

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

September 15, 2017

Nate Zahn

Naftali ben Yosef v'Chaya

November 8, 1947 – September 13, 2017

It is almost impossible for me to refer to Nate Zahn in the past-tense. It seems like a mistake on my part. One of my dearest congregants who lost her husband said that well-meaning friends offering condolences “have no idea how terribly it STINGS to hear your loved one so easily spoken about in the past tense.” She told me it’s just too soon. So with the exception of these first few words, I am going to take my congregant’s advice and tell you Nate’s story as if he were right here, taking notes on my accuracy and delivery, because Nate Zahn is the *maven* on how to tell a good story.

Nate passed away from this world to the next when Jews were reading the double portion of *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilech*, almost at the very end of the Book of Deuteronomy. Of all the words in the *sedrah*, the ones that speaks most to Nate are these:

“You stand here this day, all of you, before the Lord your God – your tribal heads, your elders and our officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer to enter into the covenant of the Lord Your God.

And then, according to the Rabbis, with words of acceptance and love to those who would later convert to Judaism, Moses adds:

I make this covenant not with you alone, but BOTH with those who ARE standing here with us this day before the Lord our God, and with those who are NOT with us here this day.

Of all the words in the Torah, clearly THESE are the most inclusive. And if you think of all of Nate’s wonderful qualities, I find his inclusive nature to be among his MOST endearing and memorable traits. And the fact that Nate relishes playing the role of Moses in Masonic Lodge productions make these words even more appropriate, because we could imagine Nate saying them himself with a dramatic flair he honed during his college years.

Nate was born on November 8, 1945, to Laura and Joseph Zahn, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but called Vineland, New Jersey his childhood home.

In fact, in the Alliance Jewish Cemetery in Vineland, you will find the resting place of Nate's great-grandfather, Abraham Dittus, who came over from Germany in the 1870's and gave up his Christian faith to join the Jewish people – an extraordinary thing to do at the end of the 19th century. But then some of the finest members of the Zahn family also chose Judaism – so you could say that conversion into Judaism is a Zahn family tradition. Nate was very proud of his name. Nate, is short for Nathan, which means gift. And the name Zahn is German for “tooth.” Put “tooth” and “gift” together – and Nate said his name means “tooth fairy.” And that, on one foot, is the goofy, humorous man that Nate Zahn will ALWAYS be – a role model for us all.

Nate got his love of people from his mother, Laura. She was always the peace maker in what was a fractious family. She would call all the family members every Sunday, even cousins who were not speaking to one another. Laura loved people. And it is that love of people which has fueled Nate's inclusive nature. I am holding the bookplate of our chapel *Haftarah Book*, which was a gift from his mother to him. Dated November 8, 1981, Laura wrote:

Dear Natie, May your make good use of this Haftarah Book in the best of health for yourself and for your future children. May you chant the Haftarah on many, many special occasions and may I enjoy hearing you for many years to come.

May God grant you, our wife and family with good health, long life and much happiness.

All my love,

Mom

Nate inherited a fierce love for his Judaism from Laura's father, Zayda Barney. He was the kosher butcher of Vineland, which meant Nate always ate the very best cuts of meat, and in later years, Nate would learn to make a memorable brisket. Zayda Barney came from Russia, and left pogroms and persecution behind to start life fresh in the United States.

He was a very religious man. When he saw Nate dragging his feet to synagogue only to run home after services, Zayda Barney told Nate he had it all wrong.

“Natie,” said Zayda Barney, “you’ve got to RUN to *shul* so you can thank God for all the good things He has done for you, and then you need to walk home SLOWLY from *shul*, savoring your relationship with the Almighty.”

In later years, sitting with his Bonnie by his side in the back garden of their Northminster home, Natie would adopt his Zayda Barney’s outlook. “Bonnie,” he would say, “can you believe it. Look at our beautiful home. Look at our amazing children and their wonderful spouses. Look at our grandchildren. Can you believe it? God HAS been good to us.” Nate’s love of Judaism, based on both a gratitude to God and because keeping one’s Judaism was, in his eyes, a supreme honor and a struggle against overwhelming forces --- what Nate would call “the elephant trying to crush the pea,” all of this flowed from his Zayda Barney.

