

## Last Lecture

“In writer-director Zach Helm's whimsical 2007 film, MR. MAGORIUM'S WONDER EMPORIUM, veteran actor Dustin Hoffman plays the title character, a 243-year-old toy-store owner who is ready to pass his enchanted business on to his beloved assistant, Molly Mahoney [played by] (Natalie Portman).” The movie did not get very good reviews. But there was one line in the film which did impress a movie patron who had taken his young son to see the film. (Pg. 99-100): “The apprentice (Natalie Portman) tells the toymaker (Dustin Hoffman) that he can't die; he has to live. And Mr. Magorium responds: ‘I already did that.’”

This fictional exchange is so poignant for the real life movie goer because he knew he was dying of pancreatic cancer. The movie-goer was obviously not 243 years old; he was only 46 or 47, and his name was Randy Pausch, the presenter and author of The Last Lecture. Randy was a professor of computer science, specializing in virtual reality, at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Delivering a last lecture is an opportunity that has been given to other university professors, but Randy Pausch seems to have made it famous. Millions, including me, have listened to his lecture on line; it is the only program I have found by myself and heard on YouTube. If you have a computer and about an hour and a quarter, I encourage you to listen as well. I have also read his book, The Last Lecture, which he wrote with Jeffrey Zaslow. So if you do not have a computer, you can still read, if not hear, Randy Pausch's thoughts. Please understand, Randy Pausch's last lecture is not sad or morose or depressing. It is upbeat, uplifting and filled with humor. Randy Pausch believed in having fun, even when he knew he was dying.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give us the same opportunity as a last lecture – a chance to review the past year, or years, of our life. For Randy Pausch, the review was most profound. Knowing he would die soon, he had to examine his life and decide how he wanted to be remembered, especially by his children. Within the context of his experience and values, Randy Pausch saw his lecture as having three major themes: his childhood dreams; enabling the childhood dreams of others and lessons learned. What were Dr. Pausch’s childhood dreams? “\*Being in zero gravity, \*Playing in the NFL (the National Football League), \*Authoring an article in the World Book Encyclopedia, \*Being Captain Kirk [of the starship Enterprise], \*Winning stuffed animals [the big ones they have at carnivals and amusement parks], and \*Being a Disney Imagineer.” (Pg. 19) In one form or another, certainly to his satisfaction, Randy Pausch fulfilled all of his childhood dreams.

Do you remember yours? I struggle to remember many of mine. I know as a little boy I wanted to hit, with a full count, a grand slam home run for the New York Yankees in the seventh game of the World Series, with the Yankees losing by three runs, with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning. When I was a child, I don’t think anyone had ever hit a walk off grand slam home run to win a seventh game of any World Series. Given my athletic prowess, I was surely not destined to be the first. But I have remained a loyal fan of the Yankees for over fifty years and they have won many pennants and world championships during that time. That will have to be close enough for me. I also wanted to have a big yard and grow food producing plants and herbs. That’s a dream I have achieved. I also wanted to paint, not great art, just walls and trim in a house, and to build things. Some may say I am rather slow, or I might say deliberate, in such activities.

But I have found the time over the years to do small projects at home and to help oversee some larger construction projects in the community and I am satisfied with those. Given my families' experiences in Europe during the Holocaust, I also wanted people to stop hating the Jews and for Israel to have peace with its neighbors. Those are still dreams of mine.

What were your dreams? Have you decided they were silly or unachievable? Have you worked hard and been fortunate to achieve some, or all of them? Or has living life gotten in the way of fulfilling them? Is there still time to strive for those dreams or is it really too late to work on them? And will your descendants know about your dreams?

Dr. Pausch was convinced that we each have to face brick walls when pursuing some of our dreams. But he believed that (Pg. 51-52) "The brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something." When you come up against a brick wall, in school or at work, with finances or skills, in your personal life or with leisure pursuits, do you back off discouraged or are you determined to find an alternate course? Being a Star Trek fan, Dr. Pausch made reference in his book to facing a seemingly impossible challenge. "During my cancer treatment, when I was told that only 4 percent of pancreatic cancer patients live five years, a line from the Star Trek movie *The Wrath of Khan* came into my head. In the film, Starfleet cadets are faced with a simulated training scenario where, no matter what they do, their entire crew is killed. The film explains that when Kirk was a cadet, he reprogrammed the simulation because 'he didn't believe in the no-win scenario.'" If we are determined, if we think "out of the box," we can find a way around most of the walls in life. Randy Pausch transcended his evil decree and no-win scenario by doing everything

possible to fight the cancer and by pushing himself to deliver the last lecture, which he hopes will be a source of comfort and inspiration to his three children when they are old enough to hear and see it.

Randy Pausch's last lecture challenges all of us to raise the question: what do we want to leave behind when we are no longer here? Randy did not marry Jai until he was in his late thirties. One day, early in their marriage, when Randy decided to walk to Carnegie Mellon, Jai did not realize that his car was in the driveway. Jai drove the minivan out of the garage and into the Volkswagen convertible and dented both cars. After a day of anxiety and a very lovely and meticulously prepared dinner, Jai delivered the bad news to Randy. (pg. 86-87) "She said the convertible got the worst of it, but both cars were running fine. ... 'Tomorrow morning,' she promised, 'I'll get estimates on the repairs.' [Randy] told her that wasn't necessary. The dents would be OK. .... [Cars] are utilitarian devices, not expressions of social status. And so I told Jai we didn't need to do cosmetic repairs. We'd just live with the dents and gashes.... If your trashcan or wheelbarrow has a dent in it, you don't buy a new one."

