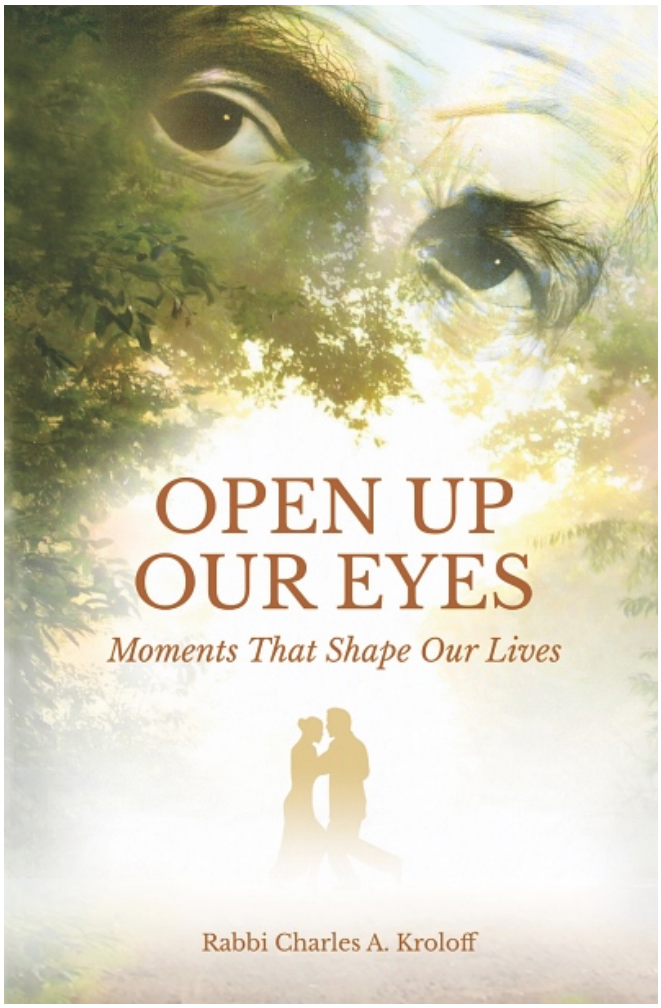

We all experience moments over a lifetime that bring into sharp focus what we value and what makes us happy. The author shares his amazing experiences and asks you, the reader, to recall moments that shape your life and to be be amazed.

OPEN UP OUR EYES: Moments That Shape Our Lives

By Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff

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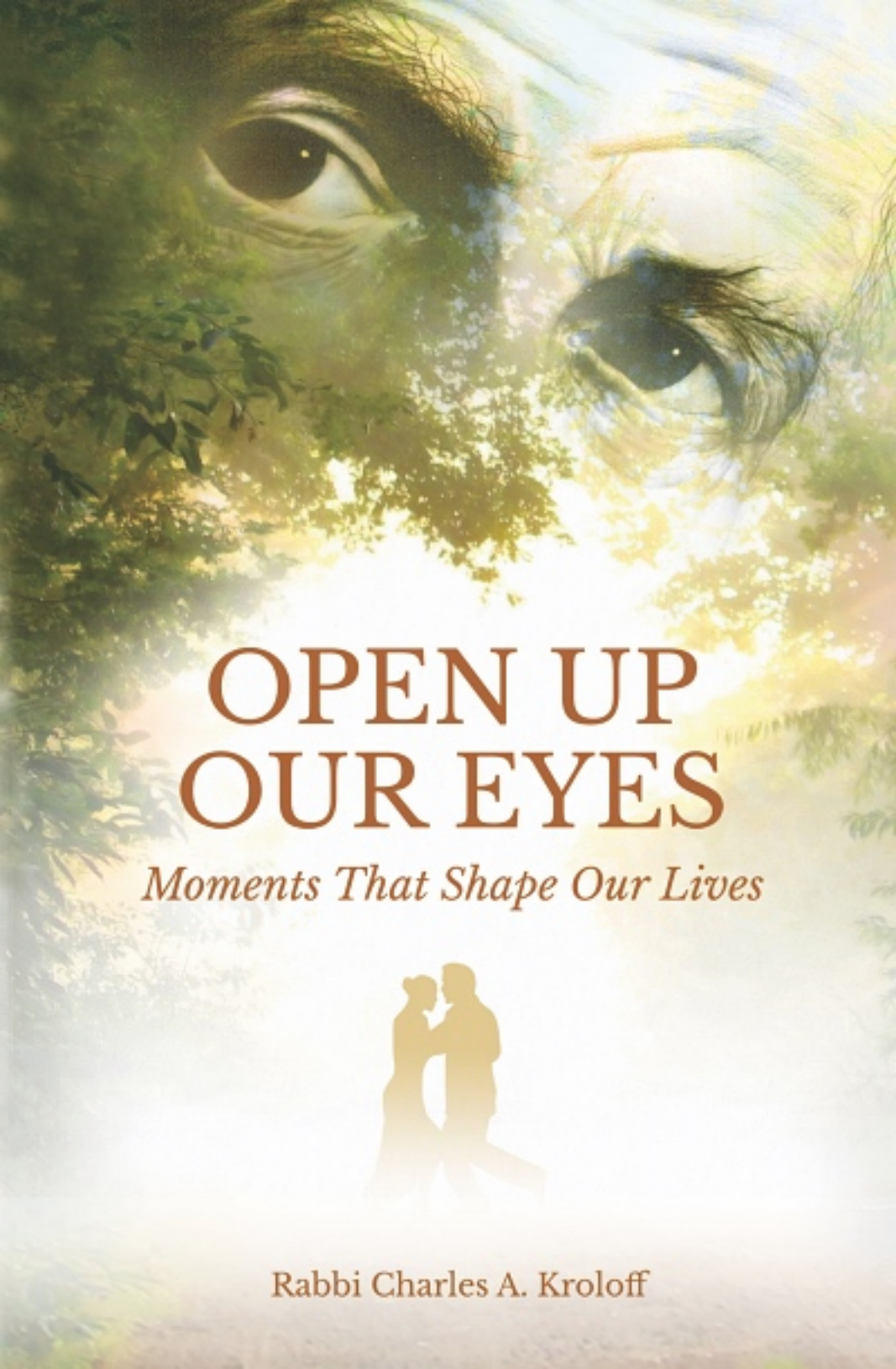

