time to go back to work, he disappeared. He had been dismissed and I never saw him again.

An elderly black gentleman, Mr. Gray, who had short grey hair and who must have been in his 70's was someone I enjoyed hanging out with. He took me under his wings, and used to show me how to stretch our breaks and make it seem like we were working when we were not. During the times when we were together he imparted to me advice and wisdom about life. I will never forget what he said to me that day. He told me, "You

know the only reason that man didn't start spewing off about blacks is because he saw that I was sitting there. But make no mistake, there is no difference, because the people who hate Jews also hate blacks."

I thought about that incident and what Mr. Gray told me when I learned of the tragic slaying of the black security guard at the Holocaust Museum. The irony and symbolism of the slaying of a black man working at the Holocaust Museum, reminds us of the shared fate and destiny of our people and how much we have in common.

Wednesday, June 10th started out like any other day at the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. After 9 ½ year old Riley Grisar of Las Vegas passed through the security apparatus, the guard, Stephen Johns joked with the little boy about having to confiscate the coins in his pocket. Holocaust survivor and volunteer at the Museum, Nesse Godin, a true pillar of our community, and an amazing woman, was kissed on the cheek by Stephen Johns and given a hug as he did whenever he greeted her and she entered the building. And the last act Stephen Johns performed before being taken from us was to open the door to help an elderly gentleman enter the Museum.

As we all know, Stephen Johns was shot and killed by that elderly gentleman who turned out to be a white supremacist obsessed with hatred and intolerance of Jews.

In addition to the family members and friends who knew the security guard, there were many from the community, some 2,000 people, who did not know him attended his funeral yesterday. Many members of the Jewish community were there. In eulogizing him, his pastor spoke about the connection between those who hate us.

Our hearts go out to the family of Mr. Johns. We can only imagine the pain and anguish of the 11 year old son of the security guard this Father's Day who is now without a father, and who buried his dad yesterday. He will grow up without the tender love this man had to give, without the guidance and advice that can come only from a father. But at least he will grow up knowing what a hero his dad was, how brave he was, what a good man he was, and that he died defending others.

Several venues have been established by Jewish organizations to collect donations to help the family.

In addition to thinking about him and his family, I think today not just of a son who will not have his father by his side, but of a father who will not have his son by his side.

On June 25, in a few days, it will be three years since Gilad Shalit was captured by the Palestinian terrorist group that rules Gaza, Hamas.

Gilad was captured when he was just 19 years old. In a flagrant violation of international law, he has been denied access by the International Red Cross. Curiously, international human rights groups remain virtually silent about this and about his fate.

An Israeli diplomat who works here at the Embassy in Washington told me how important it is to continue to raise the issue of Gilad Shalit. He told me that in one of his meetings he was asked by a journalist or an American official, why they were so focused on the fate of this one soldier. He explained that this is Israel. It is a small country, where every life counts, and where every parent sends their child to serve in the military,

and where they know that the government and other soldiers will do everything possible to see to it that the fate of the soldiers is a priority.

To help raise consciousness and to keep the issue alive, people are being asked to write to President Obama to demand the safe return of Gilad. Here is one example of a short letter you can write.

Dear President Obama,

As parents, we are blessed to have our children safely at home with us. Noam Shalit, however, does not. Noam and Aviva Shalit have not seen their son Gilad in 3 years and wonder daily about his safety and wellbeing. This Father's Day marks the three agonizing years that Gilad has not been home with his family. I urge you to consider Gilad's plight, not as a political issue, but rather as a humanitarian one, and to bring Gilad home.

As many of us prepare to celebrate Father's Day, we pray that the outpouring of love and support will comfort the family of Stephen Johns and help to sustain them in their loss. Let us hope that a similar outpouring of love and support will help the family of Gilad Shalit so that their loss will not last any longer.

© Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org