

LETTING GO

Rabbi Cary D. Kozberg

When it comes to setting the right atmosphere for our weekly program for Welcoming the Sabbath, I can always count on Joe. I know he will greet me with a handshake, a smile, and a reminder, “Rabbi, it’s time to talk to the Boss.” It’s true that sometimes when I ask him to recite the blessing over the wine, he forgets the words. It’s also true that sometimes his answer doesn’t fit the question he was asked. Still, on Friday afternoons, I can always count on him to help create a “Shabbes-dik” (Sabbath-ful) atmosphere for everyone present.

Joe has Alzheimer’s disease and is a resident in our dementia-care neighborhood. Though still possessing some remarkable social skills, he has little short-term memory. He can no longer care for himself without assistance. He is often incontinent, and he needs help ambulating. Still, Joe is one of the most spiritually-attuned individuals I have ever met. At every opportunity he prays with joy and enthusiasm, crafting responses that blend routine worship with heartfelt spontaneity.

I believe he is able to do this because Alzheimer’s has been a boon to his spirituality: his religious feelings-- joy, spontaneity, gratitude—are expressed without passing through the cognitive filter of the “rational mind”, unlike us normal folk who are often content to sit and just listen to the choir. Though Joe can no longer think clearly, he continues to sing most sweetly. He is truly an inspiration.

It is certainly true that most of us would not want to be in Joe’s place. For most of us, becoming demented, losing our minds—our ability to remember and think, our ability to independently engage in the normal activities of daily living—would be tantamount to losing any reason for going on living. Such is the fear behind the sentiment “...If I ever get to be that way, just take me out and shoot me!”

Listening to such fears as often as I do, it is clear to me that Joe is different in yet another way: he trusts. He trusts people. Moreover, he trusts God. To be sure, his trust is not the considered conclusion of a rational process, or a choice conscientiously made. Indeed, Alzheimer’s has ensured that he can no longer make sophisticated choices. Thus, having no choice in the matter, he **must** trust.

His trust comes from the necessity of having to surrender, of having to “let go” of his autonomy and a total sense of Self. It is a necessity he cannot

understand. For Joe there is no more significant “choosing”. Having had to “let go”, now he “lets God”. And “letting God” so enthusiastically, he continues to trust and he continues to love.

People like Joe can teach us much about trust. Although Judaism encourages us to trust God our covenant Partner, we--as a people and as individuals—have had issues around such trust. Though we talk about relationships, we often find it difficult to risk “letting go” and surrender our selves to those we can see, much less to One we can’t. Certainly, it’s not a phenomenon unique to our generation: even our ancestors who left Egypt wouldn’t trust God, though they were eye-witnesses to, and recipients of, some incredible acts of Divine love. As Jews, perhaps our historic reticence to trust God and our continuing doubt about Divine love is a by-product of our age-old adulation of the human mind. And perhaps it is also part of the reason why we were—and probably still are—a “stiff-necked people”.

There are those who see people like Joe as merely unfortunate victims of an insidious disease. I believe they are inspiring teachers. They teach us that, though dementia may be a curse, it may also hold a hidden blessing—if we let it.

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