Randy Pausch was not very much into material stuff. Judaism is not very much into material stuff. After all, one of the explanations we have for breaking glass at a wedding is not to depend too much on material items for happiness. And when *Pirke Avot* asks: "Who is wealthy": it answers – the one who is content with his or her portion." Increasingly, I wonder why I have the need to buy stuff – especially odd and interesting chairs. Toby and I may love them, but who will want them when we are gone? I look at the accumulated possessions of my parents, grandparents and even one great uncle and aunt, a lot of which remain in my parents' home in Massachusetts, and the real issue is how do we dispose of all of it. Once, every item served

a purpose and probably was enjoyed. A few items will be saved. But most will fall into the hands of strangers, after hours of sorting through everything. I mentioned earlier that one of Randy Pausch's childhood dreams was to win very large stuffed animals at carnivals and amusement parks. The day of his last lecture, September 18, 2007, Randy brought several with him, had them placed on stage, and offered them to the audience, on a first come first served basis.

Everyone should have a legal will to dispose of items; why encourage fighting or disagreements among heirs. There may be family heirlooms that deserve special attention. I suspect most of us have taken the time to handle our money and stuff. But what about passing on who we were, what our values were, what our priorities were, what our dreams were. How many of us have made a video or written an ethical will that captures our essence just in case a grandchildren or some distant future descendent looks at a faded picture and wonders about who we really were. Every one of us, in our own style, should leave behind a last lecture. How do we want to be remembered?

Most of us, including me, occasionally find reasons to complain about one thing or another. That is only natural. But Randy Pausch was not a believer in constant complaining. He wrote: (pg. 138-139) "Too many people go through life complaining about their problems. I've always believed that if you took one tenth the energy you put into complaining and applied it to solving the problem, you'd be surprised by how well things can work out."

Dr. Pausch continued: "I've known some terrific non-complainers in my life. One was Sandy Blatt, my landlord during graduate school. When he was a young man, a truck backed into him while he was unloading boxes

into the cellar of a building. He toppled backwards down the steps and into the cellar. ‘How far was the fall?’ I asked. His answer was simple: “Far enough.’ He spent the rest of his life as a quadriplegic.

Sandy had been a phenomenal athlete, and at the time of the accident, he was engaged to be married. He didn’t want to be a burden to his fiancée so he told her, ‘You didn’t sign on for this. I’ll understand if you want to back out. You can go in peace.’ And she did.

I met Sandy when he was in his thirties, and he just wowed me with his attitude. He had this incredible non-whining aura about him. He had worked hard and become a licensed marriage counselor. He got married and adopted children. And when he talked about his medical issues, he did so matter-of-factly.” Obviously, I only know Sandy Blatt through this description by Randy Pausch, but it seems clear to me, Sandy Blatt also transcended his evil decree. Will we be remembered for transcending our evil decrees or only for complaining about how unfair they were?

I suspect that none of us needs Randy Pausch to tell us that time is precious. But Randy reminds us that in our communications connected world, we all need a time out. (Pg.110-111) “It’s not a real vacation if you’re reading email or calling in for messages. When Jai and I went on our honeymoon, we wanted to be left alone. My boss, however, felt I needed to provide a way for people to contact me. So I came up with the perfect phone message:

‘Hi, this is Randy. I waited until I was thirty-nine to get married, so my wife and I are going away for a month. I hope you don’t have a problem with that, but my boss does. Apparently, I have to be reachable.’ I then gave the names of Jai’s parents and the city where they live. ‘If you call directory assistance, you can get their number. And then, if you can

convince my new in-laws that your emergency merits interrupting their only daughter's honeymoon, they have our number.' We didn't get any calls."

Can you imagine that? A month without calls? Most people cannot imagine even a day a week, which we call Shabbat – a day of rest, but also a day for ourselves, for our families, for our friends, without calls. What are these calls all about? Are they really of enduring value? Whatever people are busy doing every Shabbat, is it of enduring value? Will anyone in fifty years, let alone five hundred years, care about what secular activities occupied our time every Shabbat? Or would we have benefited more by spending some time with our family, friends and community? As Randy so succinctly put it: "Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think." Will we be remembered for transmitting Jewish tradition or for ending it?

"Perhaps [Randy Pausch's]... most ambitious effort was Alice, a computer programming environment that enables novices to create 3-D computer animations using a drag-and-drop interface. 'The best way to teach somebody something,' Pausch explained, 'is to have them think they're learning something else.' With Alice, students concentrate on making movies and games, but they also are learning to program." Pausch hoped to inspire a whole new generation or generations of computer scientists. This was doubtless important to him, because in addition to fulfilling one's own childhood dreams, Randy Pausch thought it was very important to enable others to fulfill their childhood dreams.

Whose dreams have we enabled? Do we even think in these terms of helping others fulfill their dreams, whether from their childhood or from their adult years? We can't all build a school in Africa like Oprah Winfrey, but we can all support our own children and many others: financially, by

mentoring, and by volunteering for organizations and institutions that help people to fulfill their dreams.

Randy Pausch died on July 25<sup>th</sup> of this year. His last lecture was “a call to his students and colleagues to go on without him and do great things.”

In a few minutes we will be reciting Yizkor. That is our opportunity to remember loved ones who have died. Perhaps we take some comfort in contemplating that one day our descendants will be thinking, and thinking positively, of us during Yizkor. What do you want them to remember about you, what you did, and what you did for others, and when will you write your last lecture?

[Click [here](#) to view Randy Pausch's last lecture on YouTube]

AMEN