

As we gather this evening and look back at the year that has past for its lessons and teachings, a teacher and his lessons come to mind. This past April our entire nation watched in horror as a gunman murdered students on the campus of Virginia Tech. One of the stories that you may have heard about as a part of this tragedy involved a teacher, a professor named Liviu Librescu. Professor Librescu was a survivor of the Holocaust and was teaching on that fateful day. In the chaos of the gunfire, Professor Librescu physically barricaded the door to his classroom to prevent the gunman from entering the room. The barricade he formed allowed his students to escape out of the window, and also put him in direct line of fire of the gunman. For a man – whose widow described him as someone who loved teaching more than anything – taught his last lesson by giving his life on their behalf.

This teacher who loved teaching reminds us that our teachers give us life ... they give us life in the form of the sacrifices they make to teach and the insights and knowledge they impart to us. Such gifts then become for us the tools, the lessons and the wisdom we need to craft and create lives of meaning and value. Perhaps it is for this reason that Rabbi Joshua ben Perachyah teaches us in Pirke Avot: *Aseh L'cha Rav* - Get yourself a teacher ... perhaps he knew, that teachers in many senses - give us life.

On this night that we celebrate another year of our lives and the life of our community and our world, it is appropriate to invoke the spirit and the lessons of the teachers who have given us such gifts. On this night that begins a period of days in which we strive to recapture and return to our most cherished values and truths, it is fitting to reinforce and renew those teachings that have come to serve as the cornerstones to our lives and what we value. In the spirit of this night and in honor of Professor Librescu and his students, I humbly share with you some of my teachers who by who they are and what they taught me ... give me life.

*Aseh L'cha Rav* - Get yourself a teacher ... sometimes we look within the walls of the educational institutions through which we travel on the paths of our lives and find our teachers waiting for us. The first characterization I had of Dr. Alvin Reines was simply this: "He's nuts! He's crazy! I cannot believe that we have to sit through his class twice a week! He doesn't believe what we believe!" The class, part of our curriculum at the Hebrew Union College, was supposed to be a course on Jewish theology and philosophy. Instead, every class became a free for all. Each time we would sit down together to learn about Jewish philosophy and theology, the students would feel the need to debate, denounce and denigrate anything that came out of Dr. Reines' mouth. For the few moments that they let Dr. Reines actually teach – I found him just as unnerving, unsettling and disconnected from the philosophy of the Hebrew Union College – but I loved it!

It did not help that Dr. Reines (we rarely referred to him as rabbi, even though he was an ordinee from HUC – it felt irreverent to do so) was as comfortable to be around as your standard Front Range summer heat spell. Dr. Reines' reputation had preceded him as a cranky, cantankerous and somewhat certifiable figure. He stood tall and lanky, with little meat on his frame – he often looked so frail he might keel as he entered or left the classroom. During class, however, was a different story. You could tell that his mind worked with great efficiency and creativity – he would get so caught in his thoughts that you could almost see his brain working to ponder the latest question or challenge. You see, Dr. Reines basically in his mind, reinvented how to think about Judaism and religion – he boiled all of religion into one idea. For him, religion was humanity's response to our ultimate dilemma – the fact that we die. For him, every religion exists to bring its constituents some answer to this question. So for many at the seminary – this idea threatened what they believed and how they lived their lives. The idea was so outrageous for them that they could not even consider it – play with it, review it. Dr. Reines taught me that sometimes that was the exact reason one should consider an idea – because it was so outrageous and challenged everything you thought you knew. The way his ideas challenged my own, the way he sought to make me think -- brought a thrill and a renewal to what I believed.

As much as I enjoyed learning and discussing what he thought, Dr. Reines taught me in the way he thought. He had the courage to think and to teach contrary to the status quo. For me, Dr. Reines taught me this valuable lesson that that is found in the fabric of our tradition: sometimes one must think in a contrary manner to genuinely understand and to discover truth about the world and about our selves.

*Aseh L'cha Rav* - Get yourself a teacher ... sometimes we seek beyond the margins of the circle of people we meet or know and find those whose deeds, wisdom and spirit make them our teacher. I have never met Paul Farmer, at least not in person ... in fact meeting him through the pages of a book was intimidating enough. Author Tracy Kidder introduced me to Dr. Paul Farmer in his book: Mountains Beyond Mountains – *The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer A Man Who Would Cure the World*. The title itself is intimidating. Paul Farmer is an anthropologist and a physician. He is a teacher and international health policy maker. Paul Farmer teaches at Harvard Medical school. He is the co-founder and backbone of Partners in Health – a worldwide health organization that fights and effectively treats tuberculosis and AIDS in Haiti, Russia, Peru and Rwanda. He is an author and - according to a 2003 NPR story - a god in Haiti. Reading this incredible story of one of the most extraordinary human beings, it became clear to me that Paul Farmer is a man who would cure the world.

What Paul Farmer taught me has nothing to do with the fact that he has personally improved the quality of life of thousands of poor people around the world. In fact reading about his life, his commitment and his energy made me feel like a slug. Here is someone who not only saw injustice on a global scale, but actually had the perseverance and aptitude to do something about it. Our tradition teaches us and we talk a great deal about making a difference in the world, on repairing its ills. Very few human beings accomplish the kind of healing on such a grand scale as does Dr. Paul Farmer. And to do so, he gives up a lot and lives a lifestyle that would make even the most harried of American workaholics feel as if they were slacking off ... travelling continent to continent managing the PIH projects in each, teaching, speaking and politicking to promote PIH's efforts toward health care for the world's poor ... while missing the everyday contact with a wife and child. As I read his story I was simultaneously amazed and disturbed by the life he lives ... thank god for him, because I could never do what he does.

