

**Lasting Legacies**  
**Yom Kippur 5770 Yizkor**  
**Rabbi Ari Sunshine**  
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A few weeks ago, I came across an interesting article in the Post, entitled, “ ‘*American Idol*’ Desk: Artifact or Artifice?” In this article, Philip Kennicott talked about the recent news that the Smithsonian was accepting the “American Idol” desk into its collection. The announcement back in May was played up on “Idol” with an appropriately mocking touch of humor through a guest appearance by Ben Stiller and several of his co-stars in the summer movie “Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian”. Stiller made the announcement, which subsequently brought comments like “This mighty desk will share the same roof as Abraham Lincoln’s top hat”—that from Hank Azaria; it “will soon be displayed next to Old Glory”, added Bill Hader; and, the best line of all, from one of the funnier guys around these days, Jonah Hill, who said, “Right beside Thomas Jefferson’s desk, where the words were first uttered, ‘All men are created equal’ will be this desk, where the words were first uttered, ‘You were pitchy, dawg, you were mad pitchy in spots’”. ☺

Their humorous comments were not quite accurate. True, the Smithsonian did acquire the “Idol” desk, but it was not acquired by the National Museum of American History, nor was it displayed there. In reality, until two weeks ago, the desk was kept on display in the Smithsonian Castle near a pile of fake museum “loot” that advertised for Smithsonian’s agreement with the makers of “Night at the Museum”. Subsequent to the end of the exhibit, the desk was to be held by the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, whose “material culture” collection is housed in various storage facilities in and around Washington. As the author of the article writes, “the desk won’t sit near Jefferson’s desk nor share a roof with Lincoln’s top hat. It may share a warehouse with a truck from Pakistan and a water tower from New York City. And if it goes on display again, it will very likely be at another museum not affiliated with the Smithsonian”. The acting director of the Folklife Center indicated that other museums may be interested in the desk for longer-term display.

According to the American History museum, they couldn’t take the desk because it comes with a neon sign, which would have been difficult to store. HMMM. ☺ Brent Glass, the director of the American History Museum, says that the desk ‘just wasn’t right for his curators’ popular history agenda’. He said, “we are making judgments about what people in

the future will want to know about our own time, what entertained Americans at different times”. But the desk, his scholars felt, didn’t fit their plan for telling the story of American popular culture. The article’s author wonders if the “American Idol” desk is really a piece of genuine folk culture, building on a more than 200-year American tradition of amateur talent competitions? Is it even possible to make that determination yet? Glass says that “pop-culture memorabilia is particularly difficult because it must be collected quickly. Today the famous “puffy” shirt from “Seinfeld”, acquired by the museum in 2004, would probably end up on eBay. But Archie Bunker’s chair, also held by the museum, would probably have gone into a dumpster if the Smithsonian hadn’t acquired it”.

The debate as to whether the Idol desk merits a place in the Smithsonian collection anywhere raises an interesting issue for us today. As the author of the article cynically comments, “The public, it seems, doesn’t just want historical objects. It’s also happy with merely famous ones.” In our society we tend to get hung up on the ephemeral, the newest, the latest, and...the least lasting. Who is to say how long American Idol will last? Well, it will last at least as long as it has good ratings. ☺ But a life saturated with *American Idol* and *People Magazine* is not likely to be filled with Torah, with art and worthy music, with literature and social passion and the

intricate beauty of the natural world. In our limited free time, we can choose to spend it on things that no one will care about in a year or two, because we enjoy them and they are easy; or, we can choose to focus on other, more enduring things. My colleague Rabbi David Wolpe relates that the famous artist Renoir suffered from arthritis toward the end of his life. One day Matisse was in his studio and saw the Master wince with each brushstroke. "Why do you persist?" Matisse asked. "The pain passes," answered Renoir, "but the beauty lasts forever."

Moreover, not only is our free time limited, but, ultimately, as we know but don't always process, so is the amount of our time here on Earth. And, what's more, if our lifespan is in some way analogous to fads that come and go, or as the Psalmist says, "*Eynosh k'chatzir yamav*, the days of mortals are like grass, *K'tzitz ha-sadeh ken yatzitz*, we flourish as the flowers in the field, *ki ruach ovrah bo v'eineinu*, a wind passes over them and they are no more, *v'lo yakireinu od m'komo*, and no one can recognize where they grew—then what truly lasts from human life? Besides the beauty and art of our world that Renoir described, what is forever?