OPEN UP OUR EYES

Moments That Shape Our Lives

Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff

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INTRODUCTION

"Open up our eyes. Teach us how to live.

Fill our hearts with joy and all the love You have to give."

These words, from a song by Cantor Jeff Klepper, capture the theme of my book.

We all experience moments--over a lifetime--that bring into sharp focus what we value, what we prioritize, and what make us happy. These moments sharpen our vision and calibrate our moral compass. They help us adjust to the stark reality that we are flawed souls in an imperfect world. Most of all, they deepen our gratitude and leave us amazed.

Some of these moments impact us immediately; others have a delayed reaction. They lurk in the background of our psyches, waiting for us to reach back to them and only later to experience their wonder.

Memory triggers images and my mind's eye opens wider than before. I start to unearth new meaning from life experience. As I open my eyes to past wonders, I hope this will encourage you to travel a similar pathway and to uncover experiences that you may have forgotten altogether--or that you may have shunted aside. Some of them will now amaze you like they never did before. The cool thing about living is that it is never too late to open our eyes to the past, to discover new meaning in the present, to learn and to be amazed as we look to the future.

As we reflect on our past, present, and future, consider the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement…to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal, everything is incredible. never treat life casually."

So let's get started. I invite you, the reader, to join me in recalling moments, small and large. As we turn them over in our minds, let's discover new insights that can guide us right now and into the future.

1. GROWING UP

The Buick Mascot

The 1946 Buick sported a hood ornament that caught the eyes of my friends and me as we played catch on the streets of Chicago's Southside. Its shiny metallic circle was clean, sleek, and so easily detachable that it frequently ended up on top of my friends' night tables.

One day, outside alone and with time on my hands, I decided to indulge in what seemed to my pre-adolescent mind as a relatively harmless act: the acquisition of an already very loose Buick mascot.

I didn't hide it. Rather, I proudly displayed it on my night table, exactly as my friends had done. That evening, the ornament caught my father's eye at which point he asked, "Where did this come from?"

Here's my explanation, almost verbatim: "It was pretty loose and about to fall off a nearby car. It was going to end up on the street anyway."

Decades later I still remember my father's words: "You'll have to return it first thing tomorrow."

"But why?" I asked, "everyone does it. I know at least six kids who did the very same thing."

Dad's response: "Six kids doing the wrong thing doesn't make it right. It's called stealing. You stole a piece of someone's car. Back it goes."

The next morning I found the owner, apologized, and offered to pay whatever it would cost to re-attach the ornament to the hood.

