

Remarks of Leonard Fein on being awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Baltimore Hebrew College in May, 1991

The dissonance of oh so many commencements follows from the fact that while the graduates and their families have assembled for purposes of celebration, the academy takes itself too seriously to mark the occasion with party hats and fireworks, instead inflicting upon its captive audience a speaker who almost invariably is unable to resist the temptation to turn what should have been a party into a last-minute effort to offer the assembled precisely that which they are least inclined at the moment to want--that is, gratuitous advice on the subject of how they ought to live their lives.

I might myself have succumbed to that temptation had I not recently heard the story of the Jew who one day came to his rabbi with a problem:

"Rabbi," he said, "it's our goat. Our goat, our only means of livelihood, is sick, listless. Rabbi, help."

The rabbi replied, "Oats. Feed the goat only oats for a week, and then come see me."

A week later, the Jew returned, panicked: "Rabbi, last week the goat had just a few symptoms, but now she's limping, her eyes are half-closed, and she's got no more milk. Rabbi, you must help."

"Barley," said the rabbi. "Feed the goat only barley for a week, and then come see me."

When the week was up, the Jew appeared again: "Rabbi, rabbi, the goat is in a coma. For God's sake, tell me what to do!"

"Corn," said the rabbi. "Corn for a week, then come see me."

"But rabbi, our goat has never ever eaten corn."

"Feed the goat corn. Then come see me."

And when, a week later, the Jew returned, and the rabbi asked, "So how is the goat?" The Jew replied, "Rabbi, our goat died last night."

"I'm so sorry," said the rabbi. "What a shame. I had so much more advice to give you."

It's not advice I've come to share with you this evening, but a story. Or, more precisely, a story about stories, and then a story.

What prompts my choice of subject is, of course, the resonance that this occasion has for me. I am twice-connected to this institution: I walked its halls, albeit back when they were in a different part of town, and it was, of course, the place where my father, alav hashalom, taught

several generations of students--I among them. While I lived in Baltimore for only eight years, I am from Baltimore, since this was the city where I attended high school, and when people ask you where you're from, it's almost invariably the city where you went to high school that you announce as your childhood home. And the Baltimore I am from was, aside from my parental home, the Baltimore of Habonim and the Baltimore of the Hebrew College. Entering this building is, for me, like being dunked in a hot tub that has been filled with nostalgia.

My Baltimore years were those strange, those mysterious years when tragedy unparalleled was so quickly followed by triumph so glorious, the years during which we became aware of the extent of the butchery of our people, of how dense was the darkness of the Kingdom of Night, and then, in a dislocating juxtaposition from which we are still reeling, just three years later, watched the skies transformed by the brilliant light a people resurgent, by the birth of the Republic of Hope.

Need I observe that much has changed since those years?

Baltimore was a very different place back then, still mostly a sleepy southern town, noteworthy if at all for Fort McHenry and Francis Scott Key, for Edgar Allan Poe and Babe Ruth and H.L. Menken and the Enoch Pratt Free Library, and finally for Reginald Stewart, then the conductor of the decidedly inferior Baltimore Symphony, distinguished for having the longest fingers of any living conductor. The Forest Park High School I attended was racially segregated by law, and the law was so inviolate that when some of us proposed to Mr. Dunn, our principal, that we mark the occasion of brotherhood week by inviting the choir from Dunbar High School--then, by law, a negro high school--to sing on Forest Park's stage, Mr. Dunn replied, "Don't you think that's going a little too far?"

And my Baltimore Hebrew College years? Our faculty back then was--I believe without exception--a faculty of first generation American Jews. With the singular exception of Dr. Kaplan, whose mastery of English was a source of pride to us all, they were men for whom English was plainly a second language, for whom America was not yet, not quite, home, and who saw us, their students, as largely useless, entirely inadequate as raw material with which to mold a new generation of literate Jews. No matter that my own class produced four rabbis, several olim, and sundry other Jews of note, we were plainly inadequate to the task. There was a mournful tone about the College back then, the sense of a hardy band fighting a rearguard action it knew was doomed to fail.

One understands the tone, of course. The great reservoir of Jewish learning and of Jewish life had been destroyed. The seductions of America were, so it seemed, irresistible. All that could reasonably be expected is that we would here and there, now and then, recall and retell the story of the way it used to be, a once-upon-a-time story.

Which, together with my acute nostalgia, brings me from Louis Kaplan and Harry Tchack and Mordechai Kossover and Sam Ivri and the others to Barry Levenson and Avalon, a story about a story.

Avalon, as perhaps you are aware, is a suspense story. Very early in the film, at Thanksgiving dinner, Mr. Krichinsky is telling the youngsters of the family the story of his arrival in Baltimore--"I came to America in 1914"--and the older members of the family groan at having to hear the familiar tale yet again. At that point, Mr. Krichinsky slams his hand on the table and virtually shouts, "Jews! If you don't remember, you forget."

I like the Levenson/Krichinsky formulation even more than I like the Baal Shem Tov's classic formulation, inscribed at the entrance to the museum at Yad VaShem--"Remembrance is the path to redemption." Levenson makes a verb out of the noun, makes of memory an activity rather than a passive state. And the rest of the unfolding film deals with the question of whether Jews will, in fact, remember, or whether, instead, they will forget.