Nate was big brother to Alan, who was four years and ten months his junior. We are blessed to have Alan, and his wife, Jan, with us today. Nate was not the kindest of big brothers. For example, in boyhood, Nate was given a knife from England. To see if it truly was sharp, he tried it out on his baby brother’s arm – and Alan still has the scar – and Nate still has the knife. Alan and Nate shared one of two bedrooms in their very modest Vineland bungalow. At night, Nate would give his baby brother Alan a *zetz* at night, and when Alan cried out, “leave me alone!” it was Alan who got in trouble for making so much noise, not Nate, the instigator. Or Nate would give Alan his hand at night, and told him he mustn’t let go, or Nate would die. So, while Nate slept peacefully, poor Alan was up half the night, not daring to let go. This sense of humor, which I, *baruch HaShem* never experienced, was a hallmark of Nate’s playful personality. Beyond a doubt, Nate’s son, Joey, inherited this wicked sense of humor.

Nate would later go on, as a teen, to steal gunpower from a local fireworks company which he had hoped to blow up later – but fortunately for all, he was caught. And then there was the time Nate got caught by a policeman because he was running red lights on his small motorbike. Well he didn’t exactly run red lights. Rather, when he came to a red light, rather than wait patiently, he would simply get off his motorbike, pick it up, and cross the

street. When he was pulled over, Nate's father, Joseph, came to his rescue. Joseph confronted the officer saying, "tell me where, in your rule book, it says that a boy cannot pick up his motorbike at intersections and carry it across the street. If you can find such a rule in your book then, by all means, charge my son, but if you can NOT, then let him be on his way." Joseph successfully went to bat for his son. And in later years, Nate would go to bat for his own son, Joseph, with similar results.

Despite these stories, Nate was also a very good boy. He mastered a *haftarah* long before his bar mitzvah, in order to chant it for his Zayda Barney in *shul* on Shabbat, to make him proud. And when not in *shul*, Nate was playing baseball for Vineland High School, where he graduated in 1965.

From there it was on to Oglethorpe College in Atlanta Georgia. Why Oglethorpe College? – because it was the furthest place he could get to from his hometown of Vineland. His college yearbooks are filled with Nate next to various good-looking girls, many of whom helped him get through his classes – Nate didn't go to college for the academics. It was at Oglethorpe where Nate joined an acting group called The Players – he eventually became its president. It was with The Players that Nate made his first rock video, featuring a very handsome Nate Zahn coming down the escalator of a department store, playing guitar. I would not be at all surprised if Joey plays it for all of us before the week is through – in fact, I'd be disappointed if he did not. At Oglethorpe, Nate joined the pistol team as well as the Jewish fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu. In fact, fellow Sammy fraternity brother, Andy Weiss is with us today. Andy, and his wife, Eileen, were Nate and Bonnie's late night, after-Shabbos, dinner partners for many years.

That wonderful Nate sense of humor which he honed at his poor brother's expense, was in full force at college. There was, for example, the time when Nate took a disgusting can of Hormel's Chili, and rather than eating it, he opened it in front of the dorm room bathroom, and dribbled it from there all the way to his own dorm room, before retiring back to the common room.

Sometime later, the RA started screaming about what he thought was, well, we're in *shul*, so we'll clean up the story a smidge, what he thought was human waste. And as he screamed for Nate, Nate affirmed that it certainly looks like human waste material, then he bent to the floor and said it certainly smells like human waste, and then the piece-de-resistance, he scooped up a bit of the wretched looking Chili, much to the horror of the RA, and proclaimed, "and it certainly tastes like human waste material." Now Nate would be delighted that I shared this typical Nate Zahn story with you, although he would be disappointed that I sanitized the story.

Nate graduated Oglethorpe in 1969, with a BA in Business Administration. And being it was 1969, he found himself in the thick of the Vietnam War. In honor of his 67th birthday which fell out on Veteran's Day weekend 2014, Nate shared some of his war stories for our Second Shabbat Speaker Series. I will tell you that Nate, thinking proactively, attempted to join the U.S. Airforce as a Navigator, because they had a better longevity rate than the other forces. Alas, the Marines got to him first, and after 48 hours of sleepless travel, Nate found himself in boot camp in Parris Island, North Carolina.

