

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Some people have grandfathers. I had a zayde.

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12/86

The family had come to see me so that we could plan Alan's bar mitzvah. With them was the father's father, a successful attorney, well spoken and well dressed, with a neatly trimmed graying mustache.

It was when Alan referred to him as "Grandpa" that I thought of my "zayde." Zayde was certainly no Grandpa, not nearly as urbane or successful. Reb Avraham, as Zayde was known, had a generous gray beard flecked with yellow streaks, a dialectical beard—like a talmudic *pilpul*, growing in contradictory directions. He wore a *gartel*, a twisted black belt, to divide the upper from the lower part of his body. And always he wore on his head a large yarmulke, shiny from handling, not a tiny and inconspicuous *kipah*. Outside his home, the yarmulke was topped by a shiny black derby. As a child I wondered whether Zayde was ever hatless. Not even in the shower?

What did Zayde do for a living? Zayde was unemployed—proudly and forever unemployed. But no one regarded Reb Avraham as indolent. He was always very busy, pressed for time, doing Jewish things.

Zayde was a Jewish Thomas Edison. He had, for example, invented his own *Shabbos-zeiger* (Sabbath clock). It called for a cord wound around the alarm key of the clock, attached to a naked bulb placed in a socket. On the eve of Shabbos, before the setting of the sun, the bulb was turned on, the alarm set for 12 o'clock midnight, and at midnight the cord twisted around the alarm key, unscrewed the bulb "and behold, it was dark." No human energy had violated the Shabbos.

Zayde was no idler. Early in the morning, before anyone else in the family arose, he could be found sitting at the oilcloth-covered kitchen table, holding a *yahrzeit* glass filled with tea, poring over a volume of the Talmud, swaying to the sing-song of the talmudic argument, inserting vocal

question marks and exclamation points into the unpunctuated text.

Zayde was not a rabbi. Matter of fact, Zayde had it in for rabbis, especially American rabbis. What could they teach him? In shul, when the rabbi arose to deliver his *drashah*, his speech, Reb Avraham took it as a cue to open his large Gemara. The only time he approached the rabbi was after the service, always in the presence of a group of congregants. That was the time to ask the rabbi a trick *sheilah* (question) to which, of course, Reb Avraham had the answer, sources and all. The rabbi sought to avoid Reb Avraham's public inquisition, which was designed to impress this grandson and to convince all that Zayde, if he had wanted, could have become a rabbi, "if not higher." Even at my wedding, under the *huppah*, Zayde corrected the rabbi's reading of the Aramaic marriage contract. "Please Zayde, not now," I whispered. He answered in no whisper, "*Loz er vissen az er kenn nisht*" ("Let him know that he doesn't know"). Zayde did not suffer rabbis gladly.

Sabbath afternoons, before *minchah* services, Zayde would drag me to shul to study. "Why can't we study at home?" I asked. He never answered. You don't have to answer every question a child asks. It became clear, however, that Reb Avraham was proud of our teaching relationship and wanted others, including the rabbi, to see who was the real teacher.

Zayde would receive no prizes in pedagogy or parental education. But he knew how to teach and how to discipline: He never taught anything he did not practice. I caught him praying, I caught him studying, and even a child knows the difference between talking and doing. On Shabbos I would sit next to him and, like the other children, stare at the door, trying to figure out how to escape to the backyard of the shul. Zayde controlled my restlessness by gently but firmly placing one of my hands beneath his thigh. Thus I remained, piously handcuffed until the sounds of "Adon Olam," the concluding hymn.

Zayde never heard about recess. He taught relentlessly, without breaks. Only my Bobeh could rescue me.

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After two or three hours of study, she would enter the kitchen with some cookies and fruit and, glaring at Zayde, plead, "*Hob rachmones oif dos kind*"—"Have pity on the child." Bobeh, God bless her, was my savior. But Zayde could reward me too. No cookie or fruit could compare to his pinching my cheek with the two fingers next to his pilpulistic thumb. It was the ultimate compliment—"a *knip in bekel*."

