



*Shavuot*  
**June 5, 2014—7 Sivan 5774**  
**A Yizkor Sermon:**  
**Ruth Moments and Sinai Moments**  
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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When the siren sounds in Israel on Yom HaShoah, the nation stops. Wherever they are, Israelis stand in silence to offer their respects to the Six Million. As Daniela Schiller, an Israeli woman raised outside of Tel Aviv, observed, “To ignore those sirens is a complete violation of the norms of our country.” And yet, Daniela Schiller’s own father, Sigmund Schiller, always ignores the sirens. Year after year, he would flout this national norm of remembrance. The sirens would sound; he would go about his business. As his daughter puts it: “The day doesn’t exist for him. He moves about as if he hears nothing.”

Sigmund Schiller is himself a survivor. As Michael Specter shares in his riveting piece in a recent *New Yorker*, Schiller spent World War II in horrifying and traumatizing ways: in a Polish ghetto; hiding in the forests of Galicia; and in a German labor camp. He somehow survived it all and moved to Israel after the war, determined never to talk about his traumatic past.

When his daughter Daniella was in grade school, she got the assignment to talk to a survivor about the Shoah. Get a first person account. “So I went home after school. My father was at the kitchen table reading a newspaper, and I asked him to tell me about his memories. He said nothing. I have done this many times since. Always nothing...I long ago concluded that his silence would last forever.”

Sigmund Schiller’s stony silence, and its impact upon his daughter, suggests a question: how do we shape those we love? The holiday of Shavuot offers us two different models.

There is the model of God coming down at Sinai and intentionally imparting God's truths via the Ten Commandments. *Vayedaber Elohim eit kol hadevarim haeleh leimor*. God spoke all these words. That is the model of the deliberate transmission of ideals. This is what I stand for. This is what I would like you to stand for too. A prime example would be the Passover seder we observed 7 weeks ago, when the Haggadah is our text, the seder plates are our props, the people around the seder table our students. That is trying to teach.

In the same vein I remember reading an essay years ago by a man who grew up in a religious home. Every night at the dinner table, his parents would go around the table and ask all the members of the family: what favor did you do for somebody today? That is trying to teach.

These intentional Sinai models can be effective in their own way.

But there is a whole *other* model: teaching when we are *not* trying to teach. We are just living. But what we do, the example we set, is so powerful that it sticks far more powerfully than any intentional lesson plan. That is the example of Ruth.

You don't have to be a Bible scholar to know what Ruth is famous for. Naomi and her husband Elimelech are living in Moab with their sons Mahlon and Chilion, and their wives, Orpah and Ruth. And then misfortune finds Naomi. Her husband dies. Then one son dies. The second son dies. Now Naomi, widowed and grieving over her departed sons, living far from home, says she is going back to Israel.

One daughter in law, Orpah, bids her farewell. Have a nice life.

But the other daughter in law, Ruth, famously says: "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Ruth was not trying to teach anybody anything. She was just living. She was just being a loyal daughter in law. But what she did in that moment would go on to have a huge and continuing impact upon the Jewish people.

She would role model what loyalty looks like. Wherever you go I will go has become the mantra of faithful love.

She would become the role model for what a Jewish convert looks like. To this day, Ruth's words are cited by rabbinic authorities to emphasize that Jewish peoplehood takes preference over dogmas. When we meet with candidates for conversion, Ruth is still teaching us. We don't ask candidates for their views on doctrinal issues. We ask them why they are drawn to join the Jewish people.

Ruth reminds us that often we do our best teaching without intending to teach, not through our lesson plans, but through our deeds.

Sigmund Schiller ignored the Holocaust sirens and would not talk about the Holocaust not because he wanted to teach some lesson, but because his losses, unfathomable and searing, left him traumatized and speechless. But that in and of itself turned out to be a pivotal Ruth moment. That silence ended up shaping the adult his daughter would become.

As Daniela grew up, the big question of her life was: what made her Dad react that way? What causes him to respond to those fearful memories by shutting down? Is there some way to not suppress the memories, to let them come to the fore, and yet not be terrified by them? She pursued these questions first by obtaining her doctorate at Tel Aviv University in cognitive neuroscience. She continues to pursue these questions by directing a neuroscience lab at Mount Sinai in New York. Her mission is to "disentangle" painful emotion from painful memories so

that the memories need not be suppressed, but could actually be recalled, discussed, and shared, without causing fresh fear or pain.

Today we recite Yizkor for those whom we have loved and lost. Doing so on Shavuot makes us think about both ways our departed loved ones have influenced us.

What were their Sinai moments? What did they teach us when they were trying to teach us?

What were their Ruth moments? What did they teach when they were not trying to teach us? They were just living, but their example shaped our whole trajectory.

The irony is that Ruth moments, so often spontaneous, that don't cost thousands of dollars in tuition, that don't involve nights of homework, Ruth moments can be more impactful than Sinai moments.

I just finished reading a biography by Rabbi Berel Wein, a leading Orthodox rabbi of our generation, entitled Teach Them Diligently. How did he become the person he became? Why did he become a rabbi? He tells the story that when he was a young boy, right after World War II, when the reality of what had happened to European Jewry was beginning to sink in to the American Jewish community, he went with his father to hear Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, the chief rabbi of Palestine. Rabbi Herzog related that shortly after the War was over he went to the Vatican and asked Pope Pius XII to return thousands of Jewish children that had been entrusted to Catholic institutions by desperate European Jewish parents during the nightmare of Hitler's Europe. These Jewish children were converted to Catholicism; they had begun to be raised as Catholics; this saved their lives during the Holocaust; but now, in 1946, the Holocaust was over. Can we get our children back? They are Jews. Pope Pius XII refused. Once they are Catholic, they are always Catholic, the Pope averred. Rabbi Herzog could not change the

Pope's mind.

That night, in Chicago, in 1946, talking to a young Berel Wein and others in attendance, Rabbi Herzog wept as he confessed: "I cannot save those thousands of Jewish children. But I ask each of you, how are you going to help rebuild the Jewish People?"

This was a Ruth moment. Rabbi Herzog was not trying to teach. There was no lesson plan. There was no class room. There was no tuition. There was no seder table. There was no ethical will. There was no homework or grading or follow through. Rabbi Herzog was actually in mourning, sharing the horror with an American Jewish audience. He was just living, a desperate Jew in a desperate time trying desperately to rebuild the Jewish people. But that Ruth lesson landed in an indelible way in young Berel Wein:

All my life, Rabbi Herzog's words have echoed in my ears and soul. Numerous times in my rabbinic career, I've been discouraged and downhearted. But then I remembered his words. They have continually inspired and challenged me, shaping many of my decisions and actions.

Sigmund Schiller was not trying to teach when he was silent in the face of the Shoah. But his silence shaped his daughter Daniela whose career is all about finding healthy ways to deal with the most painful memories.

Rabbi Herzog was not trying to teach when he expressed his pathos at the cruelty of Pope Pius and the continuing loss of the Jewish people. But his passion inspired a young boy to spend his life rebuilding the Jewish people.

All of the people we remember today did some of their best teaching when they were just living their lives. No lesson plans. Just the force of their conviction, the power of their example. Because of *their* Ruth moments, who have *you* become?

Please rise.