For that ten-year-old, it was one of the hardest days of his young life. For this octogenarian, looking back, it was one of the most important. Clearly, it was an early Eye Opener.

As a child, I thought that the most daring thing I could do was to steal that mascot, as my friends had done. But as Jim Hightower teaches, "The opposite of courage is not cowardice, it's conformity." In fact, the bravest thing I could have done was to do nothing at all. The Talmud makes this point on many occasions when it instructs: *"Shev v'al ta-aseh*. Sit and do nothing."

Years after my encounter with the Buick, as a rabbinic student, I studied Exodus: "Do not follow a multitude to do evil" (23.2).

There are some things we just do not do, even if lots of others do it. That youthful moment--embedded in my psyche--often pops up with red lights flashing. It happened one day when I picked up a NY Times at an airport news stand, had a plane to catch, and ten people were lined up to pay. Who would notice? I wouldn't be the first to rush back to a gate without plunking down the cash. Fortunately, the red lights flashed in my brain.

Or the time I learned of a breakthrough at a public company and thought--for a moment--about trading on information not available to others.

Many times in life, doing nothing is a courageous act. Perhaps it was your decision to stay far from a group intent on inflicting harm. Or to avoid an inebriated crowd. Or to stay off the road in dangerous conditions. When was it both right and wise for you to do nothing, rather than follow a crowd to do the wrong thing?

A Bugle

I was about nine when I joined the Cub Scouts. The group met a few blocks from our Chicago apartment, at the KAM Temple on Drexel Boulevard, across the street from what decades later would become the home of Barack and Michelle Obama. I learned to create a campfire by rubbing two stones together and to make enough lanyards to circle Chicago's Loop. I also joined the Drum & Bugle Corps. My parents bought me a dark brown, plastic (yes, plastic) bugle for $12, a hefty price those days that was probably equivalent to a week's groceries.

Five days after the purchase, I accidentally dropped the bugle, cracking it in two. I was devastated. I knew that the purchase was a sacrifice for my parents and I shuddered at the thought of their reaction. To this day, I remember how they received the news. "These things happen," they said, "We'll go back to the store this weekend and buy you another."

Instead of rebuke, understanding.
Instead of anger, compassion.
Instead of punishment, love.

Amelia Earhart taught, "A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees."

My parents' kind response to that broken bugle threw out roots of compassion that sprang up again and again during my lifetime. When one of our own children smashed a treasured item, that memory of my parents' measured response helped me muster the patience to defuse the moment.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, taught: "Acts of kindness never die. They linger in the memory, giving life to other acts in return" (*From Optimism to Hope*, Bloomsbury, 2004).

Kindness spreads. If someone is kind and patient with me, that should inspire me to be patient with others. By the same token, if I am kind with myself, that should spur me to act with compassion toward others.

Those roots of kindness pop up when I am impatient with others. A single act of parental compassion, lingering in my memory, can act as a corrective reminding me to cool it. If my parents could instinctively forgive me for cracking that bugle, the least I can do is to be a more patient husband, father, teacher, friend, rabbi, or therapist. At times like that, I feel my father's presence with me in the moment. He lives on with me as I hope I will live on with my children, their children, and their children's children.

Think of this as a "chain reaction of kindness." Our parents' love instills in us a love for others who in turn reach out to their circle with compassion. And on and on it goes. Perhaps this is what we mean by immortality. This is one way that we, our parents, our children, our friends, all of us, live on.

In the *Amidah*, one of the central prayers in Jewish liturgy, we bless God "who remembers the love of our fathers and mothers." While this references the patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham, Sarah, and other Biblical greats), I believe that God also remembers the love of our own parents, a love that becomes part of our spiritual and psychic narrative. As one of our prayers reminds us, "their love lives on in every act of goodness we perform and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory."

In what ways does the kindness of a parent live on with you? Think back on words they spoke or things they did that made you feel good about yourself and your future.

And what if your memory is not that of a loving parent? What if, growing up, you felt abused or emotionally abandoned? What if anger and impatience pervaded your home?

While this is not the youth I wish for anyone, there is a silver lining. I know more than a few who--with the help of therapy and/or religious insights--have navigated through the pain of parental neglect and have become the most caring and loving human beings on earth. Because of the pain of childhood, they were determined to live a different kind of life. And beyond your nuclear family, consider others in your life who supported you, blessed you, and left you with fond memories.

