

Cantor Messerschmidt, the Legend

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I had the privilege of witnessing something incredible happen two weeks ago: a man turned into a legend.

Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt passed away at the age of 102-and-a-half: he had been celebrating half-birthdays since his 80s, “just in case.” Raised in Berlin in the 1920s and ’30s, he was barred from that city’s university because of antisemitism and for that reason enrolled in a Jewish teacher-training program. Kurt and his future wife, Sonja, met at that school. In 1943, the Nazis deported them to Terezin, where they married before each was sent to a different death camp. Miraculously, both survived, and they found each other after the war; their marriage lasted 66 years. For 34 of those years, Kurt Messerschmidt was the cantor of Temple Beth El in Portland, where he touched the lives of countless congregants, choir members, bar- and bat-mitvah students, and others with his beautiful tenor voice and his eagerness to foster and sustain lasting relationships.

You can find all of these details about Cantor Messerschmidt’s life, along with many others, in the obituaries and news reports that ran in the papers and on Maine Public Radio. Cantor Messerschmidt earned his place in history. At his funeral, however, these historical facts were an afterthought. Eulogy after eulogy focused instead on fleeting—and timeless—moments in Kurt’s life. The stories told by family members and fellow clergy painted vivid pictures of a mentor who believed in each of his students and challenged them to exceed their own expectations, a choral director who stood up for and inspired the members of his choirs, a tech lover who kept up with the latest gadgets and emailed regularly with hundreds of friends until

just a few weeks ago, a bon vivant who bought a new car at the age of 100. I never got to know Cantor Messerschmidt, nor did my colleague Rabbi Jared Saks, but he commented after the funeral that Cantor Messerschmidt was clearly the kind of person who made each and every person feel uniquely special and important. That's a practice to which we should all aspire.

The funeral marked not an end, but a moment of transition. Cantor Messerschmidt will never send another email, but he will continue to touch those with whom he once corresponded; he will never teach another bar-mitzvah student, but his lessons endure. I certainly don't want to diminish the real sense of loss that accompanies his death, and that of every beloved figure. My point is simply that we have also retained something: an inspirational legacy, a legend, a myth.

My students are often troubled when I use the term "myth" to refer to the stories found in the Bible. I always need to explain that when it comes to matters of religion, "myth" doesn't mean false in the sense of fake news. Quite the contrary, a myth is a tale that conveys a community's timeless truths. Biblical accounts of the world's creation don't aspire to compete with scientific theories like the Big Bang or Darwinian evolution: instead, they seek to help us understand the world in a certain way, and to behave accordingly. The same can be said about the story of Jonah, which we'll read this afternoon. It doesn't matter whether a real person was actually swallowed by a big fish: the point of the myth is to emphasize God's boundless compassion for those who engage in teshuvah, so as to inspire us to do just that. The stories I heard at Cantor Messerschmidt's funeral were also myths—I don't doubt that they happened, but the inspirational lessons they convey about how we should live our lives and relate to one another don't depend on the underlying facts.

I spent several days this summer in Berlin, Cantor Messerschmidt's hometown until the Nazis deported him to Terezin and then to Auschwitz. Berlin doesn't have a central Holocaust

memorial like those in Jerusalem, Washington, or Boston. Instead, there are hundreds of memorials scattered throughout the city. Like facets of a prism, each one refracts one small aspect of what happened under Nazi rule. My tour guide explained that the goal was to keep the Holocaust ever-present without being overwhelming. One haunting memorial is located in Koppenplatz, a small park in an elegant residential neighborhood that was home to many Jews until the Nazi deportations. In that park, on what looks like a parquet floor, rest a desk and two chairs that look like fine wood furniture with leather covers. The chair on the drawer-side of the desk, where the owner would have sat, lies toppled on the floor, while the chair where a visitor would have sat remains erect.