He was not the demonstrative sort. I don't remember his kissing or embracing me or telling me that he loved me. But once, at services, when the *kohanim* stood before the congregation to *duchan*, to bless the congregation with outstretched arms, the fingers of both hands parted in the middle like the Red Sea, I sensed his care. As the *kohanim* began their priestly benediction, it grew suddenly dark. Zayde had draped my head and face with his huge *tallis* so that I would not look at their gestures. He hadn't explained why. In ritual matters, Zayde was a strict behaviorist. Only later did I learn the legend that gazing at the priests would blind or even kill you. Zayde's *tallis* was meant to protect me from unknown harm. Today, whenever I recite the "Hashkivenu" prayer and come to the passage, "Shelter us with Thy protecting love . . . spread over us the tabernacle of Thy peace," I think of Zayde's sheltering *tallis* and his protecting love.

For Zayde, Jewish learning was all, the highest expression of Jewish piety. He never argued the point, but he lived a Jewish hierarchy of values: He *davened* by heart, never once looking into the prayer book. But while his lips moved, his fingers leafed through the pages of the Talmud. *Kavannah*—concentration—was mainly for the talmudic text. *Davening* was an obligation, the payment of a debt to the God who graces man with understanding—but learning was a gift from Above.

"*Nor lernen*"—Only learn, Zayde insisted. I had come to see him at Mt. Sinai Hospital. He was dying. "What are you studying?" he asked his eldest grandchild. I knew he could be referring to one type of learning and

one text alone. "*Ketubot*," I answered—the talmudic tractate dealing with Jewish marital contracts and the like. "Which chapter?" he pursued suspiciously. "*Elu na' arot*," I replied, referring to the third chapter. Zayde was a hard man to convince. "*Velche sugya? Which section?*" he continued. Zayde was not to be fooled. He left no last will except for that inquiry; it entailed his testament: Learn, know, understand, study.

Alan's grandfather was a far cry from Zayde. Urbane, sophisticated, a man of the world. When the family discussed the honors, the *aliyot* to be assigned for the bar mitzvah, he announced casually that he didn't know the blessings. He'd forgotten how to "say" them. Alan volunteered, "That's all right, Grandpa, I'll teach them to you." Everyone smiled. Alan was well trained, knew the blessings and haftorah.

But something felt wrong here. It's wonderful that Alan is so confident, so well trained, so at home in the synagogue. But a zayde—whether he's a "zayde" or a "grandpa"—ought to stand for something Jewish, ought to have something Jewish to pass on to his grandchildren. A zayde ought to be able to induct his grandchildren into the world Jewish community. A zayde ought to be able to teach something Jewish to his *einikel*. After all, a grandpa is also a zayde.

Zaydes are important. Our sages observed, "He who teaches the child of his child is considered as if he has given birth to him." The socialist ideologue Moses Hess was deeply affected by watching his zayde mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, ravaged some 1,800 years before his own lifetime. Historians conjure that Hess's own secular messianic vision of a redeemed Judaism drew its emotional power from that childhood experience. Who knows? But the idea is plausible; zaydes father more than their biological children. They create formative memories in their children's children.

Zayde knew nothing of Erikson's virtue of generativity, but for all his lack of pedagogic sophistication, he communicated respect for a sacred heritage. The writer Philip Roth com-

plains, "What a Jewish child inherited was no body of law, no body of learning and no language and finally no Lord . . . not a culture or history in totality. What we received was a psychology—we are better." That psychology is a vain conceit, not an inheritance of content and purpose but more like a blank check that can be filled with aimless drive, ambition, energy. That is the false heritage of Duddy Kravitz, a child of means without end. Zayde transmitted content—law, language, lore and Lord—and underlying it all, love. Zayde transmitted dreams of substance. ★

