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“You are only as great as the cause you are fighting for.” - Shimon Peres z”l

Elie Wiesel got a call to throw out the first pitch at a World Series game and he was terrified. According to the story told by his son after Wiesel’s death this summer, the honored and revered Holocaust survivor, journalist and author heard the word “Commissioner” in the phone message left on his answering machine and as a Holocaust survivor the word “Commissioner” gave him flashbacks. As a survivor of concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau, he knew “commissioners” as Nazis who would do horrible things like what had happened to his family who perished in World War II. Elie Wiesel was confused as to why a commissioner would be calling him decades later. Adding to his confusion, he did not understand what a “pitch” would be for and there was no way he was going to return the call. His son begged him to, explaining Peter Ueberroth was the Baseball Commissioner and he wanted him to throw out the first pitch during game 2 of the 1986 World Series. The courage Wiesel had to call back Commissioner Ueberroth pales in comparison to the courage he had to depict his survival in in the book *Night*, for which he had just won the Nobel Peace Prize, but the incident was a reminder that as far away from his native Romania he had come, the depth of the experience of the Holocaust was ingrained of the in him. (<http://www.momentmag.com/elisha-wiesel-remembers-father/>)

Wiesel had courage in the places we admired him for – the upheavals, the concentration camps, the voice of the downtrodden post-Holocaust. But even in the unexpected places, he had courage, to return the Commissioner’s call once he understood what the commissioner was and what he was being asked to do and he did throw out that pitch. The story is funny and sad at the same time and reminds us that Wiesel had demons that followed him always.

For the six million Jews that were killed, there were survivors as well and some of them dwell among us here at Temple Beth El. Wiesel was the face of the survivor and with the publication of *Night* he gave other survivors the ability to share their stories, as painful as it was. As Elie Wiesel was to the Holocaust, Shimon Peres, who died three months later, was to Israel. The Holocaust and the Jewish State that rose from its ashes and was embodied in the lives and legacies of these two men reminded the Jewish world that its greatest leaders are leaving us.

Born in Poland, Peres’ youth could have been as traumatic as Wiesel’s but the family settled in Tel Aviv in 1932 and while he strived to be a shepherd or a poet, history would make him a voice for the miracle that was 2,000 years in the waiting, the birth of the modern day state of Israel. When Former Prime Minister and President of the State of Israel Peres passed away exactly two weeks before this Yom Kippur, David Graham in *The Atlantic*’s tribute to Peres wrote, “It’s impossible to come up with an American analogue for Peres’s 67-year career (in Israeli politics). It would as though an aide-de-camp to George Washington had retired during the James Buchanan administration, after a career with turns as ambassador, secretary of state,

and senator.” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/shimon-peres-the-last-link-to-israels-founding-fathers/499868/>)

Like Holocaust survivor Wiesel, Israeli leader Shimon Peres was born at a time and into a place that survival depended on finding a well of strength within. And like Wiesel, Peres had his demons. In his eulogy at Peres’ funeral, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, “We all know that political life was not always kind to Shimon. Alongside his achievements, he also knew disappointment, he also knew difficult moments, he also knew pointed criticism.” Political life was tough on Shimon Peres. He and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin were rivals for much of their political life and Rabin’s biography written in the 1970’s expresses great distaste for Shimon Peres. (Rabin Memoirs, 1979)

Even in the 90’s, at the time of the Oslo Peace Accords, it was European leaders who advocated to have Peres added to Rabin and Yasser Arafat’s receiving of the Nobel Peace Prize. Rabin didn’t want Peres at the talks and was only added when Peres expressed his annoyance. But in time the men had mutual acceptance and the very night of the peace rally where Rabin was assassinated, earlier in the evening the men had embraced. Peres, famous for telling his people, “You are only as great as the cause you are fighting for,” made the Jewish people and its preservation his cause, settling personal differences and putting aside personal aspirations, and embracing full-throttle his role in celebrating the Jewish people and their accomplishments and the Jewish state and its potential for peace.

Peres understood that the Jewish people have a mission larger than themselves, and he had to have the courage to put his personal aspirations aside and embrace his rival who he would ultimately come to replace after his assassination.