Aunts & Uncles:
More Important Than You Think

I was blessed with 16 uncles and aunts. Each one shaped my life, blessing me in ways that keep showing up in my daily life. As a kid, I thought everyone had 16. Today, I recognize this was an amazing gift.

Here's just one example. My mother's sister, Kate, and her husband, Abe, a highly respected plastic surgeon, welcomed me into their Long Island home over many summers. Every Wednesday, on my uncle's day off, we traveled with my cousins into Manhattan to take in a Broadway matinee. Mostly musicals, they opened my eyes to the wonders of the Broadway stage.

Seventy years later, those performances--their music and their star-studded casts--continue to amaze me: Oklahoma ("O What A Beautiful Morning"), Annie Get Your Gun ("There's No Business Like Show Business"), Carousel ("You'll Never Walk Alone"), South Pacific (Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin), and many more.

My life-long love affair with Broadway musicals-- especially the genius of Cole Porter, Lerner and Loewe, and Rodgers and Hammerstein--is a direct result of those matinees. As we packed into their car every Wednesday, did my aunt and uncle realize that they were instilling in their young nephew a passion for Broadway theater?

Perhaps. But what is clear to me now is that they--like every one of my aunts and uncles--made me feel as if I were a cherished part of their nuclear family. They differed from each other in terms of geography, resources, and educational backgrounds, but that was of little consequence. What was consequential was that each overflowed with love and affection, each cared about my unique self, and each enriched my life. They were--for a summer, a weekend, or for half a lifetime-- surrogate parents. Not to replace parents, but to augment. Not to compete with them, but to supplement. Not to by-pass them, but to complement them.

If you are blessed with aunts and uncles (great aunts and uncles count too), open your eyes to the blessings that they may have bestowed upon you. Consider the ways that they may still bless you now or tomorrow.

On the other hand, if you are blessed with nieces and nephews, think about how they might become a larger part of your life. And if you do not have uncles or aunts, nieces or nephews, extend your reach to cousins or family friends. Consider what gifts of friendship, counsel, or simple acts of love you might bestow upon them right now. Think about what a call, an email, or a work-related reference from you might mean to them. Here's the point: cherish those outside your immediate nuclear family. Consider them a unique extension of yourself with all the blessings that those relationships can yield.

2. JIM CROW SOUTH

Back of the Bus

Our family moved to Atlanta in 1946. World War II had just ended. Martin Luther King, Jr. was 17 years old and the "New South" was only a dream in the minds of a handful of progressive thinkers, like Ralph McGill, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, and like my Dad, Max N. Kroloff.

Jim Crow reigned supreme.

One summer, my naturally dark complexion turned even darker under Atlanta's searing summer sun. I boarded a bus to travel downtown. Taking an empty seat in the second row, I was promptly instructed by the driver: "Hey boy! You move to the back of the bus." I was too young and shocked to consider any alternative other than to follow his brusque order. I must have been so traumatized that I cannot remember ever sharing the incident with my parents.

Ten years later, my wife, Terry, and I flew from Cincinnati to New Orleans and then boarded a train to New Iberia, Louisiana where I would serve as the High Holyday student rabbi at Gates of Prayer synagogue. When the conductor collected our tickets, he told us we were not in the right seats and directed us to the car behind us, the last car, where we proceeded to move. It was only after sitting there for 30 minutes that Terry and I looked around and realized that everyone else was Black. The conductor had assumed that we were a mixed-race couple.

We didn't make a fuss. We had no objection to sitting in that car. I realize now that, had we resisted, we might have landed in a Louisiana jail…or worse. In 1890, the State of Louisiana enacted the Separate Car Act. Two years later Homer Plessy, a racially-mixed shoemaker, boarded a whites-only train car, aware that he would

likely be arrested. His case eventually arrived at the U.S. Supreme Court that ruled--in its historic 7-1 decision in Plessy v. Ferguson--that "separate but equal" is constitutional. Of course separate was never equal. (On January 5, 2022, nearly a century later, Gov. John Bel Edwards of Louisiana pardoned Plessy.)

Those two experiences--an Atlanta bus and a Louisiana train--opened our eyes just a sliver to what it was like to be a Black American in the South. But for us, these were only momentary glimpses! The deprivation and terror that Blacks have endured are ten thousand times worse than anything we experienced.

We Jews are reminded--no, we are commanded--on Shabbat, at Passover, in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy to empathize with the stranger. Make sure that you treat everyone equally because, like you, the stranger is created in the image of God (Genesis l.27). Never forget that you were an oppressed stranger in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23.9).

