

Kol Nidre 2016 - Machar
Life, Loss and Change
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Just as our ancestors gathered for generations before us on the eve of the Day of Judgment, I appreciate the opportunity to stand before my community — in the finest Humanist tradition — judging myself.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to offer you some perspectives on what I learned this year about myself through the passing of my brother, Barry, this past January.

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I am here to confess my mistakes in how I judged and misjudged.

But I also hope that sharing some changes I have made this year will give you something to consider as you plot your own course to improve yourselves and our community in the coming year.

We all judge sometimes, don't we?

Often in subtle ways.

We often don't even realize we are doing it.

Who here has ever judged a family member —
brother, sister, parent?
Their habits? Their indiosyncracies?
Their lifestyle choices?

Anyone ever consider how someone in your family
lives their life and thought, this relative is kind of a
clown?

I'm embarrassed to admit that sometimes I thought
of my brother that way. After all, Barry was kind of a
clown.

No, seriously, he actually was a clown!

[SHOW PICTURES]





In his later years, he was a highly celebrated, music festival business man who liked to dress like a clown and was known to thousands as “The Ringmaster.”

Despite the apparent, uncanny resemblance, it may surprise you to know that, from the time we were children, we have always been different.

We often made different choices.

Especially later in life.

As we got older, when I saw his number appear on my cellphone, my initial reaction often was that something bad had happened. Sometimes my concerns were justified.

But it was always great to hear his voice, especially when he was not in need.

It's funny how I wish he could call me now, even if he was in need.

Mostly, I worried. I worried about his health — he was bipolar and diabetic and steadfastly refused conventional treatment.

I worried about his financial circumstances. He refused to get health insurance (ironically until weeks before his death).

I worried when he had no job, unreliable housing, whether he had enough food.

I worried when SuperStorm Sandy took his belongings. I worried about his future.

Do you know who didn't worry about any of those things? Barry.

While his lifestyle choices stressed me out and caused me worry, Barry happily lived life by his terms.

He would not conform to a job where he had to work for someone else, follow a doctor's regimen, or anything else that constrained his will or his spirit.

He loved life -- exactly as he was living it. I would caution him...lecture him. But he was unmoved by my rule-following ways.

I don't want to leave you with the misimpression that my brother didn't work or make a living.

At different times, he had many, many jobs. After trying some more conventional jobs, he was the proprietor of a cigar shop for 15 years.

In his final years, he was a waiter and a band manager.

And finally, he traveled around to music festivals selling, as his business was called, Things That Are Cool.

But to Barry, life was more about the journey than the destination.

He couldn't do a job he hated because the means was as important – or more important – than the end for him.

He was an epic storyteller.

He was larger than life.

As I often described him to people, and as you can see from the pictures, he was a fully sensory experience.

He was the man at the diner you would stare at in disbelief ordering a bacon double egg and cheeseburger, with extra bacon, and a side of bacon...just because. (true story)

Besides that, there were so many things about him I never really understood.

And I could not, for the life of me, understand how he could live his life, happy as can be, without a penny to his name and without really worrying about it.

We had a strong friendship, and he was enormously proud of my accomplishments.

He never wanted my so-called career success. Shockingly, he didn't yearn for three kids and a mortgage.

Yet he never judged me. He simply loved me for who I am.

But what I want to focus on is what happened after his death and its profound impact on me.

When the phone rang on January 7, and I heard his old friend Bern on the line, I immediately knew something was wrong.

Barry had gone to Denver for a week or so to celebrate New Years and attend several concerts. He had not turned up at home in New Jersey.

To make a long story short, after a brief investigation, I learned that he died of natural causes in a hotel room a couple of days earlier.

I don't want to dwell on the circumstances of his death. After all, Barry would prefer I note that, by all accounts, and true to form, he had a heckuva last week.

It was in the aftermath of those terrible few days though that I truly got to know my brother.

So much of my relationship with Barry was unnecessarily complicated by my own judgment. My own concerns.

My own conventional worldview blinded me to the full extent of what made my brother great in the eyes of **his** community.

In the years after his cigar business in NJ began to slip away, he fully embraced what he'd always wanted to do. Be around people he loved listening to music.

I knew many of his friends, but only passively.

I knew they were good people, but I didn't realize how amazing.

In the days following his death and leading up to his funeral, I saw a side of Barry and his community that I never could have imagined.

My parents and I often chided Barry to be more responsible.

We'd lecture him that, at the end of the day, when he is sick or old, his "friends" would not be there for him. Only family will be.

He would say that we just don't understand.

What we failed to recognize is that he had a family. Just not the type we were accustomed to.

