

### “Clearly Spiritual”

I'm afraid Rabbi Lyon is under the impression that having a doctorate in communication will catapult me into a category I do not belong. I am not a wordsmith. Nor am I an interpersonal maestro. I know about communication, but it doesn't mean I do it well. Sometimes I feel like a cardiothoracic surgeon who smokes, completely aware of what I should do, but instead do everything wrong. Instead I do what feels good and do what my impulse compels me to do.

As someone who has studied communication as an art and a science, I can tell you that our spurts of reckless communication are never correct. Things we say are oftentimes inadvertent. We are sorry and move on. But too many of us feel comfortable, even well-equipped at having our lips drip of harsh words and menacing thoughts. I have the verbal skill-set to destroy anyone, and in the past have done so on more than a few occasions. But, I have learned not to be mean. I like that about myself. It's better to be nice or, to paraphrase Rabbi Karff in one of his High Holiday sermons delivered many years ago: to embrace your life by committing, or at least acknowledging Messianic Moments—those specs in time when maintaining the dignity of another eclipses your personal need to win. Then, we can become human beings in the best possible sense of the word.

I didn't learn to be human in graduate school, and don't you dare think that common sense teaches it either. I discovered it by conceding that my spirituality is my religion. That's a true revelation, because now I understand why I was always bothered by what so many write in their online dating profiles: I'm not religious. But I am spiritual. Is that admission supposed to impress us? I think those who say that are confused. I was. I went to Rabbi Lyon for counsel years ago when I was going through difficult times. He suggested I come to services and become an active congregant. I alleged that I didn't really need the religious component because I was spiritual. He told me that my religion was my spirituality, and I thought, “What does he know, he's just a Rabbi.” He was right. I needed to revisit my religion and only then, achieve the magical byproduct called spirituality. With that in mind, please let me take you on a part of that journey. I promise to return you in plenty of time to break fast.

I lived with my grandparents, parents, and brother in a conservative Jewish home in Cleveland, Ohio. Three generations living under one roof wasn't terribly uncommon. My grandmother, Razel, ruled. Literally. My mother tried to mother me but was dwarfed at every turn by Grammy. My Grandmother might have been the founder of Chelm, that mythical village populated, according to Jewish folklore, by fools. My grandmother was no fool, but she knew a fool when she saw one. Wisdom was peppered generously throughout her soul. If I complained, she would render some Chelm-like anecdote like “One woman cries her pearls are thin, the other cries her barley is thin,” or “Somebody else's problem is easy to carry up the hill, your own is heavy down the hill.” If I asked, “What's for dinner,” I never got a straight answer. My grandmother would pontificate, “Your stomach has no window, so it doesn't

matter what you eat... just fill it up." I was 7. I said, "OK." Or, if I asked for a new shirt, I was told to sit, and then told the story about the little boy at the carnival. What does that have to do with a new shirt? It did. I just had to wait until the end of the story. Welcome to my world in Cleveland.

She was the consummate storyteller, and in fact is a titanic portion of the material I use on my radio show. If we meet in some kind of afterlife, she'll expect residuals. She had a story for everything and if she didn't have a story, she would offer some perplexing rhetorical remark that could boggle any mind. "Do you like my girlfriend?" I'd ask. "Well, I was at the post office last week and I didn't see her picture on the wall." I'd ask again "Do you like her, Grammy?" And she proclaims, "I'm sure she didn't kill anyone." And it went on... I got it. A simple "She's just OK," wasn't her style. She defined human expression. And some wonder if she had any influence on me becoming a communication professor?

She could stifle anyone with a few words and a dynamic gesture. I was 10, and I remember my cousin's Catholic husband, Michael, sitting at our kitchen table, sipping tea (in a glass, of course), and speaking passionately to my grandmother about Christianity. After about 15 minutes of non-stop lecturing he finally takes a breath and asks, "Razel, what do you think about all this?" Quietly and thoughtfully my grandmother answers, "He was an honest boy. But God?" But he loved my grandmother. When he was engaged to my cousin, his soon-to-be mother-in-law-my grandmother's youngest sister, confessed in prototypical dramatic form that she'd kill herself if she married him. Grammy, with her engrained pro-Jewishness told her that love was God's gift and that everything would be alright. Despite her wisecracks and humor she knew what counted most: Protecting and respecting people and believing in God.

I listened to stories about the shtetl, and Shlobotkah, which I still think had to be an invented name. And their Jewish life, one filled with warmth and pride. I ate more schmaltz than even Jewish law allowed and it's only a miracle of science that I am alive today. And stories about her years at Stutthoff concentration camp with her two daughters, convincing my mother to tell the commandant she was 14, not 13, because my grandmother's uncanny instinct told her that a child under 14, meant separation from your mother. My mother's sister suffered from rheumatic fever and somehow my grandmother provided her with enough strength and courage to survive in the camp. I heard about her brothers and sisters who were killed, and her son, the uncle I never met. I heard more stories than I wanted to hear and many more that I didn't want to remember.

