

BACK TO SHUL

When I was teaching English I used to get mailed an envelope every August whose return address, printed in cranberry and black, read: *Summit Board of Education*. It was the first-days-of-school schedule, and it felt like a small knife inserted into my heart. It seemed to arrive earlier each summer—as if the superintendent were taking some malicious delight in impaling the teachers' vacations with the weight of impending responsibilities. It was similar to the way I used to feel walking into Target in July and seeing those stacks of wire-bound school notebooks and the boxes of crayons.

And so I headed back to school, a full two weeks before the official return to work. In the airless, windowless book room (cinderblock walls and tall teetering shelving), I'd spend two hours pulling 60 fraying copies of *The Canterbury Tales* and 60 even more tentatively bound copies of *Hamlet* before anybody else could commandeer them.

Then I'd photocopy all the class requirement sheets for my four different classes (AP English Literature, Film Studies, Creative Writing, Techniques of Writing). Good God, how did I do this for 34 years without collapsing into the photocopier: (*Jam in areas 7, 8, & 9.*)

The Jewish High Holidays always merged with the opening of school in Summit (a conspicuously Gentile community). I was surprised every fall to see, at 4 PM, a legion of elderly men hauling cardboard boxes of yarmulkes, prayer shawls, and prayer books into the lobby of Summit High School. (The local temple used the school auditorium to accommodate the crowds for both High Holidays.) The juxtaposition of cultures always amused me.

Though I'm possessed by certain spiritual intimations, they've never solidified around a particular organized religion. I walked through my bar mitzvah like a sardonic actor stuck in an incomprehensible play. But I liked the strange music of spoken Hebrew—the way my lips were forming mysterious sounds that probably had given comfort to my brethren for 2,000 years. They were powerful sounds—but they were largely without meaning to me. I remember sitting at a Seder as a child, listening to the Hebrew which no one at the table could understand, and thinking: Instead of this reading, how about if just one person at the table asked *Why are we here? Is there a God? What can this life possibly mean?* I would have woken up if I'd heard those plain words spoken even once.

My father Jerome, who lived to be 94, always insisted on attending *shul* for the High Holidays, even when he could barely walk. Sometimes I went with him; mostly I didn't—but I admired his conviction in attending—for *hours*. The rabbi finally told him he was not required to stand. My father didn't attend because he was deeply religious; he attended because *his* father Morris was deeply religious—and he felt the need to honor his father's convictions.

I miss them both. Morris with his miniature De Nobile cigars; Jerome with this frozen Milky Ways, his ribald humor, the way he liked to pretend he was a native French speaker. (In the hospital a nurse once asked my brother: "Does your father speak any English at all?") Jerome wasn't particularly adroit at Hebrew, but he was fluent in Yiddish which, he explained to me, was the only language his grandparents spoke. One of Jerome's favorite expressions was *Ich hub mein eiginuh tsouris* which translates loosely as: I've got my own troubles—with its tone comically implying: So leave me alone already.

Often on the High Holidays now, instead of attending temple, I go to their graves in Iselin. My mother, my father, my sister, my grandparents—the whole departed *misbucha*—there they are: under the scrub grass, the misaligned headstones, the drought-parched azaleas.

I place a small brown stone on each grave. Sometimes I mutter *shema yisrael* in Hebrew—it's the only prayer I know. I hope their spirits still exist somewhere in this universe—and the physics that contend that matter cannot be created or destroyed, only modulated into some other form, provide me some reassurance that their atoms are still whirling around somewhere. Certainly they're still whirling inside me—particularly Jerome's. That same afternoon, in Wegmans, at the checkout line, I find myself buying a Milky Way. It's not for me; it's for Jerome. And later that night, as I bite into it as if it were some sort of sugared, high-caloric sacrament, I say out loud to the atoms visibly whirling around the kitchen: *Shema yisrael...*