



*Parshat Ha'azinu*  
**13 Tishri 5779 — September 22, 2018**  
**Invisible Lines of Connection**  
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My mother Rosyne Gardenswartz passed away on the first day of Rosh Hashanah two years ago. This first day of Rosh Hashanah marks her 2-year yahrtzeit.

How surprising it was, then, when a day or so before Father's Day *this* year, I walk into my office and there is a Father's Day card from my mother *waiting for me on my desk*. It is a *fresh* Father's Day card. I had never seen it before.

The card is just the kind of Father's Day Card my mom would send me every year. The card itself, a Hallmark type card, had a lovely pre-printed message on it, written in cursive: "*Son, You're really a son to be proud of, and you're wished everything you're dreaming of...everything wonderful life can bring. Happy Father's Day.*" Now different people have different styles when it comes to cards. Some close by saying Love Mom. Others xoxoxo Mom. Not my Mom. She used every square inch of the card to write her own personal message. I know my Mom's inimitable handwriting very well. In her later years, as she got older and weaker, her handwriting got weaker and less legible. But this handwriting was strong and beautiful, a birthday card written in the full bloom of my mother's life. This card landed on my desk, three days before Father's Day, one year and eight months *after* she passed away. The whole thing gave me chills. Was my Mom still speaking to me? How did this happen?

Alas, there was a perfectly commonsense, non-mystical explanation. For years Shira had been telling me that the shelves in my office had too many books on them, the books were piled high on top of each other. She would tell me, every Shabbat on the way home, for twenty years, that all these books were messy—a source of vertigo for congregants who came to see me. A

rabbi's study should be calming, she would say. Orderly. Organized. Clean. Feng shui. Your study is not calming. We have to weed through the books you never use.

The dreaded day, the day of book purging, happened one rainy Monday in June. Shira came into my study to help me give away books I don't read anymore. You may have heard of the book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo, the woman who is an expert at slimming down our stuff, and achieving that *feng shui* feeling of lightness, through one simple principle: if you don't use it, lose it. Give it away to somebody else who will. I had not read her book in a few years, so I used the principles in her book to give her book away, along with lots of other books that I had not read in a long time. Our wonderful librarian Deb Abner, and our dear friend Molly Goodman who volunteers extensively in our library, were with us, and they carted away many books to be given away or if possible put into our library circulation.

What does this have to do with my Father's Day card that my mother sent me three days before Father's Day and 18 months after she passed away?

My mother used to send me lots of books. I had whole shelves of books from my mother. Do I dare apply Marie Kondo to my Mom? Alas, I decided yes. If I no longer read her books, it would be better for somebody else to get to read them. Many of the books that I gave away on that rainy Monday were from my Mom.

As Deb was sifting through these books, one of the books was from my mother, and the Father's Day card fell out. She saw it. She thought I would want to have it. She came up to my office and left it on my desk. Which is how, 18 months after my Mom passed away, I got a Father's Day card from her.

How am I to understand this card? I know I am not the only person with this kind of issue because over the years members of our congregation have shared with me *their* stories

of a mysterious connection, of a seeming coincidence, that could be explained away rationally, or perhaps could be a sign of something deeper.

Once a friend was having a surgery. I asked him for his Hebrew name to make a *misheberakh*. The name of his beloved departed father was Aaron. His father Aaron had passed away many years ago. The name of his surgeon happened to be Dr. Aaron.

Is it possible that this is a total coincidence? Of course. Aaron is a common name. There have been a lot of Aarons throughout human history. One Aaron was his father. Another Aaron was his surgeon. So what? Just one of those things. A coincidence.

But is there another way of looking at it? Of all the names in the world, what are the chances, why would it be, that the name of his father and the name of his surgeon are the same? Perhaps it is a sign—a sign that his father is still watching out for him and still protecting him and still with him in some way that is not rational but is deeply felt.