We have cause, as the film moves on, to doubt they will remember. Television happens, and the suburbs happen, and financial success happens, and the extended family comes unglued, and by the end of the film the Thanksgiving feast with the entire family assembled, each competing to be heard, has been shriveled into a nuclear family huddled silently with their TV dinners in front of a television set, watching the only vestige of the bustling family that remains, the family as interpreted by TV sitcom.

But in the very last scene in the film, Levenson throws us a comforting bone. In that scene, as you will recall, Mr. Krichinsky's grandson, now grown and with a son of his own, comes to visit the old man in the home for the aged where he now lives. Mr. Krichinsky has little memory left; he barely recognizes his grandson, and, soon enough, the young man and his own son take their leave. On the way out, the young boy look up at his father and says, "That man talks funny." And his father, Krichinsky's grandson, puts his arm around the boy and begins the story: "He came to America in 1914."

And so the film ends, its audience meant to understand that *af al pi shehayamim cholfim, shanah overet, hamanginah nisheret*--that the story continues to be told. In its way, the story is a contemporary adaptation of the familiar Hassidic tale, renewed in our time by Elie Wiesel:

When the founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, sought to avert a threatening misfortune, he would go to a certain place in the woods, and there light a fire and utter a special prayer--and the misfortune would be averted.

When his successor, the Maggid of Mezeritch, sought to accomplish the same purpose, he, too, would go to that place in the woods and there light a fire, and he would say, "Master of the universe, I no longer recall the prayer, but this is the place and here is the fire, and that will have to suffice." And suffice it did.

In due course, it fell to Moshe Leib of Sassov to intercede on behalf of his people. And he, too, would go to that place in the woods, and there say, "Master of the universe, I do

not recall the prayer and I cannot make the fire, but at least I remember where it was done." And again, the evil decree was averted.

Finally, the task fell to Israel of Rizhin. And the best that he could do was to say, "Master of the universe, I know not the prayer, nor the fire, nor even the place, but I can still tell the story, and that must suffice." And it did.

In Wiesel's retelling, as in Levenson's script, the story is what we are left with. And in each case, whatever the admixture of irony the teller of the tale may feel, the moral is intended as a comfort. The story alone, says Wiesel, is sufficient.

I come to Baltimore to accept with gratitude and delight the honor you do me and to propose to you--no, more than propose, to insist--that the story alone is not sufficient. Once-upon-a-time stories are for bedtime, they are meant to put their audience to sleep, and it is not sleep that Jews in Baltimore or in Boston or anywhere else in America today are lacking. The story of how it used to be is a story that peters out, and if that is the only story we know, we, too, will fade away.

The point of Jewish memory is less to remember yesterday than to remember tomorrow, less to remember what once happened than what has yet to happen. The story of what once happened is merely a prologue. We live our lives between *hayamim hahem*, the days that were, and *acharit hayamim*, that day that is yet to be, the day that is neither day nor night, and our task is to build a bridge between the one and the other, a bridge of stories we do not merely tell but stories that we write, stories that grow out of what was and point to what can be, what must be.

I come to Baltimore to join you in your *simchah* and to tell you one such story, a story that remembers tomorrow, a story whose last page is blank, waiting for you to inscribe your own lives on it--and then to add yet another blank page, to make room for those who will follow you.

It is a story some of you have heard, and more than once, for it was told from this platform on more than one occasion by my father. He may well have told it the evening you bestowed on him an honorary degree; I know he told it the night you honored him on the occasion of his retirement.

"For his many years as a teacher," you said. And this was his reply:

"When I was still a child in Bessarabia, our rebbe said to us one day, 'Children, they say that very far away there is a land called America. And I suppose that is so, for why should they lie? And they say that in that far-away land called America, there is a city called Philadelphia, and I suppose that, too, is so. And then they say that in the city called Philadelphia, there is a bell they call the Liberty Bell, and quite possibly, that is true as well. But they go on to say that on that bell are inscribed words from our book, "'Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.'" And, frankly, I

find that hard to believe. Why in such a far-away place would they use words from our book for their bell?

"So I have a favor to ask of you," the rebbe continued. "If it should happen when you grow up that you go to America, see to it that you visit Philadelphia, and when you are there, go look at the bell, and then write to me and tell me whether the words are there. I would very much like to know such a thing."

And it so happened, my father continued, that he did, indeed, come to America, and he did chance to Philadelphia, and, remembering the rebbe's request, he went to see the bell. And yes, there were the words. But then he saw what his rebbe did not know: the bell was cracked. "You honor me this evening, my father concluded, as a teacher; I prefer to think of myself as a bell-mender."

I tell you this story this evening to honor my father, and because none of us owns the stories we inherit, the stories we live. Each of our stories belongs to all of us, and as we live those stories and weave of them a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow, they become the living Midrash of our people, the means by which we stay awake and alert and alive.

And I tell you this story because I am so touched by the honor you do me this evening, and, thus indebted to you, have wanted to repay the debt.

And, finally, I tell you this story because the bell is still cracked, and even though Baltimore has changed, and even though the Hebrew College has changed, I permit myself to hope that in one respect this place still teaches its students what it taught to the students of my generation--that it is for us, in our lives and in our work, to help mend the bell.

Thank you, congratulations, and may God bless you all.