

Article for *WexnerLEADS blog* – Nov. 26, 2015

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LOSS, LEARNING, AND LEADERSHIP

Fourteen years ago both my parents died in a car accident. How does one cope with such a tragedy? I was immediately transformed from child to orphan. I and my siblings, each of whom made aliyah many years ago, decided immediately on burial in Israel. Thanks in part to help from the Jewish community network, we were able to handle the complicated arrangements. But my story is about what happened afterwards.

Would I say kaddish for the year of mourning? As far as I knew no family member, past or present, had ever had the opportunity or the desire to do so. So I began. Every late afternoon, as I drove to shul for minyan, I listened to the voice of Theodore Bikel narrating Leon Wieseltier's book *Kaddish* (a must-read for anyone in mourning). Shloshim came and went, and I was still attending every day. The comfort provided by others who "know" is immeasurable and invaluable. Our venerable minyan leader said to me, "If you're going to come every day, you should learn to lead the davening." As I have done throughout my life, when given the chance to learn, I said yes.

A few weeks after my parents' passing, my close friend and fellow WHF member and community leader, Bernard Pinsky, lost his father. We would become more than just two friends sharing losses.

Our synagogue was at a low ebb in the life cycle of institutions. Our aging membership was becoming increasingly disengaged from, and disenchanting with, synagogue life. Our rabbi had lost connection with his congregation. Our aging building no longer properly served our needs. And we had a difficult financial situation. Other than that, everything was great!

One day, while sitting beside Bernard in shul, I said to him, "We need to use our combined Jewish leadership experience to fix the shul." Bernard immediately agreed. The plan was that he would look after the financial resources and I would address the human resources. At the next synagogue annual general meeting, Bernard became treasurer, and with some creative fundraising and careful accounting, we were back in black, and have been every year since. A year later, I became synagogue president. My main task was to deal with our spiritual leadership (rabbi, cantor, and Torah reader). In short order, our beloved Torah reader passed away, our cantor's contract was terminated, and a performance review of our rabbi showed overwhelming support for change. So the rabbi's contract was not renewed. Enter another close friend and fellow WHF member and community leader, Stephen Gaerber.

Stephen and I had an agreement that if I handled letting our current rabbi go, Stephen would chair the search committee to find a new one. We did find a new rabbi, and he has been with our congregation ever since. We also hired a new Torah reader. And we hired a cantor who had a successful run with us until deciding on a career change.

Once the finances had been stabilized and the klei kodesh restocked, it was time for the congregation to build a new building. Just in time for the High Holydays in 2014 we opened the doors to a spectacular new synagogue. The membership is revitalized and growing. Young families are joining. There is a wide array of creative programming for children, seniors and everyone in between.



It would be a great understatement to say that the project was not a smooth road, but the results made all the frustration and tsuris worthwhile. I get great satisfaction from seeing what my leadership led to. Wexner taught us about the importance of a guiding coalition; one person acting alone cannot accomplish what a coalition of like minds can. Rebuilding our synagogue required the combined efforts of three Wexner grads, and of course many others who followed through on what we began.

That's my story of loss, learning and leadership, although I'm not sure I have the order of the three words correct. What I am sure of is that my Wexner learning experience helped me cope with my tragic loss, and made me a better leader. And it led to the renewal of a leading synagogue in Vancouver. Would I have said Kaddish without Wexner? Maybe not. Would I have been a synagogue president without Wexner? Definitely not.

Postscript: Bernard and I both also served as president of Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, and chaired the annual campaign. Stephen is the current board chair. All three of us share a diagnosis that I term "acute sense of obligation."

Jonathan Berkowitz, a WHF member (Vancouver 2000) is a consulting statistician in private practice and a professor at the Sauder School of Business at University of British Columbia. He has a long history of volunteerism, serving as president of Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, chair of the annual Federation Campaign (the only person ever to fill those two roles simultaneously), president of Congregation Beth Israel, vice president of Vancouver Talmud Torah day school, and a host of other roles. Currently he serves on the national board of Jewish Federations Canada-United Israel Appeal, and helps out with any organization that asks. Numbers are his vocation, but words are his avocation. He has written numerous scripts performed at annual Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations, and has written, produced and acted in a number of Purim shpiels for his synagogue. The shpiels are available for a small donation. He can be reached at jonathan.berkowitz@ubc.ca