What he taught me is not really about my limitations as possible saviour of the world's medical ills. What Paul Farmer leaped through the words on the pages of Tracy Kidder's book to teach me is less about health care and his incredible energy and ethic, and more about the importance in each and every moment of life – being present and, as the Talmud puts it: *Da Lifney Ma Atah Omayd* - Knowing before whom you stand.

Kidder tells a story about one of Farmer's early experiences in Haiti, before he entered medical school. A young pregnant woman in the throes of malaria came into the clinic in which he worked needing blood transfusion. There was no blood and the doctor told her sister to go to Port-au-Prince to get her some blood, but he said that she would need money. Farmer continues: "I had no money. I ran around the hospital and I rounded up fifteen dollars. I gave her the money and she went away, but then she came back because she did not have enough for a tap-tap and the blood. Meanwhile the patient started having respiratory distress and this pink stuff started coming out of her mouth. The nurses were saying 'It's hopeless' and I was saying 'There has got to be some way we can get her some blood.' Her sister was beside herself – sobbing and crying. The woman had five kids. The sister said: 'This is terrible. You can't even get a blood transfusion if you're poor. *Tout moun se moun* – We're all human beings." After the woman and her baby died, the sister lavished thanks on Farmer, which of course made him feel his failure more acutely. He was upset and the doctors and

nurses focused their attention on him. The nurses were saying: Poor Paul. What a sweet young man.” And he knew what the doctors were thinking: “He’s new here, he’s green, he’s naïve.” Remembering this year’s later, he was still framing his retort: “Yeah, but I got staying power. That’s the thing, I wasn’t naïve, in fact.” And when after his efforts to make blood transfusions free for the poor turned into another paying for blood scenario, he resolved himself “I’m going to build my own !@#%-ing hospital. And there will be none of that there, thank you.” And he did, and there was none.

Paul Farmer spends the waking moments of his life pursuing his vision of the world ... it defines his work and his relationships; it determines the manner in which he spends his time and enables him to be fully present and focused when he examines a patient, chides someone from the WHO or returns the hundreds of emails awaiting in his inbox. In every moment of his life he knows before whom and what he stands. It is this valuable teaching that he had imparted to me.

*Aseh L’cha Rav* - Get yourself a teacher ... sometimes the effort to find our teachers does not need to go beyond our front door. It was a hot muggy day in Atlanta, Georgia on the campus of Emory University that I watched the incoming freshman move into the Dobbs residence hall. There is no way that I could imagine that the young eighteen year old freshman to be who was bouncing around the halls in the floor below mine would become my greatest of life’s most important lessons. There is some discrepancy as to when Renee, my wife, and I first met ... but, whenever it was the lessons began at those auspicious moments. It is quite humbling to look back at that time and gaze and what I thought I knew, and know now what I would come to learn about myself and how to love another.

There were many things for me to learn from this unique teacher ... she was so comfortable in the situations that I was not; she had been places, seen things and dreamt about seeing places and things that I did not even know to dream about seeing; and she graciously shared her vibrant energy with all around her in a manner that both confounded and inspired me. And yet, these are not the lessons that resonate with me on this sacred evening when we seek to return to our fundamental truths. Renee has taught me to take the lessons of all my treasured teachers and put them to use in the most sacred realm that we human beings know, in the realm of relationship.

Every time I officiate at a wedding and I try to share some wisdom or perspective to that couple underneath the canopy/chuppah ... it is essentially the same wisdom, the same story ... it is what Renee has taught me. As special and gifted as each of us may be as individuals, the reason we marry is simple ... there is something sacred of ourselves that we cannot realize alone. Only another human being -- when we let them in and they let us in -- can guide, instruct and inspire us to become something higher. That something captures the essence and the fullness of the human experience. When we truly give ourselves to another – as exhilarating and exasperating as that may be at times – we touch the sacred, the divine.

The essentiality of standing before another human being and presenting them with your true self ... whether it be in the form of a meal you cook, a bench you build, a sermon you write or the glimpse of what makes you afraid or secure; lonely or loved; weak or powerful – this is most important lesson I learn from my wife. Standing in such a place requires me to be able to think differently about myself and about relationship. Standing in such a place requires my full presence and awareness of before whom I stand. I have learned that life is at its very essence and its core about our willingness to stand before another in this manner – to be loved, to grow and to teach another this sacred lesson ... and to be willing and welcome to do so, even when I fail the lesson. Renee has taught me the value of taking many great adventures ... we have stood together at the tops of mountain peaks, at the site of historic

ruins and even swam together in the company of dolphins. The greatest adventure she has taught me to take is that risk of opening one's self to experiencing the peaks, valleys and wonders of wholly loving another human being.

Who are your teachers who have given you life? ... The ones you encountered in your traditional educational experiences ... the ones whom you may have never met, but whose life and wisdom still informs your own ... the ones with whom you share your lives and while may not be teachers in name, are teachers in the spirit of those who give us life by the lessons they teach. There is no more appropriate task tonight and during these days of Teshuvah – of returning – to look into our lives and acquaint ourselves with the students in ourselves and meet our teachers and their lessons, once again. In doing so we enable ourselves to return to what we know to be indispensable, meaningful and true ... and are empowered to go boldly into 5768. May this evening begin a time in which these teachers and their lessons again inform and inspire you. May we continue to strive to be students and aware of the many ways that we each become teachers as we work, play, love and live. May these teachers and their lessons guide us toward a New Year during which we embody their spirit and the best of the truths they have taught us as we work toward realizing our vision for ourselves, our families, our community and our world.