

Shabbat Parashat Terumah 5786
Rabbi David Englander
Twenty-Five Years Later

My JTS Rabbinical School class, the class of 1999, has a WhatsApp group that people post to occasionally. This week it was full of old pictures, so old that they had to be scans of physical photos or maybe low-resolution early digital files somehow saved until now.

So why this trip down memory lane?

Because, as I wrote about on Friday, this coming Monday we will gather at JTS to receive the honorary doctorate that follows 25 years of service to the Jewish people. It is a significant milestone for all of us, but I think we are looking forward to it mainly for the chance to see one another and to catch up.

The irony of the rabbinate is that you spend five or six years living, working, and learning more or less on top of each other, and then scatter to Jewish communities around the world. We run into each other at conventions or other gatherings, but never all at once.

And in truth, we will not all gather on Monday either.

JTS chose this date because it is also the 30th yahrtzeit of our classmate Matt Eisenfeld, who was killed in a Jerusalem bus bombing together with his soon-to-be fiancée and New Jersey native, Sara Duker. Their loss was a defining moment for our class, and for our lives, our Zionism, and our rabbinate.

Matt would have been a highly influential rabbi and teacher. His and the equally brilliant Sara's loss still stings. Like most significant losses, such pain does not dissolve with time. Instead, it becomes a motivating force, pushing us to try to do some of what they might have done, not as well or as effectively, but in ways that keep their memory and something of their legacy alive in our world.

Included in the class memorial will also be my great and good friend, and more importantly Len Feldman's son, Rabbi Adam Feldman, lost to us just over seven years ago. His sudden and shocking death left a wonderful family bereft and his many friends saddened beyond what many of us had previously known was possible.

Adam took me out to play golf for the first time. Our families vacationed together. We were scheduled to spend New Year's with them at their home in Princeton, when instead we traveled to his funeral, where together with other colleagues and friends I served as a pallbearer.

These are the kinds of losses we all carry with us. They will be on our minds as we celebrate this moment of longevity in the rabbinate, made all the more poignant by those who will not be with us in person.

My class is a special one, one that without exaggeration or bragging people are still talking about. First of all, we were uncommonly large. Even with Matt's loss, I think we graduated with 39 fellow rabbis. Classes since then have averaged, don't quote me, closer to 15, maybe fewer.

There were actual geniuses among us, and rabbis who went on to do truly remarkable and influential work. Shai Held founded and still runs the extraordinary Hadar Institute. He was my roommate in the Brush Dormitory. Elliot Cosgrove is one of the most quoted and, by acclamation, successful congregational rabbis working today. He was my roommate in Jerusalem. Jacob Blumenthal is now head of the Rabbinical Assembly and the USCJ, participated in my installation here, and was in my freshman seminar led by our esteemed teacher and role model Joe Brodie. I have known Jacob's family since going to Michigan with his brother.

Matt Berkowitz is President of the Schechter Institutes in Jerusalem, was also in that freshman seminar, and was my congregant at my former congregation before making aliyah. Ellen Wolintz-Fields is the Executive Director of Women's League for Conservative Judaism, just back from Jerusalem advocating for equal status at the

Kotel. Josh Heller is a long-time member of the law committee and helped shape the movement's guidelines for Zoom use during Covid.

So as we like to joke, the class of '99 has the RA, the USCJ, Park Avenue Synagogue, Schechter, the law committee, and Women's League. We are just waiting on a Chancellor. And as you may have heard, that job is open too.

All of which is not meant to negate or minimize the extraordinary contributions of other classmates across every area of the rabbinate. Those who have devoted their lives to one congregation or more, those serving in mental health roles, chaplaincy, Hillel work, day schools, and academia. If I can say it directly, we have all given a great deal to a great many people.

I am grateful that JTS, including Vice Chancellor and our neighbor Rabbi Joel Seltzer, not in the class of '99, because nobody is perfect, put time, effort, and resources into recognizing their alumni and going out of their way to help mark this milestone moment. May it be followed by many more, for all of us and for our patient and understanding families, who should really be getting these honorary degrees.

I want to end with my favorite story, which is really saying something. It was also my congregant Jerry Schneiderman's favorite story, of blessed memory. Whenever I share it, I think of him. Despite eventual setbacks and decline, Jerry came to services every Shabbat to connect to learning, prayer, and community.

Jerry is one example of what makes this work not only doable, but worthwhile. The chance to connect, to build relationships, to be there for people in good times and harder ones, and in doing so, to keep the chain of Jewish tradition strong enough that others will choose to link themselves to it in the future.

Here is the short version of the story.

A man goes to the airport and buys a bag of cookies. He sits down to wait for his flight and reaches into the bag, takes a cookie, and eats it. A woman sitting next to him, a

complete stranger, reaches into the bag and takes a cookie too. He gives her a look, but thinks, whatever, it's just one cookie.

He takes another. She takes another.

His looks become more bewildered, judgmental, maybe even a little angry. And so it goes until the bag is empty. She boards her flight, and eventually he boards his. As he settles into his seat, he reaches into his coat pocket and finds the original bag of cookies he had bought.

It turns out he had been eating her cookies, not the other way around. And she shared willingly, while he judged her for taking without asking.

I am not sure if I am the man or the woman in this story. Maybe I am both.

For all my failings and shortcomings over these past twenty-six and a half years, I can tell you that overall my intentions have been, and remain, good. I have tried to share not just my cookies, but my days, my nights, my Shabbats, my holidays, my struggles, my preparation, my study, my teaching, my ideas, my motivation, and occasionally my inspiration, with the communities that have welcomed, encouraged, supported, and challenged me.

In some ways the time that has passed since my ordination feels like it has been every moment of more than a quarter century. In others, I still feel like the kid wearing the sea-foam-colored Lands' End jacket in those old pictures circulating among our gifted and dedicated class ahead of our long-awaited reunion.

Like Woody says in Toy Story, there is not a day that goes by that I do not think of those we have lost along the way. And there is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful for the blessing of being someone's rabbi, and for waking up each morning with the chance to fulfill the words we pray every day: *lilmod ul'lamed, lishmor v'la'asot*: to learn, to teach, to observe, and to practice the words and values of our Torah, *b'ahavah*, with love.

Shabbat shalom.

