

Rabbi David Vorspan

Yizkor 5780/2019 (with credit to Rabbi Gary Oren for sharing the story)

There was once an investigative reporter who traveled across America in search of interesting stories for her newspaper and for her blog. She came across a town in mid-America that, at first blush, seemed like every other town she had visited, but there was something odd about it, something very retro that she could not quite put her finger on. It all became clear to her as she strolled down Main Street that this was a town where no one had in hand a cell phone, an iPad, or a laptop, but everyone in town jotted notes down on a pad of paper with not even a pen, but a pencil. A pencil! She couldn't remember when she had seen so many people with pencils in hand. So she stopped a clerk in the store and asked, "Excuse me, but can you tell me why in this town everyone uses a pencil?" And the clerk responded, "You must be from out of town, because here we all use pencils. These are special pencils: Goldberg's pencils. These pencils are the wisest pencils in the world. When you write with these pencils, they actually make you feel better."

"What makes these pencils so special?" asked our travelling reporter. "No one really knows," answered the clerk. "The pencils are produced in Goldberg's workshop. No one is permitted to enter the workshop. But that Mr. Goldberg, he really knows how to make pencils."

The reporter knew a hot story when she came across one so she had to, in some way, infiltrate the Goldberg's pencil workshop. She found the address and in the middle of night easily broke in, and placed a video camera which she linked to her laptop computer. In the morning she rose early, left a note not to be disturbed in her motel room and sat and watched the screen of her laptop. At 9 am, the door to the workshop opened and in walked Mr. Goldberg, a gentleman in his seventies, who has done nothing in life but produce pencils.

The reporter watched him put on an apron, gloves, and goggles and proceed with the production of pencils in silence. She sat there for hours waiting to see something out of the ordinary, but as far as she could see this was one man making a bunch #2 yellow pencils, nothing more. But just as 5 pm rolled around, Mr. Goldberg stopped his efforts. He assembled the 12 dozen pencils he had spent the day crafting and set these 144 pencils in front of himself. And then he spoke to them.

"*Kinderlach* -- My dear little pencils. You are about to go forth into the world—schools, businesses, homes, and so forth. Remember the 5 following important lessons:

1. Everything you do will always leave a mark.
2. If you're not so happy with the mark, don't worry, you can erase it. Erase it quickly because the longer you leave the mark the harder it will be to erase it.
3. You will undergo some very painful sharpenings, but you know what—it will make you a better pencil.
4. At some time, you may end up in a desk for years or behind a shelf or lost on the road, abandoned, forgotten, alone. At those times remember—what makes you a pencil is not what's outside of you, it's what's inside of you.
5. And finally *kinderlach*, my dear pencils, in order to be the very best pencil in the world, you have to be held and guided by the hand that holds you, so respect that hand, for it will help you become what you were put on this earth to be: a pencil."

And with that address to the pencils, Mr. Goldberg turned the lights out, went home after a day's work, and the reporter knew what made the Goldberg pencil the most special pencil in the world.

Everything you do will leave a mark.

1. *All of us have left our marks on others in our lifetimes--mostly for the good. In our daily* interactions with others, friends, family, co-workers, people we encounter in the street and the stores, we leave an impact. Some of us have the privilege of having been told of the impact we made; those who teach or heal occasionally hear such testimony. But all of us, regardless of what we did or will do professionally, have an impact on others, often in small ways—in a kind word said to someone at the checkout counter, in the smile we bestowed on strangers, in the deserved compliments we pay others.

Scientists speak of the butterfly effect, that the fluttering of a butterfly can cause epochal changes. Who knows what our many small deeds do to make this a better place. The marks we leave on the walls of this world are indelible, though often times invisible to the eye. And of that we need to be mindful. We leave marks by our actions; and so we need to be at all times careful of what kind of marks we leave in this world as we accumulate hidden marks in the next.

2. If you're not so happy with the mark, don't worry, you can erase it. Erase it quickly because the longer you leave the mark the harder it will be to erase.

Our mistakes can be erased. Perhaps not all of them, but certainly most of them can be corrected, or at least atonement made for them. Sometimes it's difficult to take out the eraser and undo what we have written; the marks that we have made upon others.

But Mr. Goldberg is correct: it is harder to erase mistakes a long time later. It is as though the pencil marks have become transmuted and become the markings of a pen. Grudges develop; anger develops; the ability to make peace becomes more difficult.

Listen to the words of a parent in my high school, responding to a message I had sent in an electronic newsletter the school puts out each week. Last week I encouraged people to apologize to family and friends, in keeping with the theme of the season.

This is what she wrote:

In reading your message today I felt as if the message was directed to me.

Unfortunately, my sister and I have not spoken in over 2 years since the death of our dad. We had always been a very close family, being children of Holocaust survivors we understood forgiveness and tolerance. But that seemed to fade over the last couple of years between my sister and me.

I am truly not sure why my sister chose not to have any more contact with me and my daughter, but I believe her pain goes way too deep for any of us to try and understand.