A little later on in the service, we will read, as we do each Yom Kippur, about the martyrdom of Rabbi Hananiah Ben Teradyon. As he is

wrapped in a scroll by Romans and set on fire, his students ask him, "What do you see?" His answer: "The parchment is burning but the letters are ascending to heaven."

At that agonizing moment, Rabbi Hananiah had the comfort of knowing that his teachings would endure. Though he lived two thousand years beforehand, he could easily have taught the wise words of William James, that, "the great use of life is to spend it on something that outlasts it." Rabbi Hananiah knew his life was over, but he also recognized that what was most important to him in life, passing on the laws and values of the Jewish tradition, was a legacy that he had left behind with his students.

So the best answer I can give to that question of what lasts forever is—our legacies. And by that of course I don't mean what we leave behind as a material inheritance, but the wisdom and values that we leave for our children and the generations that follow. There is a long record of ethical wills in Jewish history that dates as far back as the Torah. Isaac and Jacob on their deathbeds summon their children to speak to them one last time and Moses addresses the Jewish people at the conclusion of the Torah just before he ascends Mt. Nebo to die.

Coming to terms with one's own mortality is not an easy task, let alone writing words on paper expressing our innermost feelings. With the exception of today, Yom Kippur, when, by wearing white, fasting, refraining from pleasure and luxury, and atoning, our tradition teaches that we are simulating our own deaths, in general it's fair to say we try to avoid contemplating the finite nature of our days. But death is a constant companion, for, on some level, we all live in the Psalmist's "valley of the shadow of death", since we are the world's only beings that understand that we are going to die. So composing an ethical will for family and friends may be a difficult experience, but it is also can be an immeasurable blessing.

In general we don't get much advance notice of when our life on earth will end. All of us can be here today and gone—not even as far away as tomorrow—but today. Many of us are taken from this earth without any advance warning. In one sense, that is a blessing, but in another sense, it is not. It IS a blessing in that the person who goes swiftly and suddenly is spared pain. But in another way, it is NOT a blessing, in that the person may not have the opportunity to settle his or her affairs, and to make amends and to bid farewell to those whom he or she loves. In contrast, some are sick for a while before passing, which gives the person and his or her loved ones notice, and time to prepare.

Let me tell you, or remind you, about one such person who did know of his impending death and went to extraordinary lengths to compose an ethical will that has literally touched more than ten million people.

You may have heard of Dr. Randy Pausch who passed away last year at the age of 47. He was a gifted professor of Computer Science, Human Computer Interaction and Design at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He accomplished so much in his short life but his greatest contribution was known as “The Last Lecture”. It is the custom in many universities for professors to deliver a lecture predicated on the proposition that they have one more class to teach before they die. They are to try to teach what to them are the most important and lasting lessons they would like to impart to the world.

For most professors and their students it’s more of an intellectual exercise, but for Randy Pausch it literally was his last lecture. You see, just a short time before he was asked to participate, he learned that his pancreatic cancer had metastasized to his liver and he had only months to live. Randy decided to present the lecture even though his wife had reservations. The speech would take place on her birthday and she felt that she wanted him to herself for as much time as possible. They had just recently moved to Virginia to be close to her family, which would make things a bit easier for

his wife and three children when the time came. But in spite of her misgivings, they traveled to Pittsburgh so Dr. Pausch could deliver his final lecture that he entitled, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams”.

Four hundred people packed the lecture hall to listen and he spoke for 76 minutes. How many of you have seen the lecture on YouTube? Millions have. He also transformed this lecture into a book that he published shortly before he died called “The Last Lecture”, written with Jeffrey Zaslow. How many of you have read it?

The video of his lecture is quite moving. He was a person filled with a special passion for life, his chosen profession, his students, and most of all, his wife and three young children, ages 1, 2 and 5.

The book reads like an ethical will filled with suggestions for living and how to live your life to the fullest. He is witty, charming, and a gifted communicator and teacher. His warmth and authenticity leaps out from every page of the book.

In the lecture he speaks about those who inspired him in life from James T. Kirk of Star Trek and the Disney Corporation to his gifted students and some of the giants in the computer world.

He presents his last lecture as a power point presentation with 250 slides. One of the slides lists his childhood dreams: Being in zero gravity;

playing in the NFL; authoring an article in the World Book Encyclopedia; being Captain Kirk; Winning stuffed animals; and being a Disney Imagineer. He never made it to the NFL but he was invited to scrimmage with the Pittsburgh Steelers. He experienced zero gravity and was asked to author an article on Virtual Reality in World Book. He met William Shatner and got to say a line in the recent Star Trek film; won dozens of large stuffed animals, and got to be a Disney Imagineer.