These two men, Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres, showed courage not just at those majestic moments that life and fate presented to them and made them famous leaders in the timeline of Jewish history but at other times. Like Wiesel with the World Series, like Peres with the repairing these sour relations. These actions took courage too. History placed them in situations that they needed the mettle to survive – thrust them in the most significant historical moments of the 20th century, Wiesel in its horrors in the worst ways imaginable and Peres escaping from it, leaving family behind, many of whom perished, and in just as great difficulty sending other to die fighting for the Jewish state.

But their courage lies not in these singular moments of fame but in the other moments too. The behind the scenes stories matter as much as the grand stories because in this courage beyond what they were famous for was important to the Jewish people and a lesson for us. That is where Wiesel and Peres become accessible to us. Not in the camps G-d forbid, not in the front lines of battle or having to send young people off to their deaths. But courage in daily life and living. These people were placed at a certain time and place. History played out personally in their lives and we know their names because of that reality. But events outside of the moments that made them famous, remind us that their survival is tied up with ours. Wiesel didn’t just have to survive 1939 to 1945 but he had to figure out how to survive the rest of the life so that the world would know his story and create that moment at the World Series that couldn’t be farther from Auschwitz so that his son and the next generation his son represented could understand that we

survived not just to live to tell the tale but to overcome its damage on us. It is a marvel and a wonder that we are still here.

That a Wiesel or a Peres could live through what they lived through is inspired by living through what we lived through thousands of years ago. Political thinker Michael Walzer looks at the Exodus story as the reason that has kept the Jewish people alive through thousands of years of statelessness. He views the exodus of our people from Egypt as the most compelling story that reminds us that to this very day we are always travelling towards something better. The Exodus invites people to repeat it again. That marching across the desert to reach a better place to have a better life takes a long time – a whole generation in the Bible. And because the world is always radically imperfect and in need of improvement it is up to us retell this story and make the world better. During that time of statelessness of the Exodus, the Jewish people taught one another and lived and breathed the idea that that statelessness was no reason for the Jewish people to cease. And they made it back to the land. And when exiled again for 2000 years, when we became stateless again, we did not cease to be Jewish. Wiesel and Peres were born during that time of statelessness, as were many of you. We are lucky most of us that we just have to learn the story of the Exodus and have the courage to retell it. Others like Wiesel and Peres had to relive it. Today we are no longer stateless and we are no longer persecuted. There is a Jewish state of Israel that Peres brought to fruition. And there is a comfort outside that state in American Jewry, so much so that Elie Wiesel is asked to throw out the first pitch at the World Series. And this is a remarkable thing. It is as if there is no need for the courage that Peres and Wiesel exhibited, because we are so safe. But in that safety and security has come complacency.

G-d willing history will not put us through the historical trials of Peres and Wiesel. But that does mean you do not need courage. The courage lies in acknowledging that there is a journey for the taking. That journey is living the call to journey across the desert to a better life than you could have in Egypt, ancient or modern. The courage in understanding everywhere we go, as our prayer book says, is eternally Egypt, and what inspires us to have the courage to take that journey is embracing our role in the very people we are a part of. We thank G-d we live in a world we don't have to do the unimaginable that Peres and Wiesel had to do in order to preserve our future. But because that is our reality it creates a leisure and a lack and a misunderstanding in how essential each of us is to the Jewish people. And it takes courage, yes courage, to acknowledge that. The model for that courage, the courage we as Jews could seek to emulate lies not through the Holocaust like Wiesel nor the birth of Israel like Peres, but here, in the United States 100 years ago. That model lies in Justice Louis Brandeis, the first Jew on the Supreme Court.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of his appointment to the Supreme Court, the first Jew on this nation's highest court. A Supreme court that included at the same time and also from Kentucky like Brandeis was the anti-semitic Justice James McReynolds. Legend tells that McReynolds refused to sit for the annual photograph of the Justices after Brandeis was admitted and upon his retirement, McReynolds refused to sign the customary letter sent to retiring Justices. While being the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice no doubt put Brandeis in the history books and thrust him in unpleasant interactions like this that was not where his courage lay. It was found a few years earlier when he had the courage to embrace his Jewish identity and in that become an advocate for there to be a Jewish state. Brandeis had grown a completely

assimilated Jew with no strong Jewish identity. He once reflected, “Throughout long years which represent my own life, I have been to a great extent separated from the Jews,”. Courage came to Brandeis around 1914, as he heard more about the plight of European Jewry and their arrival to the states fleeing anti-Semitism and Zionist leaders who sought the well-admired Justice out, he changed. “I find Jews,” Brandeis said at a speech in New York that year, “possessed of those very qualities which we of the twentieth century seek to develop in our struggle for justice and democracy; a deep moral feeling which makes them capable of noble acts; a deep sense of the brotherhood of man; and a high intelligence, the fruit of three thousand years of civilization.” “All of these experiences convinced Brandeis “that the Jewish People should be preserved.” (<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/204852/why-zionism-is-americanism>).