Because of his college education, Nate was made a Group Supply Administrative Chief. At one point, an assignment came up for a Marine from his group to go Vietnam. Nate's commanding officer asked Nate if he should send him. Nate said it was not his place to make such a decision but he asked his commanding officer to consider this: "would I be able to better serve my country as a Group Supply Administrative Chief or in a God-forsaken mudhole in Vietnam?" And with that, the CO changed the quota, and probably save Nate's life. Of course, in later years, Nate suffered from some survivor's guilt as he met fellow servicemen, now in Veteran's Hospitals, who did serve in Vietnam, and who suffered terribly from the experience. Nate served our country, in the U.S. Marines, from 1969 until 1971, earning the rank of Private First Class. He kept servicemen from this part of his life, like Kam Romitch, as friends for the rest of his life.

After the war, Nate's Uncle Seymour landed his nephew a job working for a men's clothing store in Pennsville, New Jersey. In 1973 there was a new girl in town. Her name was Bonnie Leiberman. She was Director of Medical Records for Newcomb Hospital in

Vineland. She was 21 and she was a catch. One of Bonnie's employees, Millie Topper, had a son who thought Bonnie and Nate might hit it off.

Meanwhile, Nate himself, had a friend named Mel, who also thought Nate might like Bonnie. So with all this pressure, Nate called Bonnie. Bonnie recalls their first conversation.

Nate said, "Just to save me the trouble if this is going to work out, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate yourself?" Bonnie retorted, "I don't think so. You'll have to rate me for yourself." They went over to Mel and Barbara's home for key lime pie and wine. During the conversation, Nate shared with Bonnie that he HAD been engaged but he had to break it off because his fiancée was crazy. It might have been alright if Nate had left it at that. But Nate added, "I think she must have been crazy because she was an only child and because her parents were Holocaust survivors."

A little later in the evening, Mel, their host asked Bonnie, "so how many brothers and sister do YOU have." And looking directly at Nate, Bonnie answered, "Actually, I am the only child of Holocaust survivors."

At the end of the evening, Bonnie asked Nate, "so how would you rate me?" And Nate answered, "I'll give you a nine." And Bonnie answered back, "and I'll give you an eleven." Well that was that.

They dated for two years and married on August 31, 1975, at the Shelran catering hall in Philadelphia, with Vineland's Rabbi Murray Jay Cohen presiding, followed by a wonderful honeymoon in Barbados. Bonnie said that the two of them created a book based on their experiences called, *How NOT to Get Screwed Before Your Wedding Night*. I will admit that I think Bonnie enjoyed the shock in my eyes before she explained the book to me. She said because they were adults, Bonnie and Nate made the wedding themselves, so a lot of the details regarding florists and photographers, which parents may have seen to, fell on to them. So, for example, when Nate said he wanted table shots in addition to other photos, the photographer explained that would be an extra significant cost. However, if Nate posed who he wanted together in one set location, the photographer would take these photos at no additional cost. And little by little, by asking the right questions of these wedding service

provides, Nate and Bonnie composed the book *How NOT to Get Screwed Before Your Wedding Night*. “Aha!” said I, with a new sense of clarity.

Following their wedding, Nate and Bonnie made their home in Vineland, with Nate working for South Jersey Paper Products, as a salesman – everything from Dixie cups to the syrup used in Coca-Cola products. From there Nate moved into the insurance industry, beginning with Met Life in Bridgeton. Then there was the story when Nate’s supervisor, confronted with a malfunctioning chair, took the decrepit chair and secretly swapped it with Nate’s chair that the supervisor had coveted. When Nate learned of the chair swap, he threw it back into the supervisor’s office, telling him “if this is the type of disrespect you treats your employees, I will have none of it,” and then Nate walked. From this we learn another one of Nate’s values – although he is nice to almost everyone, he would also never take, um, rubbish from anyone either – and he instilled this sense of self-respect into his children as well.