Rabbi Shai Held, Dean of Hadar Institute, teaches us that our Torah tradition could have responded differently to the experience of slavery. It could have argued that since we were oppressed and no one lifted a finger to help us, we have no obligation to empathize with or stand up for others. Instead, the Torah teaches us to "turn memory into empathy," to do justly and to create a more just society (website Hadar.com, *Parashat Mishpatim*).

Systemic Racism

I admired my Uncle Abe Goldstein who built a thriving business in Atlanta called Prior Tire Company. "Don't Cuss Call Us" was his firm's motto. But they not only fixed flats and pumped gas. In the rear of the building was a massive tire recapping operation: a dozen machines of all sizes--burning hot, smelly, and probably toxic--where Black workers sealed fresh rubber onto thinly worn tires,

giving them another 20 or 30 thousand miles of life. But they renewed not just tires for the family car; they recapped tires for mammoth earthmovers that the State of Georgia used to maintain roads and bridges.

As a kid, my eyes weren't focused on the dangerous working conditions that Black employees endured or on the strictly segregated tasks at every Atlanta business. My uncle was a very good man. I loved him dearly. He probably treated his workers better than most employers did. He did his best to live by the Jewish values he learned at the synagogue where he presided as president. He was advisor to every Atlanta mayor.

But Jim Crow lived everywhere.

As a kid in Georgia, I climbed Stone Mountain, a granite colossus--bigger than Mount Rushmore--celebrating Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. I was frightened when the Ku Klux Klan held fiery vigils there, but that, like the mountain, was just part of the indelible Southern landscape that we accepted.

My encounters with racism were just that: encounters. They had a beginning and an end. They linger in my memory, but they do not define who I am from the moment I was born through every waking (and sleeping) hour thereafter. It was not until much later, spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement and informed by books like Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste,* Robin deAngelos' *White Fragility,* and Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy,* that my eyes began to open to the deeper meaning and implication of systemic racism in our nation.

It is now clear to me that all Americans must open their eyes to the 400 years of caste-based structural racism upon which we have shaped the American dream. And I must begin with myself, my privilege, my opportunities, my good fortune, much of which stand on the shoulders of a systemically oppressed people.

It feels strange to Jews and other groups--that have known unspeakable horrors--to grapple with two extremes: being both persecuted and entitled. The loss of six million Jews in the Holocaust is so overwhelming that the label of "white privilege" does not seem to make sense to us.

How is it possible that we Jews, persecuted through much of our history, can be labeled "privileged?" Do the educational, socio-economic, and human rights achievements of Jews in America somehow "balance" out the Holocaust, thereby rendering us privileged? They do not. This is not a sociological balancing act. It is simply a statement of fact: the privileges currently enjoyed by upper middle class white Americans were built on the backs of slavery, red lining, and very cheap labor.

Example: when I was growing up in Atlanta, nearly all my friends' families employed a domestic worker, usually full time. Most of my friends were not wealthy. Our family lived on a tight budget. "Maids", as they were called, were paid about one dollar a day in 1935. That's equivalent to $23 a day in 2021 dollars. At that pittance of a rate, households could "not afford" not to hire them.

I write this not to engage in a guilt trip, but to highlight that we continue to enjoy untold privileges at the expense of others. This was dramatically brought home to me in Tony Kushner's musical, "Caroline or Change," a play about the life of a Black domestic worker and her white Jewish employers in Louisiana who don't have a clue about what Caroline goes through every day of her weary life.

As I watched that play at the West Coast Black Theatre in Sarasota, Florida, my eyes opened wide. Memories rushed forth of our family's interaction with our housekeepers. I recalled one evening when, as a teenager, I arrived home half an hour late. As a result, our housekeeper missed her bus, waited a long hour for the next,

and proceeded the next morning, to quit. Did I have a clue that I was adding misery to her misery?

As I struggle with what was then and what is now, I ask myself: Can we Jews, who know what it's like to be brutally oppressed, be a bridge across the racial divide? Are we capable of empathizing, building coalitions, and collaborating to achieve racial and economic justice? Are there enough of us who care and enough of us to make a difference?

Can we open our eyes to what happened to Black people in America since 1619, long before a single Jew stepped on this soil? As Rabbi Heschel taught, we are not all guilty, but we are all responsible. What has prevented us from seeing all this before now? Why has it taken so long? What's been going on in our own lives and attitudes that have blinded us to this reality? What changes are we prepared to make in how we see others and how we treat those who look different than we?

