

Bulletin Message November 2008

There was a soft knock on my door and I looked up to see a tall, well-groomed and trim older gentleman standing tentatively. "Can I take a moment of your time, Rabbi?" "Yes, of course, how can I help you?" I answered. As he moved in he hung his head and said "Rabbi, I don't know exactly what I am doing here but I have something for you". At that time I noticed that he held in his hand a plain white envelope.

"Of course, come in..." as I gestured for him to be seated. As he sat he began by telling me he was Catholic and had never before been in a synagogue. Okay, I thought...well, perhaps he has questions about Israel, or Jewish relatives or maybe is inquiring about an appropriate present for a Bar Mizvah or wedding. But no...his story was entirely different...

"You see, Rabbi, I have to tell you...I'm from Jacksonville" he said. "And I want to tell you about something that I remember from growing up" He told me a tale about growing up in a neighborhood that was quite diverse for a 1940's southern town. His friends were Italian, Polish and one family was Jewish. It was this Jewish family that had become close friends with his family. Now, the man seated before told me that he was just a kid...but in this Jewish family there was an older boy who became his good friend. The Jewish boy, even though much older, taught him to play ball, to ride a bike and went with him on adventures through the neighborhood. Yes, he remembered fondly...this Jewish boy also had a handicapped sister...mentally handicapped...and even though the girl could not do much for herself he learned from this older role model how to treat someone with respect...and love...and he never forgot the lesson of treating others kindly.

"Oh, Rabbi," he said with a sigh, "I was just a kid when my older friend went away to college but on holidays he always came 'round to check on me...to see how I was getting on...yes, he was an older brother to me in so many ways. " I saw tears begin to well in his eyes...and for awhile he was just quiet..holding that white envelope so gently between his fingers. "Well, Rabbi, you see World War 2 was on then...and when he graduated he went off to the Army. Its what you did in those days."

More silence...and then slowly he took a tattered brown newspaper clipping from the white envelope. He quietly handed it over to me without saying a word. The headline read: "Lt. Louis D. killed during French fighting in Normandy". I looked down at the article..making out the details of the death notice...when he continued, "Rabbi, I've held on to this article for over 60 years. But I'm old now...and I don't know whats going to happen to my things after I'm gone. Here...you keep this now.... " With that, he got up and left.

For a long while I just read and re-read this article. A faded picture showed a young bespectacled Lieutenant. I read his life story...born in Jacksonville, attended public schools and college here at UF...Jewish fraternity and within days of graduation entered the army as an officer. It was only three days after arriving in France that he died. I did look for living relatives in Jacksonville...but none were found...and I began to be the holder of this soldier's legacy.

What could I know of him? That he wanted to make his family proud and attended college despite the difficulties of war? That 25 years was a short life? That he went into battle bravely and gave his life? Yes, I knew all that. But his legacy was much more...

Lt. Louis D's legacy was a legacy of friendship and kindness. Maybe it was even more...this was a legacy of example. You see my visitor had held this article because he wanted to remember not just the man...that was a fond memory too...but he wanted to remember the lessons that this older spiritual brother had taught him. There were lessons of kindness, of compassion and of how to live life.

I buried Lt. Louis D's article between the pages of a siddur...between the pages of his heritage. But before I did I made sure that I had a copy...that I too could share with you what a young man taught an even younger man over 60 years ago and then passed on to me. It was enough goodness to last more than a generation. It was enough goodness to keep inspiring goodness; to keep reminding us to achieve our best; to reach out to all who will be our friend and to always show an example of decency, kindness, honesty, and integrity.

Shalom U'vracha,
Rabbi David Kaiman