Fortunately, in 1977 Bonnie took a better job at St. Francis Hospital and Nate was able to transfer to the Met Life Office on Foulk Road. From Met Life, Nate would move on to Guardian, then TransAmerica, then expanded his skills to include financial planning at WSFS. And finally, in 1997, Nate finally went into business for himself, establishing Zahn Financial Services.

But back in 1979, Bonnie and Nate moved into their beautiful Northminster home, where they live in to this day, filled with many amazing tchotchkes, including a multi-colored giraffe from Costa Rica, each tchotchke with a rich story to tell. And more importantly, in 1979 the Zahn’s joined Congregation Beth Shalom, where they would raise both Rachel and Joey in our Hebrew School, and on to b’nei mitzvah, on this very *bimah*. And today Joey d.j.’s almost every bar or bat mitzvah at Congregation Beth Shalom, including the *b’not mitzvah* of the current rabbi’s daughters, all giving proof to that beloved Disney song, *The Circle of Life*.

In 1981, Bonnie and Nate got their first blessing in the form of Rachel. Nate has an amazing relationship with Rachel. He takes her fishing, they share beers, drinks, hors d’ovres together, just the two of them, and Rachel can tell her father anything, I mean ANYTHING. What is said on the fishing trip, stays on the fishing trip. And father and daughter

have not only bonded over fishing. There was their tag-team confrontation of a nasty woman in the Charcoal Pit parking lot, who repeatedly, in spite, backed into Nate's car, followed by Nate jumping on the hood of the car and yelling, as a very pregnant Rachael ran after the lady in the parking lot – all as Brian's refined parents, the Clark's, watched on in horror.

Speaking of Brian, Nate's spirit of inclusion, doesn't stop with Rachel – it extends to her husband Brian, who Nate loves so much. Kicking back, just the two men, sipping Chivas Regal scotch and observing life together, are among Nate and Brian's bonding experiences. Bonnie told me that Nate figures if a man can love his daughter Rachel THAT much, and let's face it, Rachel is a handful, then Brian is truly worthy of being loved and appreciated. I was thrilled to have Rachael and Brian as my Introduction to Judaism students, although Bonnie and Nate are the TRUE Judaica teachers with Friday night Shabbat dinners. And I was thrilled to watch Bonnie and Nate dance at Rachel and Brian's wedding. And frankly I was ELATED to witness Rachel and Brian make Bonnie and Nate grandparents TWICE over, first with lovely Lucy, truly, I Love Lucy, and then with handsome Joshua.

Joey came into this world in 1985, and frankly he never bonded with his dad over fishing like older sister Rachel, because boats made him seasick. But there were those multi-day drives from Wilmington down to Florida. They had a symbiotic relationship with Joey helping his dad with computers to help improve his business, while Nate had helped Joey get his insurance credentials just in case, God-forbid, this whole DJ business doesn't work out --- not likely though as Joey is the best DJ the world has ever seen. Joey and his dad have enjoyed the great sport of haggling with each other over everything – and dishing out as much grief to each other as possible. And of course, Joey and Nate have had their bonding moments over cigar tastings, poker games – and then there is Joey's beautiful wife, Anna.

Anna shared with me just how welcomed Nate made her feel from her very first meeting – complete with her pink hair, nose ring, and torn jeans. Nate took one look at the jeans and said, "I hope you were able to get a discount on those because of the holes." But it wasn't only the humor that made Anna feel included. Nate was a wonderful explainer of the Jewish tradition, not only to herself, but to her parents, as honored guests at the Zahn family Passover seder, which Nate, channeling his inner Zayda Barney, ran with such care and

reverence. I remember the rabbis on Anna's *beit din* for conversation being so impressed with her depth of Jewish knowledge and experience – it wasn't just me, I assure you. I was building on everything Bonnie and Nate had already given Anna. What a delight to see them married 39 years to the date of Nate and Bonnie's wedding, August 31, 2014, with a chuppah above, and a bear skin below, representing a novel fusion of Jewish and Native American traditions in a way I had never seen before – Nate LOVED it!