You've Got to be Carefully Taught

We're not born to hate. We're not born to see the world through the prism of skin color.

In 1949, Richard Rodgers captured this truth in the song, "You've Got to be Carefully Taught," written for the hit Broadway musical, South Pacific. Rodgers wrote that you've got to be taught "to hate and fear…from year to year." You have to be trained "to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made…or of people whose skin is a different shade." And that this teaching must come "before it's too late. Before you are six or seven or eight."

Eight years after Rodgers wrote these words, Terry and I directed a summer day camp in Jacksonville, Florida. One hot July day, we took the kids to the Jacksonville Zoo. My eyes nearly popped out of their

sockets when I saw one of our six-year-old white campers patting the top of the hair of a Black kid he encountered on the zoo grounds. From the look on our camper's face, I surmised that he was trying to figure out just how different he was from this kid of color.

A few moments later I encountered two of our youngest campers standing in front of signs designating four (yes, four!) public bathrooms. They read: "White Men, White Women, Colored Boys, Colored Girls." Confused by the signage and trying to figure out his place in a caste system that adults strictly enforced, one turned to the other and innocently asked, "Are we white men?"

Years later, I relived those moments at the zoo when a White House photographer captured a much different, yet ironically reminiscent scene. In that iconic 2012 photo, President Barack Obama is bending over while 5-year old Jacob of Philadelphia, who is visiting the White House, strokes the hair of the President to see if it is like his. It is!

Lawrence Otis Graham was a widely read Black writer of the 1990s who grew up in the leafy suburban city of White Plains, New York. When he died, his obituary recalled how--as a ten year old--he was at a country club swimming pool with his brother and several white friends. But when he jumped in the water, his friends' parents quickly pulled them from the pool (*New York Times,* Mar. 5, 2021). That was 1971, three years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and seven years after the passage of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"You've got to be carefully taught."

Growing up, I was "carefully taught" that God created us--every one of us--in God's own image (Genesis 1.26). In the Jim Crow South, that was Revolutionary! By my theological calculation that verse means that when white supremacists beat and lynched Black

women, men, and children, they were beating and lynching souls precious to God! And when we close our eyes to the abject poverty that sends one out of every five American children to bed at night hungry, we are closing our eyes to the misery of God's children.

If the root causes of inequality are not dealt with, extremism from the right and left will grow. *Did you know that the United States has the widest economic chasm between "haves" and "have-nots" of any other nation on the planet?* Abject poverty produces unspeakable misery for God's children, many of whom live just a few miles from us.

But proximity also presents opportunity. In 2000, my close friend Warren Eisenberg (co-founder of BedBath&Beyond) invited me to join him in an effort to provide educational opportunities to children of low-income families. With the support of Warren and the collaboration of Temple Emanu-El of Westfield (NJ), we launched "I Have A Dream-Plainfield."

Some background: In 1986, Eugene Lang returned to the East Harlem (NY) school from which he had graduated a half century prior to deliver the sixth grade commencement address. He looked out at the kids, scrapped his prepared remarks, and told them that one of his most memorable moments was hearing Dr. King, deliver his "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963 and that every one should have a dream. In Lang's words, "Then I decided to tell them I'd give a scholarship to every member of the class admitted to a four-year college."

Inspired by Lang and the programs that he spawned, we promised a cohort of 53 first-graders at Plainfield's Clinton School that--if they completed high school--we would cover the equivalent of four-years of state college tuition. For 18 years, our team of volunteers and one professional supported our "Dreamers" with tutoring, counseling, cultural enrichment, and mentoring. The result was, as one student

said, "I start to think of college and the rest of life in a new way." Ninety-four percent of our Dreamers completed high school or its equivalent and nearly all of those went on to post-secondary education with some attaining Masters degrees. In contrast, less than 70% of Plainfield students were graduating high school in that era.

No matter where you reside, you will find opportunities to mentor, counsel, tutor, and support. Perhaps you are already doing something to help a student move ahead and, if so, please share your experiences with family, friends, and co-workers. Let them know what can happen if we all pull together to help kids realize their dreams.

"You've got to be carefully taught."

(There are also rewards for you. The most important one, of course, is that you are helping to save a life. In addition, a recent Harvard University study revealed that "older adults who volunteer 100 hours or more per year reduce their chance of early death and boost levels of optimism and purpose in life than those who did not volunteer as much or not at all" (*Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2022).

3. BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Taking On Responsibility

Growing up, I was not a "three-sport athlete." Not even one sport. I loved baseball, but inevitably was the last to be chosen for the pick-up game. I was usually assigned to patrol deep right field, waiting under the brutal Georgia sun for what seemed like hours until a ball came my way.

I was shorter than most of my friends and when my parents took me to a department store for my bar mitzvah suit, we ended up in the section labeled "Chubby." I dreaded swimming. When I entered a pool, I seemed to go straight to the bottom.

But thanks to loving parents, insightful teachers, a rabbi (Jacob M. Rothschild) who encouraged me at every Jewish turn, and a Zionist youth organization that offered me leadership opportunities, my confidence grew to the point where I developed a pretty good sense of self.

In Atlanta, I worked for a few weeks over several summers at Prior Tire Co. My Uncle Abe gave me more responsibility than a 12-year-old kid could ever imagine. Not only did I pump gas, but I oversaw the entire station when the manager took lunch or was on vacation.

On occasion, I was in charge of Abe's parking lot adjacent to a medical building where, barely able to see above the dashboard, I maneuvered cars into narrow slots. That was two years before I was eligible for a Georgia driver's permit (age 14 in the 1940s).

Today, I observe many children growing up with an abundance of privileges and a scarcity of responsibilities. Parents helicopter into every aspect of their children's lives to defend, protect, and

advocate. A few illegally hire surrogates to take entrance exams for their kids. The clear message: "You can't do this; I'll do it for you."

As a rabbi, I regularly met with 12-year-olds prior to bar or bat mitzvah to discuss their approaching *simcha* (celebration). At some sessions, parents would accompany them. Looking directly into the eyes of the student, I would ask the child a question. Sometimes, before the youngster could utter a single word, the parent would respond for the child. What a shame, I thought, this student has a mind and a voice, but her parent won't let her shine forth.

Did You Ask Any Good Questions Today?

Just as important as letting kids figure out their own answers is encouraging them to ask good questions.

The ability of children to ask questions is a powerful tool in cognitive development. As kids question, they are gathering information they need in order to learn about the world and solve problems. When children start school, those from households that encourage curiosity have an edge over the rest of their classmates. Practice in taking in information from their parents leads to acquiring information from their teacher. In other words, they know how to learn better and faster (Michael M. Chouinard, Monograph 12936, National Library of Medicine).

My father loved to tell the story of Nobel Prize physicist Isidor Rabi. Dr. Rabi was once asked: "Why do you think you have become such a successful scientist?" His response: "Every day when I came home from school, my mother didn't inquire if I gave the right answers. Instead, she greeted me with this: "Did you ask your teachers any good questions today?"

Questions and answers are the lifeblood of the Talmud. It's the way Jews have learned for 2,000 years. Curiosity breeds learning and learning builds 1) independence, 2) confidence, and 3) a better life.

Independence strengthens confidence. When I was nine, my mother sent me on a streetcar downtown to Chicago's Loop with a Marshall Field & Co. charge card to purchase a few shirts. When I handed the clerk the card, she insisted that I bring my mother to the counter. It took me five minutes to convince the sales person that I had come by myself.

While I might not recommend such a juvenile foray to Chicago's Loop today, in those simpler times, it taught me that I could do more than I ever thought possible. Parents need to take reasonable risks as they give their kids freedom to explore, experiment, and exercise independence. The confidence gained is priceless.

What have been the most important confidence-building experiences in your life so far? What have you done lately to gain more confidence? As you interact with co-workers, family, students, or even friends, what steps have you taken to help them build self-confidence?

Expect More of Yourself

I arrived at Yale when I was 16. (Not recommended, but there I was.) After registering and picking up my library card, my next requirement was to show up at Yale's iconic 14-story, gothic-style Payne Whitney Gymnasium to take the "freshman swim test."

The required test consisted of swimming four lengths of the 25-yard pool without stopping, a feat I had never even once performed. With trepidation (would I have to leave Yale if I didn't pass?), I managed to complete the task, but just barely. Decades later, I still remember the instructor's words: "Well, Kroloff, technically, you passed the

test. But I strongly suggest that you take the swimming course this semester."

I did exactly that and will be forever grateful to the instructor for some of the best advice I ever received. To my great surprise, swimming has become one of my favorite pastimes. The kid who could barely swim four lengths, as an octogenarian now does a whole lot more than that.

