

## Memory

A film from 1990 made a great impression on me -- *Avalon*, about a Russian Jewish family settling in Baltimore in the mid-twentieth century. Toward the end of the film the patriarch says, "If I had known I was going to live this long, I would have remembered more." That resonated with me. But there was another scene in the film that brought me to tears – it was a family circle meeting. I hadn't realized until then that other families had them. They were part of my childhood, and I missed them. So let me pay heed to the words of that patriarch, and remember.

(rap, rap) "The David and Fanny Friedland Family Circle Meeting will now come to order: Any old business? Any new business?"

The descendants of the patriarch and matriarch, comprised of seven brothers and a sister, and their children and grandchildren, nearly all of whom lived in Brooklyn, would meet every other month during the 1940s and 50s and into the 1960s, in Great-Aunt Celia's dark, dank basement, and later at the Luna Park Houses community room, which had slightly more comfortable folding metal chairs.

I can recite from memory the names of all eight siblings and their spouses: Great-Uncle Sol, who never spoke, and Great-Aunt Dora, who never stopped; Great-Uncle Irving, who died young of ALS, and Aunt Bea, who later married poor bewildered Uncle Izzy; Great-Uncle Morris and Aunt Pauline; my beloved Grandpa Abe and Grandma Dora, my father's parents; Great-Aunt Celia, her first husband Ruby and then second husband Joe; Great-Uncle Harry and Aunt Min; Great-Uncle Julius, whose wife was in a mental institution and never spoken of; and the baby, Great-Uncle Frankie, who usually brought his platonic boyfriends Billy and Tommy to the meetings, but never his longtime lover, who was closeted. And then there were assorted cousins in the next generation, notably Cousin Irwin the Spy, Cousin Sheila the Pocketbook Lady; Cousin Doctor Jerry, and on and on. There were usually about 50 of us crammed into that basement. I could tell you stories about every one of them, but then we'd be here until Sukkot.

It was my Grandma Dora, the "outsider," who established the Family Circle during the war years, when I'm told that every letter from family members in the service was read aloud at meetings. She had a knack for organization, and having been raised by a stepmother, I believe understood better than the Friedlands themselves what a treasure they had. I learned Robert's Rules of Order from those meetings of my childhood in the 1950s, and made my first motion when I was 8 – asking the Sunshine Fund to buy paper and crayons, so the kids would have something to do during meetings.

Old business was who got engaged, who got married, who had a baby, who started college, who went to Israel, and even who bought a Cadillac. New business was all those future happy events, plus organizing packages to go to poor cousins in the Soviet Union. We couldn't send them money because that would be confiscated, but we could send them bolts of cloth, which they could then barter for what they needed. And of course we would solemnly note illnesses and deaths. Meetings would nearly always end the same way, with someone giving a speech – most often Great-Uncle Frankie, with elaborate sentimentality -- about how fortunate we were to have our family circle and stay together as a family.

So, In addition to Robert's Rules, from the family circle meetings I learned how a community works, and how the members look out for each other and care about each other. And I also learned that a community encompasses people who may be odd or annoying, but you love them anyway.

By the 1970s, meetings became less frequent, as the first generation died and the descendants moved away from Brooklyn. Eventually they just stopped happening; a part of my life, gone forever – or so I thought.

Because then I found myself at Bet Am Shalom – my first experience as a synagogue member.

For the first time in my life I became a regular shul-goer. As I started paying attention to the weekly aliyot line-up, I was overcome by the shock of recognition – they were all our Family Circle old business and new business items! There they were: weddings, babies, trips to Israel, illnesses, yahrzeits (but fortunately, not the Cadillac purchases). Most important was the warm familiarity of being back in a community where we look out for each other and care for each other – and yes, even cherish each other in all our blazing oddity. And so I will close with the obligatory speech about how fortunate we are to have our reconstructed family circle – and how fortunate we are that there were energetic Grandma Doras among our founding congregants who established and nurtured this warm, embracing community.