“Time”, he writes, “is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think” (Pg. 112) Randy Pausch lived every day of his life like it was his last. He never allowed his cancer and the specter of his imminent death to stop him from living each day to the fullest.

His ethical will addresses many items of importance to him. Here are just a few.

1. **Dream big, because anything is possible.**

Randy was 8 in the summer of 1969 when men first walked on the moon. He was at camp and the campers were brought to the main house to watch the moment on TV. But the astronauts were taking a while, and it was late. So, as Randy said, “eventually, while smart decisions were being made on the moon, a dumb one was made here on Earth”—the kids were sent back to their tents to go to sleep. Randy was upset at the camp directors, as he

thought to himself, “My species has gotten off our planet and is in a new world for the first time, and you people think bedtime matters?” (132) ☺

Fortunately, Randy’s dad took a photo of their home TV the second Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon and preserved the moment for Randy forever. As Randy says, “give yourself permission to dream. Fuel your kids’ dreams, too. Once in a while, that might even mean letting them stay up past their bedtimes”. (133) ☺

2. **Don’t complain; just work harder.** He attained his tenure a year early. His colleagues wanted to know how this was possible. He told them to come by his office on Friday nights at 10:00 PM and you will always see his lights on. (*OK, so we could work late on Thursday nights...* ☺)

3. **Look for the best in everybody.** With enough time and patience people will surprise and impress you. Almost everyone has a good side. Just keep waiting. It will come soon. (Pg. 145)

4. **Watch what people do and not what they say.** Actions speak louder than words.

5. **Always show a deep sense of gratitude**—always say thank you.

6. **Ask for what you want.**

On a trip to DisneyWorld with his father and his 4 year old son, Randy’s father and son wanted to sit in the nose cone of the monorail with driver.

Randy told his father, “Actually, I’ve learned there’s a trick to getting to sit up front. Do you want to see it?” At which point he walked over to the attendant and said: “Excuse me, could we please sit in the front car?” “Certainly,” came the response, as the attendant led them to the nose cone. Seeing his father’s stunned look, Randy said, “I said there was a trick. I didn’t say it was a hard trick.” (177)

7. **Tell the truth- all the time.** It’s an effective long-term strategy.
8. **Never give up. Take some chances.** Be a “first penguin”—the award that Randy gave to the team that took the biggest gamble while NOT meeting its goals—like penguins jumping in water that might have predators; well, someone has to be the first penguin!—kind of like our midrashic hero Nahshon ben Aminadav who was the first Israelite to jump into the Red Sea before it split during the Exodus (of course, his jump didn’t result in “glorious failure”). Climb over—or run through—the brick walls of life, because they’re there not to keep us out, but to show us how badly we want something.

Very few of us will ever deliver such a lecture, but each of us has the power and ability to do two important things: 1) we can earnestly live our values and model them, because our time is all too short, and 2) we can think about, and write down, a few words, thoughts and personal life lessons that

we desire to leave to our children, family and friends. What we compose will be just as powerful and moving as Randy Pausch's reflections because, like his, our words will come from the heart and be given to those we love and cherish the most. We can all do it. And if we do, it will be a gift of a lifetime and a lasting blessing for our families.

At the conclusion of his talk he states that he had things inside him that desperately needed to come out. He told the audience that he gave the lecture because he had to. He said that he had fun, even though he would soon be dead. In fact, he added that he did not know how not to have fun—as he put it, he was a “fun-loving Tigger, not a sad-sack Eeyore”. ☺

Finally, he talked about the head fake. Like the running back in a football game, who looks one way and runs the other, Randy Pausch had a head fake for this lecture. His goal was not to teach people how to attain and achieve their childhood dreams, but rather, how to LEAD their lives. “If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you.” (Pg. 206)

He then turned to his next to last slide, which stated, “Have you figured out the second head fake?” (pg. 206) As he became very emotional he repeated the words on the screen, “Have you figured out the second head fake?”

To him, the lecture was not for the people in the room, but as the slide said, “It was for my kids.” He then clicks to the very last slide, which is a photo of him standing with his wife and three children. He then sits down next to his wife to thunderous applause.

What lasts? What is forever? Not a passing piece of pop culture. Not our days on earth. Just the lessons we live ourselves—and then leave behind for those who follow us.

Please rise for the Yizkor service.

(With inspiration from Dr. Randy Pausch and Rabbi Stephen Grundfast)