I want to reach out to my sister now and just say "I am sorry". I find it very difficult because I am somewhat concerned about not getting a response and also I don't feel deep down inside that I am sorry. What do I do?

I guess I should not worry about the "unknown" and do what this important time of year means...apologize, forget the feelings of pain and just forgive.

We have all done this. We don't want to admit error where we committed one; we don't want to swallow our pride and say that we were sorry; and as time passes it becomes harder and harder to undo the damage. The argument over something trivial has meant families have drifted apart; friendships ended. If you think it is only your family that has members that are estranged, watch this:

If you have someone in your family not talking to another person in your family, raise your hand.

Life is too short to allow animosities to fester. Sometimes one must let bygones be bygones. Being *B'roygez* may be satisfying, but it doesn't improve our lives and our sense of connectedness.

3. You will undergo some very painful sharpenings, but you know what—it sometimes will make you a better pencil. Most of you are acquainted with **Rabbi Harold Kushner** and his volume *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The volume emerged out of his grief at seeing his son, Aaron, die of progeria, a rapidly aging disease, at age 13. The pain of losing a child impelled Rabbi Kushner to craft his personal response. The book became a best-seller. Rabbi Kushner wrote that we can't always change our circumstances, but we can change the way we deal with the changing circumstances. Just as the pencils must endure the sharpening, so, too, must we deal with the sharpened or broken pencils in our lives—those whose lives were cut short, those who suffered. And we can deal with the pain more easily if we don't consider God to be the source of that pain. As Rabbi Kushner wrote, we cannot turn to God as a source of compassion if we believe God caused the initial suffering.

4. At some time, you may end up in a desk for years or behind a shelf or lost on the road, abandoned, forgotten, alone. At those times remember—what makes you a pencil is not what's outside of you, it's what's inside of you

Sometimes life will find us alone. Put aside, forgotten. That happens. It can be painful. It can be painful to wait to be summoned back into the ball game; to find a new way of participating. And it isn't always easy. How do we mark that time? Pencils lie inert if unused. But human beings have options.

Let me share a story courtesy of a Florida rabbi, **Ed Farber**. An elderly man is visiting his wife in a nursing facility where she had been for a number of years. She had stayed at home during the early years of Alzheimer's but for the last three years she needed the constant attention and supervision that was best delivered in this particular facility. One of the nurses came over to the man and said. I have seen you come here day after day all these years to sit and talk with your wife. But it is increasingly hard for you to do this. The trip is difficult, the effort is exhausting you. The weather is taking a toll on you. I need to tell you – your wife has no idea who you are and hasn't for almost three years now. It makes no difference to her whether it's you or me or any of the caregivers here. You don't need to strain yourself like this. You don't need to come anymore.

The elderly man lifted his eyes, looked into the eyes of the caregiver with a look of appreciation and acknowledgment, and said to her, "I appreciate your concern. I thank you from the depths of my soul – you and all the caregivers for the extraordinary care and kindness you show my wife. But I will continue to come." The aid was a little frustrated because it hurt her to see the elderly man strain himself so much to come to visit. She said to him, "Really, she doesn't know who you are." He looked at her again and said, "I have known that she doesn't know who I am for the last three years." "Then why do you keep coming?" He looked at her and said, "Because I know - who I am."

We continue to be who we are despite the passage of time; despite the change of circumstances of our lives; we, like that elderly man, persist in striving to be who we were fashioned to be. And sometimes we try to remember the person who used to be that vital person and now lies helpless before us.

And finally *kinderlach*, my dear pencils, in order to be the very best pencil in the world, you have to be held and guided by the hand that holds you, so respect that hand, for it will help you become what you were put on this earth to be: a pencil.

What is this hand? The hand of God? Trying to push us in the right direction? Or is it the hand of fate, propelling us to a predetermined destination? Maybe the hand is the combined efforts of countless hands, extended by family, friends, neighbors, strangers, trying to keep us upright, to protect us, to support us.

I think that, at this *yizkor* hour, our thoughts are with those kinds of hands -- hands that reached out to us during our lifetime, and were so much of what made us who we are. Hands that held our hands in tenderness; hands that embraced us in love; hands that cared for us with compassion; hands that became calloused in providing for us. Hands that are now beyond our sight.

Mr. Goldberg crafted very special pencils. They entered this world with a blessing, which was a charge to them. We too enter life with blessings, and we depart this world leaving behind the nub of a once elegant and slender pencil.

We will shortly recite *yizkor* memorial blessings for our loved ones who left an indelible imprint upon our hearts and souls. And we remember the final blessings Mr. Goldberg offered his yellow pencils as they prepared to embark upon their life's mission: to leave the marks we are proud of, and erase those that we not; to remember that tribulation sometimes improves us; to remember that we must look within to determine who we really are, and to ultimately leave this world having made our mark.

At this moment of memorial, we review the pages of the books of the lives of our loved ones, some written in pencil, some with paragraphs we feel free to erase. And we remind ourselves that we all need to be better pencils.

May we all be written and sealed in the book of living and Life for a great new year.