At that moment Brandeis had the courage to come to the realization that he was an essential part of that preservation. Though Brandeis died of a heart attack in 1941, as European Jewry was being decimated, his efforts ensuring the Jewish state ultimately came to fruition in 1948. In that same year, Brandeis University was established as a Jewish sponsored secular university showing how the once alienated Jew had changed and left a legacy of actions that were so significant on the fate of the Jewish people. Sadly, 100 years later, for many the power of the actions of each individual Jew is not understood.

It is as if American Jews and Israeli Jews are like to ships passing in the night. When I heard commentator Jeffrey Goldberg use this very metaphor, I gasped. Because that is really it. We are like ships passing in the night if we only depend on the stories of those like Brandies and Wiesel and Peres to be the ones to have the courage to carry out Judaism and not take on the mantle ourselves. Less than two weeks ago, in eulogizing Peres, Goldberg again reminded us of that distance that lay between us, reaffirming this hopeless chasm between. He wrote, “The Book of Proverbs teaches us that where there is no vision, the people perish. The people of Israel, now bereft of Shimon Peres, will not perish, because survival—or, at least, muddling through—is a Jewish specialty.” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/shimon-peres-benjamin-netanyahu/502319/>)

I do not want to muddle through. I do not want to be like ships passing in the night. We are better than that. The reality of the year 5777 does not need us to have that brand of courage of Wiesel or Peres. We need the Louis Brandeis brand of courage. The courage to care. To change. To draw close to our Jewish community, our synagogue, our Jewish state and our teachings. Again and again and again Torah accentuates that we matter – We mattered enough in the days of creation that an empty world needed humans. We mattered enough to be taken out of slavery in ancient Egypt. And we mattered enough for the Jewish to come to fruition. You marched across the desert to reach a place in which you could have a better life than you could have in Egypt, Walzer teaches. We matter and we continue to matter as long as we strive to care for the story and the history and each individual Jew, from the most famous to the most obscure. From the moment the first Jew Abraham appears in the pages of Torah, he is declared to be a blessing. And you are too. A necessary blessing that is essential in Jewish history and tradition. And to embody that takes courage. To live that, not just in Temple or during life cycle events or when war breaks out in Israel, but in the mundane moments, takes courage. What mattered as

much as those major moments of these famous men was how they decided to act in those minor moments. And what you do and say and how you act in those minor moments is that guarantee that we are here. And letting Judaism infuse those major and minor moments is the miracle of how we are still here – a people stateless and persecuted and punished for so long over so much time.

The courage of today is find and have commitment to a cause and in that a higher yearning. Judaism epitomizes that higher yearning. It is in remaining on that quest for better that the Israelites of the Exodus modeled for us so many years ago. That journey as have the subsequent journeys have never been easy. But they are the very things that make us who we are. Moses, before his death, passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua with the words, “Hazak v’Amatz” – Be strong and courageous. We are now dwell in the shadow of the passing of our modern day Moses, Shimon Peres, who lived the words he said, “You are only as great as the cause you are fighting for.”

Having a cause and the courage to embrace it and execute it and use it to make a difference puts us into dialogue with the future. It lets us put our stamp, our hopes, our dreams on what that future looks like. I thank G-d that there are the Shimon Peres’ and the Elie Wiesels and the Louis Brandeis who made their mark. But they did what they did because you gave them something worth fighting for. They displayed courage under adverse conditions where they could have perished so you can display courage in the most ideal conditions do that Judaism does not perish. And that reality is a cause worth the courage to preserve. Hazak v’ Amatz – Be strong and Courageous and Be the blessing our tradition urges us to be. Shana Tova and An Easy Fast.