SAME AS IT EVER WAS
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My Papa David Kipnis was the BM tutor at Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco CA in the 1970s and 1980s.

He owned a liquor store and was the BM tutor on the side

My Grandma Vera was the confirmation teacher for the same synagogue

You could say I entered the family business

My papa died 30 years ago, like many who knew our grandparents before we became adults I often wonder what he would think of the world we live in today? Would he think that things are better with the internet, 500 channels on TV, cell phones, door dash, uber, etc.? Or would he, like many I know long for a simpler time? The romanticized version of a bygone era when every family was Leave It to Beaver, all wars were between good and evil, politics was never personal, and every family had a home and could afford to take a vacation once or twice a year.

That time never existed of course except in our mind, Leave It To Beaver was as fantastical as Star Trek, but we don't remember it that way.

What started me thinking about this was a packet of letters I got in the mail earlier this week.

The rabbi of the congregation my papa was the Bar Mitzvah tutor for, Rabbi Marty Weiner, died last year; his son, my colleague Rabbi Danny Weiner, is the senior rabbi at Temple DeHirsch Sinai in Seattle, WA

Earlier this week I got a big envelope from Danny, in it was a stack of handwritten notes that my papa had prepared about each of his Bnai Mitzvah students, he would send these monthly reports to Rabbi Weiner, the elder and they found their way into his files; with his son's thoughtful effort they are now they are in my hands

They are remarkable in how unremarkable they are.

Let me read you a few to you

READ

Sounds familiar, yes?

Ayn hadash tachat haShemesh

Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, “There’s nothing new under the sun,”

Meaning that things we assume have never before existed or happened, have their origins in something that we already have or have experienced.

When I read these notes I thought of a letter I first read in rabbinical school in a class on American Jewish History; which by definition is not THAT old, compared to say Jewish history in general.

This letter was written in the 1830s, it was sent by the rabbi and the temple president to every student in that congregation. Nearly 200 years ago it said something to the effect of, “if students do not show up at synagogue on Saturday mornings and participate more regularly in the service they will not be afforded the honour of having a Bar Mitzvah” (It was only bar mitzvahs back then). Students and parents must do a better job of honour their commitment torah and the congregation.

The letter stood out to me then, stayed with me for 25 years because like my papa's notes it could have been written yesterday, it could have been written by me.

In fact, I know I have sent that very letter many times.

We have this habit of romanticizing the past, a cognitive tendency to selectively remember the past as better than it was, especially when the present doesn't feel so good.

I hear this a lot lately in conversations with other parents.

Its not just about longing for "the good old days", it also reflects a deep dissatisfaction and resignation with the state of the world and society we currently live in.

I think I first started feeling old when I caught myself criticizing the choices of current generations in work, parenting, politics, all the things that we use to measure the relative success of one generation over another.

First time I caught myself effectively starting a sentence, "kids these days…" and finished that sentence with a sigh or more likely for me an OY! I knew that I was

1. Old

2. Using a very selective memory, in elevating the work ethic, values, civic culture of my generation over the present.

How many of us have looked at someone in tattoos, or multicolored hair, or any manner of trendy clothing and rolled our eyes figuratively or in actuality saying in effect, “well I never”

Maybe our own experiences in Hebrew School if we have them is an exception to the rule, maybe no one remembers those days as full of rainbows and unicorns.

I once overheard a father say to their child, “I hated Hebrew school, your grandfather hated Hebrew school, and so you will hate Hebrew school, that’s how it’s supposed to be, that’s how G-d intended it. That’s the meaning of L’dor vdor, generation to generation.” Really, I heard a father say that, I will not comment on whether or not I might be related to that father.

But more often so many things are simply not as bad or as good as we remember them.

There’s a common misconception that memories are accurate records of the past, pristinely preserved in a mental filing cabinet.

“Memory doesn’t really work like that,” said Anne Wilson, a professor of psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University whose research broadly focuses on memory, time and identity. “We reconstruct what happened in the past on the basis of little bits and pieces of memory. We’re acting like archaeologists — picking up the pieces and putting them back together.”

This doesn’t mean we consciously distort or embellish our memories. But the process of retrieving memories is “highly reconstructive and prone to various biases,”

Which brings me to one of my favorite images in the whole of the Torah, and it occurs in this week’s parasha, Ekev, the portion of Torah Eytan (and his father and sister) will chant tomorrow morning.

In the parasha from the middle of the book of Deuteronomy we have the retelling of the story of the Golden Calf