Here is another story which one of our members emailed me. She has given me permission to share it. The story concerns the fact that, one year to the day after her husband died, there was a terrible snowstorm, which led to massive power outages in our region. Not only did her home not suffer a power outage, but lights that had not been working for months mysteriously turned on for that day, the English anniversary of his passing, and went back to not working when this one-year anniversary was over. She writes:

*Alan passed away on March 2, 2017. On March 2, 2018 (the first anniversary of his passing), I knew that I had to go somewhere to find some solace. It was the day of that horrific storm that brought down so many trees and brought about power outages everywhere.*

*I packed myself up into the car and went downtown to the MFA. Few people were walking around the MFA on a Friday afternoon in the middle of a terrible storm. It was the perfect place for me to be. I walked through the museum and found comfort in the Escher exhibit and others. When I left, the winds were ramping up, the rain was pelting, and the driving was difficult. I made it back to Newton. As I was driving towards my home and seeing all the homes*

*without power, I kept thinking (and saying aloud) " I hope that the lights will be on- I hope the lights will be on."*

*I turned the corner and from a short distance away, saw that the landscape lights were indeed on - on my front lawn. I sighed with relief and pulled into the driveway. I stopped abruptly, parking outside in the middle of the terrible rainstorm. I pulled out my phone and took a picture of my front lawn with the landscape lights on. They were, indeed, all on - lit. Remarkable - given that 5 months earlier, they had "burned out" entirely, and the repairman from the landscape lights company had told me in October that I'd have to wait until the ground defrosted in the spring to get them fixed. They hadn't been on since 5 months earlier.*

*I took a picture of the lights that were on that night. I hadn't touched the controls nor anything related to the lights recently. I wondered how long they would stay on. They were off by the next day. They haven't been on since...*

*How to think about the lights being on - maybe Alan helping me to get home, letting me know that he was watching over me? Wishful thinking - I don't know. I'd like to think that, and actually, I do believe that.*

How are we to understand these stories? Is it mere coincidence, happenstance, something that can be rationally explained? The card fell out of the book, there are many people named Aaron, the light circuit worked. Or is there a deeper meaning?

The answer is...there is no definitive correct answer. Everybody gets to interpret these questions of "is it a sign?" for themselves. If you want to hold onto the commonsense, non-mystical explanation, that is valid. If you are open to a deeper mystical unprovable but deeply felt explanation, that is also valid.

As you think about this question I wanted to share with you one evocative phrase from Rabbi Larry Kushner, and two simple questions.

Rabbi Larry Kushner wrote a book called *Invisible Lines of Connection* whose thesis is: "everything is connected to everything else through invisible lines of connection." Here is one story that makes it real. One day he travelled from his home in Sudbury, Massachusetts to visit his widowed mother in Detroit to help her buy a car. Why did he go when he went? Why just then? He writes: "Not until I was on the plane did I realize that my visit came just a few days

before the fifth anniversary of my father's death. Suddenly it was clear: I had unconsciously engineered the whole thing so that I could be with my mother, 'back in the land of my birth' during these days of memorial." (112).

Are we alive to invisible lines of connection which connect us to the people in our lives past, present and future, and to our noblest ideals? Here Rabbi Kushner was connected to his departed father. He was connected to his widowed mother. He was connected to the ideal of the Fifth Commandment: honor your father and your mother. All of these connections coalesced to get him on that plane at that moment.

What do the connections that we feel make us do?

Think about the thing that could be a coincidence, a happenstance, or could be a sign of something deeper. *Your* version of my mother's Father's Day card appearing eighteen months after she passed away. You could explain it rationally. Or you could be open to its mystical meaning. I want to invite you to ponder two questions.

*How does the approach you pick make you feel?* If you analyze it rationally—the house was lit up in the middle of a late winter storm, when other houses were dark, because the electricity circuit was working that day—*how do you feel?* If you are open to its mystical meaning—the house was lit up just that day, despite the storm, because it is a sign that my husband is still with me—*how do you feel?*

And, what does the approach you pick *call you to do?* Are you called, summoned, mobilized, inspired, more by using one lens than another? If you think that Dr. Aaron is your surgeon because that is a sign that your beloved departed father Aaron is advocating for you on high, and that gives you more courage before your surgery, that lens is true for you.

For myself, while I can rationally explain the card's sudden appearance before Father's

Day as a result of a spring cleaning, that commonsense explanation is not emotionally or spiritually satisfying to me.

I believe that my Mom, and Dad, and mother in love, are all with me in some kind of spiritual way that is totally real, that I can never prove, but that is deeply felt.

When these mysterious things happen to you—could be a coincidence, could be a sign—what do you believe? Shabbat shalom.