

In a book titled a Piece of Peace, Sharoq Almalki shares short stories and fables that convey deep values and morality despite their compact size. One of my favorites is that of the Pencil Maker, a poignant story I wanted to share with you today before the gates begin to close.

There once lived a wise pencil maker. His workmanship was exquisite: each pencil was unique and beautifully suited for the task at hand. When the other craftsmen in the village inquired about his superior products — Was it his materials? His tools? His attention to detail? — they learned that the wise pencil maker actually had the amazing ability to speak with his pencils. Before putting each of display of his magnificent handiwork into the box for delivery, he took it aside for a brief conversation:

“There are five things you need to know before I send you out into the world,” the pencil maker told each pencil. “Always remember them and never forget, and you will become the best pencil you can be.”

“First, you will be able to do many great things; but only if you allow yourself to be held in someone else's hand.”

“Second, you will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but you will need it to become a better pencil.”

“Third, you will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.”

“Fourth, the most important part of you will always be what's inside.”

“And finally, little pencil, you must leave your mark on every surface on which you are used. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write.”

Each pencil seemed to understand and promised to remember as it went into the box with purpose in its heart.

We read in our Yom Kippur liturgy:

Consider the clay in the potter's hand: so are we in Your hand, our loving Protector.
Consider the stone in the mason's hand, so are we in Your hand.
Consider the iron in the welder's hand; consider the glass in the hand of the glazier.

Though we inhabit an imperfect reality — a world rife with suffering, blemished by the human propensity for evil — this prayer sees human beings as a work in progress. Potters, masons, glass-blowers, silversmiths work with the raw material they have on hand — repairing what is damaged, refining what is clumsy, continually reshaping their work into new and more beautiful forms. Our covenantal partnership with the divine Artist is the basis for shaping us into something better.

Imagine, then, the conversation the Pencil Maker had with his pencils in a different light. We are those pencils, the magnificent handiwork of our Creator, ready to be sent into the world in service of the divine.

“First, you will be able to do many great things; but only if you allow yourself to be held in someone else's hand.”

As we gather together this afternoon for our Yizkor memorial prayers, we remember our loved ones who held us — and were held by us — both literally and metaphorically. How we long to curl up by their side again, to hold their hand again, to have the support of feeling them at our side. We are able to do a great many things, and many great things, from the strength, the courage, the support, the confidence, the knowledge, the wisdom we gained while being held in their hand.

“Second, you will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but you will need it to become a better pencil.”

Who among us has not experienced pain this past year? The pain of loss, yes, and the pain of regret. The pain that accompanies wrong decisions and the pain forced upon us by tragedies outside of our control. But the same pain that once threatened to break us can, through the passage of time and difficult emotional work, can begin to transform us. That pain can become compassion, it can become wisdom, it can be inspiration - it can indeed make us better.

“Third, you will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.”

Would that we were as pencils, topped with an eraser to easily correct the mistakes that we have made. It isn't easy, but the ideology of Yom Kippur makes us realize that repentance is possible. We have to do the difficult work of recognizing and acknowledging our transgressions. We have to admit wrongdoing and to apologize with sincerity in our heart. We have to vow never to do it again. We can correct the mistakes we might make, and seek to avoid them in the future.

“Fourth, the most important part of you will always be what's inside.” The most important part of you will always be what's inside.

“And finally, little pencil, you must leave your mark on every surface on which you are used. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write.”

So, too, it is with us — as it is with those we have loved. We see the marks of our loved ones all over this world. First in the smells they left behind, in their written word, in a favorite recipe or meal shared that continues to bring a smile to our faces. Later, we see their marks on us as we live our lives as they — in their highest moments — wished to live, and in the thoughts and actions of the next generation.

And just like them, we will continue to write. With our words, with our actions, with our love, with our lives, we will continue to write...and God, we pray that you will write as well. Inscribe us for a year of safety, well-being, and favor; a year of love and passion; a year of life and a year of peace. Ken Yehi Ratzon - May this be God's will.