He wasn't married and didn't have kids.

But he had people who looked after him when he was sick, and gave him a ride when he needed one.

They gave him a place to stay when he had none.

They celebrated birthdays and holidays and life events together.

They were with him in good times and bad, in sickness and in health.

And, boy were they there to celebrate him upon his death.

His friends insisted on helping plan his funeral and did everything a nuclear family might do in such circumstances.

Now, anyone who believes that money and status are the keys to success should have been there.

My brother died with less than \$1,000 to his name.

Yet hundreds of people filled a hotel ballroom in New Jersey to celebrate Barry's life.

I assure you that you have never seen a funeral like this.

Picture this...

There was a band. Hundreds of pictures. A slide show.

People dressed as clowns handing out red clown noses.

There were toasts and roasts and music.

After a couple of hours, people filed out of the hotel in a New Orleans style jazz parade with instruments and horns and kazoos.

They wound their way through the streets of New Brunswick to one of his favorite bars for a party where another band played his favorite Beatles tunes to a packed house.

Later that night, at the hotel bar, I had a vision.

OK, this actually happened.

I walked one of Barry's festival clown compatriots.

He was a self-proclaimed 58 year-old hippy clown. In full garb.

As if reading my mind, he sat down and looked me in the eye.

He said, "Brother Stephen. I sense that you don't get people like Barry and me. It's OK. Let me explain.

People look at me and they see a clown and generally think that I am some kind of misfit who couldn't cut it in normal society.

You see, I had a successful career as an executive and made plenty of money. But I was miserable.

I woke up and looked in the mirror one day and decided life was too short.

So, I choose to be with good people who I love and who love me, and we all love listening to music together. That is our religion. Our way.

But even in our community, your brother was special, he said. He helped everyone and anyone and befriended all who let him. He made all people feel good about themselves. He had little yet gave much. He found jobs for kids who couldn't get a start and mentored young adults who were lost.

Your brother was a true leader in our community, he went on.

And I owe my successful festival business to your brother who shared his creativity and gave me the courage and confidence to do it.

You see, it was only through the eyes of his hundreds of friends, and his extraordinary yet unconventional family, that I was able to fully appreciate, and sadly to belatedly recognize, how truly special he was.

To this day, his Facebook site gets more posts on it than mine. You should check it out.

In the days following all of this, I wished I could have seen him in his element as the leader he was.

I wish I fully appreciated the depth of respect and love he earned in his community while he was with us.

But Barry would hate for me to have regrets.

Person after person contacted me or posted on Facebook to share their connection to Barry's legacy of boundless love.

His friends reminded me how he would describe a stranger as "just a friend we haven't met yet."

He always, always, always had a hug.

I knew that he was a loving son and a caring brother and an adoring uncle.

But, I learned that Barry was also so many people's best friend, mentor, spiritual advisor, confidant, and general spirit lifter.

And, in hindsight, despite our differences, he was the brother who always gave me a fresh perspective on life and his unconditional love.

Rather than dishonor his memory through regret and self-pity, I spent a lot of time thinking about the best way to honor him.

So, I quit my job!

OK, there's more to it than that.

The number one lesson I learned from my brother is to live in the present more than the future and to focus on the people you care about.

As many of you know, I left my job at the SEC this past June after 12 years.

Rather than jump right into the next thing, I decided to learn a lesson from my brother and just live in the present for a little while.

While my wife Alison is in the midst of a 6 month trial abroad, I am taking a six month break so I can spend focused time with my kids.

I spent the summer traveling in Europe with Luke, Leo and Anna without the constant buzzing of my blackberry or interruption by my cell phone.

We were just present together.

I can focus on coaching baseball and attending as many kids games and events as I can.

I walk them to school and talk about their homework and friends.

I won't do this indefinitely, but I am confident that the time I am spending will live with all of us forever, and Uncle Barry – whom we talk about a lot – would be proud.

The other trickier lesson is that, even those of us who believe we are open-minded, probably have some room to improve.

Things are not always as they seem. And regret is among the saddest of human emotions.

Don't bridle at your loved ones' differences, embrace them. You can't change them.

Give your sister-in-law a second chance for the sake of your brother.

You don't have to love your mom's new boyfriend or husband – be glad that she's happy.

And, for the love of God, if I am allowed to say that here, go home and call at least one relative you haven't talked to in a while – regardless of why – and tell them you love them.

You won't be sorry that you did, but you might be sorry if you don't.

Thank you for allowing me this cathartic opportunity to share a bit of my journey this year.

Have an easy fast for those not eating.

And, L'Shanah Tovah to you all.