Not all of Yale's requirements that orientation week were benign. From the 1940s through the 70s, 16 universities, including most of the Ivies and the Seven Sisters took nude posture photos of incoming students. Ostensibly taken to gauge the rate of skeletal deformity in the population, they were likely used to support racist eugenic theories. The concept was later debunked and the photos transferred to the Smithsonian Institution where most were destroyed. The comedian Dick Cavett--we overlapped one year at Yale--called it "officially sanctioned soft-porn." It is amazing that school authorities permitted the practice and that none of us or our parents thought to object.

From these experiences I have learned two valuable--though seemingly contradictory--lessons, both found in *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers. In *Avot* 2.3, Rabban Gamaliel taught: "Be heedful of the ruling power, for they bring no person nigh to them except for their own need. They seem to be friends at such time as it is to their benefit, but they do not stand by a person when he is in need."

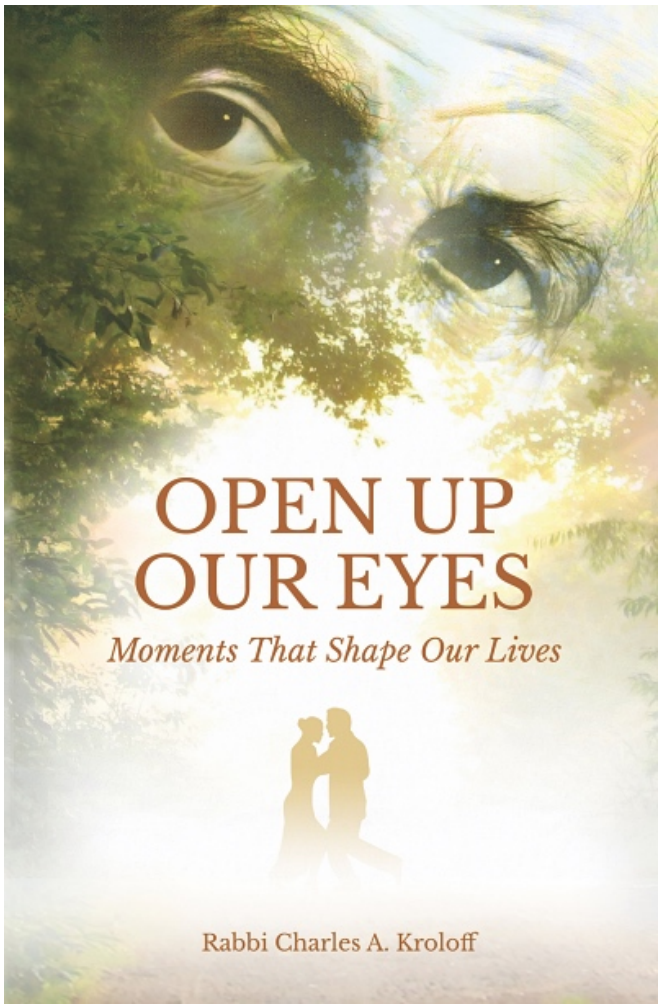
Yet, in the next Chapter, Rabbi Hanina said: "Pray for the welfare of the ruling power, since, but for fear of it, men would have swallowed up each other alive" (3.2).

I shall be forever grateful to the "swim authorities" who may have saved my life and forever be repelled by the "posture authorities" who took advantage of a half million young women and men.

I welcome strong political leadership on a local and national level. I applaud the pro-active initiatives of Westfield's mayor, Shelley Brindle's, to renew Westfield's downtown, our Congressman Tom Malinowski's defense of human rights, and President Biden's efforts to strengthen the social safety net and renew America's infrastructure. At the same time, I am angry when government lies to me (e.g. *Pentagon Papers* on the war in Vietnam or the false narrative justifying our invasion of Iraq). While both political parties share responsibility for these disasters, in recent times leaders of the Republican party have dangerously defended the Big Lie and continue to undermine the foundations of our democracy. They are literally placing in grave jeopardy the future of our Republic.

Two take aways: One, local politics and civic responsibility are the building blocks of good government. Enlightened, progressive leaders who care more about community than personal power or self-aggrandizement can do wonders. Citizen leaders must model a system where mediation, compromise, and good faith negotiation are the coin of the realm. I urge you to become active in local government or public service organizations that make our world a better place, community by community.

Second, a healthy two party system provides the checks and balances required for building a just and peaceful society. We must hold our representatives accountable and insist that they denounce the polarizing forces that are tearing our nation apart.



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