My Grandfather, Jacob (Yonkel), was a man of few words, but every word counted. He was my hero. He was in Dachau for three years, saw countless atrocities, and never-never said a bad word about anyone. Every year, around the time of my birthday, he would tell me a story about a gold watch he kept in his sock while in Dachau. He was young and a laborer and had to hide the watch. It was also a symbol, he said, that one day he would again see my mother and grandmother. He told me this story every year; year in and year out. When he died in April of 1979, a good friend of the family came up to me and handed me a small box, cotton-laced, and in it was that gold watch. Underneath a small piece of scratch paper that read, "I

love you.” That was him: Simple. Loving. True. My father wasn’t much of a presence in my life, so Grandpa really was everything.

I went to Hebrew School 4 days a week for what seemed to be forever. I had to. I felt guilty. I’m Jewish. And I was a genius. You know what a genius is? It’s an average student with a Jewish mother. We belonged to Park Synagogue, at the time the largest conservative synagogue in the country. Trust me. I checked Wikipedia. Rabbi Armand E. Cohen, the Jewish version of Zeus, could eyeball any squirming kid in that huge sanctuary, and infuse more fear in that child than Michael Myers at a Halloween party.

Judaism was everything to my grandparents. I lived in a Judaic pressure-cooker. After I finished my homework my grandmother would recommend strongly that I do it again. If I wanted a toy, I was politely corrected: I really wanted a book. I didn’t really want a Beatles album, because that’s Naishkeit (though my grandmother loved them later... especially Ringo because she heard he might be Jewish). I really wanted a collection of Bach, Beethoven, or at least Gershwin. I was a creative kid. I used to take all the pots and pans from the cupboards and speak into them, yielding an awesome echo, pretending to report the news. “Very nice,” I was told, “But how will that help me become a lawyer?” I was 5 years old and I actually contemplated an answer.

The JCC, AZA, and the synagogue were all a part of my life. And so were Jewish girls. Only Jewish girls. There are only Jewish girls in the world and don’t ever think differently, I was taught. I was so scared I not only hid non-Jewish girlfriends, but anyone with blond hair, who talked about hunting, or could fix his own car. I was a victim of what sociologists have long known about children of survivors: I was taught not to trust.

I adored my grandparents and my mother but I was angry with them. I didn’t receive praise for the things I did well. Oftentimes I felt like some members of my family had a different definition of me than I had of myself. I disclosed this to my mother a number of years ago. She said she knew. She said she was sorry. I appreciated those words. Sometimes I hear my grandmother and grandfather’s voices, filled with optimism and drowning in Judaica, wishing I could better describe those voices to my wife and my son and even my students. I hear their voices often. I now understand their fears. They were stripped of their dignity-victims of the same devastating loss of spirit you and I can take from others if we so desire. So I gave them a pass.

Over the years I have had great successes and hurtful, sometimes tragic losses. In 1998, a life-changing incident prompted me to re-evaluate how I live. I became a docent at Holocaust Museum Houston. I never read so many books, participated in as much training, and felt so committed to anything in a long time. The museum is all about spiritualism. Teaching about personal ownership and responsibility is what I make clear to students and teachers in my assigned tour groups. I proclaim with all my might to those I guide “This is not a religious institution. This is a museum of consciousness. It is where we learn not to hate.” The irony is that the level of comfort with which I say those words comes from a clearer appreciation of

my past; my religion. Then I can be successful at teaching the human lessons—the spiritual essence of the Holocaust. This is something I hope never to forget. None of us should, regardless of religious affiliation.

There it is. I guess my grandmother didn't let me off the hook. She pushed Judaism and it worked. I have a terrific son, a ridiculously gorgeous grandson, and a wife that taught me love... and it took a while because like many of us, I'm a veteran of multiple marriages. My wife, Peggy, is not Jewish. She's more. She takes part in my Judaism. She encourages me to live it. Our Jewish wedding, held at the Friends House, epitomized spirituality. It was perfect. Not only would my grandmother approve, she would love Peggy dearly. And I think she would look me in the eye and proudly say, "You turned out to be a nice Jewish boy." Because my grandmother knew what she told her sister years ago: Love is a gift from God, and everything will be alright.

Emerson said there are two kinds of poets, "the one born of education, the one we respect; and the one born of heart, the one we love." As I see it the poet born of education is religion and spirituality is the one born of heart. Together, both poets kindle a rhythm that can guide us to the best possible destination: A life worth living. Religion is who we are and spiritualism fuels what we should do: love deeply, give generously, forgive easily, and learn not to hate by placing reason over impulse and humanity over depravity. Who knows, we might even be in a position to create our own Messianic Moments. Be good to each other and...

L'Shanah Tova