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High Holidays 2016

HOLY AND NOT HOLY

My earliest memories of these High Holy Days are a very strange mix of music, and laughter, and hypnotic boredom. My grandfather, Abba Weisgal, was a cantor in a synagogue in Baltimore, and my father, Hugo Weisgall, who was a composer, conducted the choir. My uncle Freddie, a lawyer, sang in the choir, and so did my brother, from the time he was six. It was a male choir, so there was no place for me, except a seat on the ledge of the choir loft overlooking the bima, and my grandfather.

Of course I sang anyway—who could tell the difference between my voice and my brother's? And who could hear either of us over the roar of tenors and baritones and basses? We sang the music the choir at Adas Yeshuron sings, which my father introduced to the congregation over 30 years ago, and much more, too: we sang all day on Yom Kippur.

We also read the entire *machzor*, the High Holy Day prayer book: pages and pages and pages of Hebrew that took me years to understand, and many more years to appreciate. Abba sang those passages in his personal *nusach*—chanting—marvelous improvisations on the tradition he had learned in Vienna. When I was little, I sat and endured.

But, if it is possible to grow up backstage in a synagogue, that is what I did. I witnessed the underpinnings of the performances. My father sang as if he were at the Metropolitan Opera; he hissed at my grandfather for his sublime disregard of the proper key; he harangued the tenors, who sighed. He shook his head sadly when Freddie missed an entrance.

And there was an anteroom off the choir loft: an escape. During the long sermon, the whole choir retired to the anteroom, along with me and my brother and my cousins. The men talked politics, played checkers, and told stories. Uncle Freddie held forth. Often he herded the men into the bathroom, where they told dirty jokes and the kids couldn't hear them. He was one of the first civil rights lawyers in the country; he represented the Berrigan brothers and Rap Brown. When he moved to

Israel, he became a public defender and represented Arabs. He had a terrible temper, and he yelled at his children. At Passover, he read the passage about the Wicked Son. You could say that Freddie was bad. And people did, and he was, and they loved him.

On Yom Kippur, every year, after the Musaf service, Freddie announced that he was ordering in cheeseburgers for lunch. Uncle Freddie had his own parallel liturgy, which he sang not quite sotto voce. I cannot, on this bima, speak most of his lines, but here's one example. You know the verse: *Adonai yimloch le-olam va'ed*, The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. And whenever the choir sang it, Freddie intoned in his beautiful, rough bass: "The Lord shall rain for ever and ever. And the ballgame had to be cancelled."

Every year, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, just before *Ne'ilah*, the closing service, the men reassembled in the choir loft. Hungry, tired and slap happy, they tried to stifle their laughter at one of Uncle Freddie's unrepeatable stories. Even my father cracked up. The congregation noticed. The rabbi glared. And Uncle Freddie, with tears of laughter in his eyes, said, every year: "It may be Yom Kippur down there, but up here, it's Simchas Torah."

Then the ark was opened and the congregation stood for *Ne'ilah*. The service's recurring musical motive, is modal and murmuring, a resigned, insistent supplication. The gates are closing, our prayers have one last chance to ascend. Abba began, the choir answered: the beautiful melody, sung only once every year as the sun was setting.

From the time I was very young, that melody lifted me up with its heavenly helium, suddenly and effortlessly, out of the ordinary world, out of boredom, even out of Freddie's subversive irreverence, into a place of exaltation, of holiness.

We don't sing that service here anymore. In my mind I can hear my father singing *Ne'ilah* on this bima—but we still sing this beautiful Kol Nidre service, the piyutim, the *Anachnu*—and we still tell Uncle Freddie's jokes... *u'shmo echod*: His name is one. It's in the *Aleinu*. As the choir and the congregation praise God: *u'shmo echod*, Barbara Fishman

and I—and this year my brother and my daughter in Baltimore—we will look at each other and belt out: “You’re a schmo!”

You’re a schmo: it reminds me, year after year, that beauty, unruliness, or the boredom of not understanding, which gives rise to a need to understand—that these are all necessary parts of the service. Especially on Yom Kippur: which is about forgiving. Good and bad, the holy and the profane, it all jostles inside us, mixing and shifting: the music, sometimes discordant, sometimes sublime, of our being.