



*Parshat Metzora*  
**5 Nisan 5774—April 5, 2014**  
**Lieutenant Eddie Walsh and Firefighter Michael Kennedy,**  
**May They Rest in Peace**  
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As I watched the incredibly sad and poignant funerals of Lieutenant Edward Walsh, Jr., on Wednesday, and of firefighter Michael Kennedy on Thursday, I felt at the same time so close and so far away.

So close because Lieutenant Walsh, and firefighter Kennedy, died for me. For us. For all of us in Greater Boston. When a fire breaks out, when the fire alarm sounds, the firefighters rush in. It doesn't matter whether the people inside the building are white or black or brown; whether they are Christian, Jewish or Muslim; whether they are a man or a woman, a 99 year old grandmother or a newborn. They rush in to save life. And they gave their lives when the nine-alarm fire broke out in the brownstone at 298 Beacon Street, and when the wind swept off the Charles River in furious and unpredictable ways that led to their being trapped and perishing in the basement.

So close because who cannot be moved by what they lost and left behind? Lieutenant Walsh was only 43. He leaves behind his wife Kristen. He leaves behind his children Dillon, age 8, Morgan, age 5, and Griffin, age 3.

Michael Kennedy too is this incredible hero. He was only 33, a Marine sergeant, a combat veteran of the war in Iraq. He would run marathons and jump out of planes while skydiving. He leaves behind his mother and father and girlfriend and large extended family.

Who cannot be moved knowing that Lt. Walsh and Firefighter Kennedy left the lives they loved, and the loves of their lives, behind, and rushed into the inferno, literally, to save the lives of people who were total strangers.

Who cannot be moved by the sea of blue--all the police and all the firefighters who came in to honor these brave men from all 50 states and from so many countries, including as far away as Australia.

Who cannot be moved by the words of the family members? Kathy, Lt. Walsh's sister, remembered how he loved to sit on the patio with her, enjoying a cold beer on a hot summer day, watching their children play together.

To watch these two funerals was to be so close to honoring men who are true heroes.

And yet, if I am totally honest about it, I also felt far away. It is only a few miles from St Patrick Parish in Watertown, and from Holy Name in West Roxbury, to Temple Emanuel. A few miles, and a world away.

If I am honest about it, I know personally no firefighters. There may be firefighters in our Temple, but if there are any, I don't know them.

If I am honest about it, I know personally no policeman. There may be policemen in our Temple, but if there are any, I don't know them. Newton's finest often *guard* our Temple.

Newton's finest are seldom if ever *members* of our Temple.

At Lt. Walsh's funeral, it was observed that his father was a firefighter. He had uncles and nephews who are firefighters. He had friends and neighbors in Watertown who are firefighters. He was born to be a firefighter.

How do we, not born to be a firefighter, pay our appropriate respects? How do we fulfill our civic responsibility? The ritual part is easy. At the end of the service, I will invite all those

who wish to stand and say Kaddish for Lt. Ed Walsh and firefighter Michael Kennedy. Kaddish is the Jewish language of loss and reaffirmation. They deserve no less. Praying for them is the least we can do.

But it hardly seems commensurate to their sacrifice. What more can we do?

The Haggadah tells us: *kol hamarbeh lesaper bitziat mitzrayim harei zeh meshubah*. The more we tell the story, the more praiseworthy.

The first thing we can do is tell their story. We know that Eddie Walsh left behind his wife Kristen and their three children. Their love is eternal. One afternoon firefighters were in Kristen's living room. What can we do for you, Kristen? You name it. We'll do it. Anything.

Kristen had just lost her husband, but she said yes, there is one thing you could do for me. I want his wedding ring back. He never took off his wedding ring. His wedding ring must be there, in that basement. It must have come off in the fire. The firefighters vowed to find that ring. They went to the spot where Lt. Walsh's firefighter brothers had pulled his body. Let me quote the news story for what happened next:

It was dirty work, sifting through the charred debris and soot. They searched for hours, and at one point Kevin McCarthy worried they would never find it. He and the others were on their hands and knees, like prospectors, just hoping to get lucky.

And just before 6 p.m., Patty Kenneally Donovan, the first woman appointed to the Boston Fire Department and a veteran firefighter whose father, husband, and two brothers were on the job, found the ring.

"I've got it!" she yelled, and it was the first joyous moment for an entire department, an entire extended family, indeed a whole city, in a week.

In no time, there was a convoy of fire vehicles heading toward Watertown, where Eddie Walsh's wake was taking place...

Chief Magee...stepped forward and handed the ring to Eddie Walsh's widow.

Kristen Walsh took the ring and slid it on her finger. It was big, real big, but it

fit in all the ways that matter.

Firefighter Michael Kennedy was young and strong, and as a teen was a bit of a restless soul. His mother put it this way: “Michael never met a high school he couldn’t be expelled from. I’m not kidding.” He eventually did graduate high school and was enjoying Johnson & Wales culinary school when he was drawn to the pitch of Marine recruiters. Suddenly this once restless young man was being trained to be a Marine, and was sent off to fight our war in Iraq. His mother observed: “I have to say it’s the best thing that ever happened to him. The Marines really made the difference: the discipline, the camaraderie.” When the war was over, he was searching for fellowship, and found it in the Fire Department. His mother tells the story that if Firefighter Kennedy were working on Christmas Eve, she would bring over enough pot roast to feed the entire firehouse, and he would cook the meal. He was training with his girlfriend to run in the Boston Marathon in a couple of weeks. His mother added: “I asked Sarah if she would take Michael’s number and run it for both of them, and give me his number afterward. My heart aches for this girl.”

It is said that all of us die *in media res*, in the middle of our story. That is particularly the case for 43 year old Lt. Walsh and for 33 year old firefighter Kennedy. The first thing we can do is to pay heed to the rich lives they lost in their courageous service.

But there is a second thing we can do. The New York Times columnist David Brooks once famously observed that there is a difference between what he calls “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Resume virtues list our accomplishments, our awards, our honors, our grades, our schools. Eulogy virtues share our character, what is it about us that people love.

Most of us spend a lot of time developing our resume virtues. And perhaps that is as it should be. We take learning and striving and accomplishing seriously, and there is nothing

wrong with that. There is no shame in our, and in our children's, setting high professional goals and doing the hard work that makes them come true.

And yet, while resume virtues are legitimate, they are not enough. Lt. Walsh and firefighter Kennedy were loved for who they were, for their character, not for their resume. No speaker mentioned where they went to college. Nobody cares how much money they made or didn't make. No one talked about whether they won this or that award. Instead, the speakers spoke, the family mourned, and the sea of blue paid tribute, to their character. They rushed in to save others.

We are not firefighters, but we can honor Lt. Walsh and firefighter Kennedy by being inspired by their example.

We do not rush into the burning building, but we can find our own way to express moral and physical courage.

We do not routinely risk our lives to save a stranger, but we can find our own way to express selflessness and grace.

Ours is not the fellowship of the sea of blue, of Engine 33 or of Ladder 15. But we can find our own ways to build and strengthen community.

May Lt. Walsh and firefighter Kennedy rest in peace. May their families be consoled by the love they earned. And may we be inspired by their example to be better human beings.  
Shabbat shalom.