Part of a poem by Nobel laureate Nelly Sachs encircles this life-size bronze sculpture:

O dwellings of death

Set out so enticingly

For the host of the house, who used to be the guest—

O you fingers

Laying the stone of the threshold

Like a knife between life and death—

O you chimneys

O you fingers

And Israel's body dissolves in smoke through the air!

The Koppenplatz memorial expresses in mythic terms the historical experience of Jews like Kurt and Sonja Messerschmidt. The Nazis deported Berlin's Jews and gave their homes to Aryan Germans, one of the many ways in which average citizens became complicit in the Holocaust. This memorial drives home the message that, in important respects, the houses of the Koppenplatz neighborhood were themselves dwellings of death; the people and the chimneys of that neighborhood, not just those at camps like Auschwitz, played a role in the destruction of the Jewish people. The mythic dimension of this memorial rests in its effort to communicate timeless truths to residents and visitors who may have had no direct involvement in what happened in neighborhoods like Koppenplatz. Among its lessons: we are all responsible for protesting against and seeking to prevent acts of injustice. It is this focus on timeless truths and universal lessons rather than historical facts about a specific time and place that makes the Koppenplatz memorial a kind of myth.

The historian of religion Wendy Doniger observes that myths are especially capable of engaging the particular and the general simultaneously, of providing both a microscope and a telescope through which to perceive our world. The toppled chair in Koppenplatz speaks both of a single deportation from a nearby apartment and also of the Holocaust writ large and the even broader phenomena of racism and genocide. Doniger observes that the Book of Job, a classic text to study on Yom Kippur, depicts not only everyday, personal sufferings of loss, death, and illness (albeit raised to the nth degree) but also spectacular, impersonal images of laying the earth's foundations and tying cords to constellations. The unresolvable tension between these poles is what makes this myth resonate.

Both the particular and the general featured prominently at Cantor Messerschmidt's funeral, as they do at all funerals. Eulogists told stories that described specific moments in one man's life but that sought to inspire everyone present. The officiant, Rabbi Carolyn Braun, recited psalms that placed the occasion of one man's death within the timeless framework of humanity itself. "אנוש כחציר ימיו, כצִיץ השדה כן יציץ", The days of humans are like grass; they bloom like a flower of the field. A wind passes by and they are no more, and where they were planted is no longer known. "והסד ה' מעולם ועד עולם", But Adonai's steadfast love toward those who revere God is for all eternity, lasting through the generations."

Cantor Messerschmidt's funeral ended with two recitations of the El Malei Rahamim: first a general prayer on behalf of all who perished in the Holocaust and only afterwards a specific prayer on behalf of the cantor himself. Kurt Messerschmidt's body then left the sanctuary on the way to its final resting place. His legend, however, will remain in that space for many years to come as those who remember him recall his legacy.

Cantor Messerschmidt was, in a sense, already legendary in his lifetime. Media coverage of his death, and the presence of so many people at his funeral, attest to his broad and lasting influence. Each one of us can also become legendary, even if only in smaller circles. My great-grandmother remains a legendary figure within my family 20 years after her death, as my parents and I invoke her memory each year around the various holidays that she used to spend living in my childhood home. My passion for cooking, and my commitment to fostering relations between children and the elderly, are a small part of her legacy. When my grandmother passes away, her legacy will continue to inspire an expansive and embracing conception of family as well as a commitment to Jewish communal causes. I'm certainly not looking forward to Grandma's death, but I do look forward to her funeral as an opportunity to crystallize her status as a legend.

The Yizkor service, like funerals, tends toward myth rather than history. It too places particular lives and deaths in the universal context of human frailty. It also provides an opportunity to revisit and reinforce the legendary aspects of those who have passed away. To say that my great-grandmother didn't get along with her daughter-in-law, my Grandma, is an understatement. I try not to dwell on unsavory historical facts like that during Yizkor, however. The power of this service is that it helps us to draw inspiration from the moments we once spent with those we love, so that we can become better versions of ourselves. Through these memories and this lasting influence, those who touched our lives remain with us as legends, their legacy endures.