Granddaughter Dolly has been such a wonderful addition to Bonnie and Nate's life. And just this past Monday, Nate proudly showed the seventh month sonogram photo of his future grandson to his fishing buddy. Anna and Joey blessed Nate with a glimpse of the future.

Nate has been amassing a bucket list. I am pleased that I got to help him check off one very important item off that list. When Bonnie and Nate found they could begin to do some serious travel, they decided that before they went anywhere else, they wanted to begin their world travels with a visit to Israel. Bonnie and Nate joined our synagogue's 2014 summer trip to Israel – we go every five years. Bonnie and Nate added so much to the Israel trip with their presence. My Shira, being somewhat a character herself, completely bonded with Nate --- they totally understood one another.

Bonnie shared with me that among Nate's best moments in Israel were, of course, his visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, but also unexpected things like the Graffiti Tour of Tel Aviv, or the visit to the amazing Machon Ayalon in Rehovot, which prior to Israeli Independence in 1948, presented as an unremarkable kibbutz above ground, while below ground game-changing bullets were being made under the very noses of the British who forbade such activity. The bravery and ingenuity of these factory workers was inspirational and definitely made the difference between Jewish survival or defeat in that critical period after the British left in May 1948. I was so grateful to share meals, experiences and observations with Nate.

If I could summarize Nate's values, I would say family is number one. He would do and has done anything for his family, including ensuring that both his children had quality

educations --- and Rachel's nursing has been an endless source of pride for Nate. And his grandchildren have been such a delight to him.

Next, I would say that his Judaism means the world to him. It started with Zayda Bernie, and nourished through his own mother. By marrying the daughter of a Holocaust survivor and being the grandson of a pogrom survivor, Nate came to realize how precious his Judaism his, and he has instilled this love and respect of Judaism to his children and their spouses. I have witnessed the reverence Nate has shown for his Judaism right here at Congregation Beth Shalom – in fact he was in *shul* this past Shabbat. It was a bar mitzvah so he didn't want to stay for Kiddush lunch, which of course is a shame, as I would have loved to have *schmoozed* with him.

Nate was funny. If you were at the brunt of his practical tom-foolery perhaps you did not appreciate his humor. But he had a goofy, somewhat raunchy, but always good-natured sense of humor, and it is hard not to imagine him with a smile on his face when you close your eyes and picture Nate in your mind's eye.

I do not think there is any other way to think of Nate other than with a smile on his face. His attitude towards life, despite a quadruple bypass, and not one but seven stents in his heart, has always been *b'charta b'hayim*. God says later in this week's Torah portion *Nitzavim*: "behold, I put before you heaven and earth, life and death, *b'harta b'hayim*, CHOOSE LIFE!" From fishing to Chivas Regal to spending time with his family, or coming to shul, Nate Zahn has always chose life!

Aside from family, I think what Nate was MOST proud of was becoming the very first Jewish Grand Master of the Masons in the State of Delaware, a position of great honor which he held from 2016-2017. Jewish Mason members Lou Zaret of Beth Shalom and Danny Cheitlin of Adas Kodesch served as role models to Nate, and in recent years, Nate has served as a mentor to Beth Shalom members Hayim Weiss and Rob Kleiner. And as I mentioned earlier, nothing gave Nate more pleasure than playing Moses in the Mason theatre productions. And it was NOT simply playing Moses which made Nate proud, but it was playing Moses reading the Ten Commandments in perfect Hebrew, something only Nate could do, which truly made Nate proud.

And so when we picture Moses standing before the Israelites on the East Bank of the Jordan River, telling them to include men and women, rich and poor, native born and foreign born, Jewish and non-Jewish, in this remarkable covenant before God, it is not hard to imagine that it is not Moses but rather Nate who is talking in this week's Torah portion, reaching out to the waitress taking his order, the rabbi and cantor leading services, not only his children – but their spouses and their spouses' families as well -- making everyone feel welcome. That remains Nate's special gift, and we would do well to put Nate's gift into action in our homes, our synagogue, in our community, and ultimately in our nation.

May Nate's example continue to inspire us to be better people, *zikrono l'baruch*, may his memory always be for a blessing, and let us say *amen*.