

I think about this evening, Kol Nidre, all year long.

And eight months ago I read a story I knew I needed to share with you tonight.

It affected me so very deeply.

I read the story in the Washington Post last February 14th.

It is a valentine day story, but one that is unusual and surprising.

It was titled:

A valentine to a never-forgotten classmate

By Andrew Leheny

Andrew Leheny is a freelance writer in Belle Vernon, Pa.

She was big, dressed in ill-fitting hand-me-downs that, to my 11-year-old eye, appeared to be purely functional.

She avoided eye contact with other students, always turning her reddish, blotchy face away.

Yet nothing about her was as out of place as her knotted nest of red hair, an uncombed thicket upon a child's head.

She appeared in our fifth-grade class at Washington Elementary School in West Aliquippa, Pa., in late September 1962.

She was assigned the seat directly in front of my own.

To her new classmates, this girl was as unreal as a fictional character.

If she was aware of the laughter and finger-pointing that her appearance generated, her face didn't show it.

I found it ironic that she sat in front of me.

Until her arrival, my obesity had been the target of classmates' jokes.

But her peculiar appearance trumped even my own; now, students smiled knowingly at me, offering unspoken sympathy that I should sit behind such an otherworldly creature.

Perhaps a week or two later, the new student was called to the front of the classroom.

She rose, unkempt as usual, and walked forward silently, her eyes downward.

As she came next to Miss K, our fortyish-year-old teacher turned the girl forward to face the class.

“Now, young lady,” said Miss K, “did someone forget to comb her hair this morning?”

Miss K picked up a comb from her desk and stood behind the girl.

She placed her left hand on the student’s left shoulder and, using her right hand, attempted to guide the comb through the girl’s snarled hair.

Almost immediately, the comb became stuck.

I watched as the class’s new object of ridicule reacted with discomfort, her eyes closed as Miss K tried to disentangle the comb.

Some students giggled softly.

Our teacher worked the comb free and sought a different, perhaps more forgiving, section of hair.

Using short strokes, Miss K seemed to be making progress when, suddenly, her grooming effort dislodged a greenish insect that fell to the floor and scampered forward, among our desks.

At the sight of the grasshopper, laughter, including my own, filled the classroom.

Only the girl and Miss K remained silent.

After a moment, Miss K told us to behave and then directed her still-stoical grooming subject to return to her seat.

There was no apology, no word of comfort from Miss K.

None of the other fifth-graders considered how much this incident must have hurt our classmate.

Like us, she was just a child, but, as Miss K's behavior had shown, she was also a strange being who existed beyond our rules and expectations.

The next morning as I was leaving for school, I saw the new girl walking toward our house.

As she neared the gate to our yard, I turned and walked back inside.

My mother was waiting just inside the door.

"You wanted to avoid that young girl, didn't you?" she asked.

I nodded yes while avoiding looking directly at my mother.

"Do your friends make fun of her?" she asked.

I told her yes.

Mother watched from our living room window as the girl continued walking toward school.

She looked at me with concern.

"Andy, she reminds me so much of myself at her age," she said.

"We were poor and the other children made fun of me too . . . of what I wore . . . of how I looked.

"Don't you hurt her, too. Be nice to her."

In school that day I watched my classmate, who always stared, impassively, straight ahead. Midway through the day, a pencil rolled off her desk.

I picked it up and handed it to her.

“You dropped this,” I said and offered a smile.

She took the pencil, but if my small gesture meant anything, her face betrayed no emotion.

One day, several weeks later, she did not return to school.

No one knew or seemed to care where she had moved.

It’s funny how memories stick with you.

How one moment can haunt you.

A teacher and a classroom of children forget that behind grooming issues and ill-fitting clothes is a child, a young girl lost and probably overwhelmed by her circumstances.

Instead of making new friends, celebrating birthdays and sharing valentines with classmates, some are denied the joys of childhood for reasons beyond their control.

Five decades later, I still wish I could apologize to my classmate.

Of all her classmates, I should have known better.

I cannot forgive our teacher for publicly humiliating her.

I will forgive my classmates when I can forgive myself.

I have hoped for decades that an undelivered valentine would someday reach her.

It is a prayer that somehow the pain she endured as a child has been balanced with joy as an adult.

That she has loved, married and taught children of her own to judge not with their eyes but with their hearts.

I hope that this year an undelivered sentiment has made its way to its rightful recipient.

My dear classmate, this valentine is for you.

The contemporary poet Merle Feld says that on Kol Nidre, we stand before God “naked,” “without disguise, without embellishment.”

With the vulnerability that comes from entering into the holiest day of the year, a day of self-examination and truth telling, comes a sense of honesty about the places of pain and hurt in our lives.

Even those who consider ourselves lucky or blessed, whose days are more happy than frustrating, may come to synagogue on Yom Kippur full of memories of losses and disappointments experienced over the course of our lives.

Tonight is a time in which we can more readily tap into our own brokenness.

And that is what I find so compelling about this Valentine's Day story.

Of course I feel very sad for the young girl in the class, but most of all, I relate to the author, and I applaud his mother!

I relate to his rachmanus for the girl, and how it has stayed with him for all of these years.

Writing this article, is clearly an attempt on his part to heal something broken within *him*.

My very powerful reaction to his article, is indeed an attempt on my part to heal something broken within me.

It pains me, and always has, and probably always will, when someone else suffers pain – physical pain for sure, but emotional pain, even more.

I know you can come to synagogue for many different reasons, but one of the most common reasons has to be for spiritual and emotional if not physical healing.

And this Valentine's Day 2014 article helps me to realize that our services frequently actually serve people more like the author of the article, than its subject.

I don't know that I have enough empathy to truly, fully relate to the girl in the story.

But I do fully feel at one with the author.

And I know why I waited nearly 8 months to share this article and my reaction to it with you.

The article is among many other things, a form of Kapara, a form of **atonement** on the part of the author, who knows or at least wishes he should have done more long ago to reach out to his classmate.

It's not clear how much more he **could have done**, and it is certainly not clear that anything else he might have decided to do would have been helpful.

But he knows, that in the end it doesn't matter.

Atonement works its magic in ways that are often independent from results.

Perhaps too often we say, well, there is "nothing more I could've done that would've made a difference."

That may be true when looking for measurable results in situations.

No matter what might have been done, the outcome could have been the same for this girl.

Perhaps even if the class members would have been kinder to her, **her day-to-day life** would not have been much different.

She might have remained just as lost and bewildered as described in the story.

But it would have been a much nicer story if there would have been, gestures of kindness toward her by class members besides the one mentioned at the end of the article.

Think of how differently the author would have needed to write this article.

It would have been about how the class rallied to find ways to be helpful, even though it might not have made much difference, even though results of that kindness might not have been discernable within the life of the girl.

Everyone else would have known that they truly did whatever they could, even though, the end result for the girl, might have been pretty much the same.

Doing the right thing, especially when it comes to being helpful to other people, is not only determined by the result of the action.

It should also and often be measured rather by the sense of shalom, of wholeness, of peace, of atonement it brings to all or any of the people involved.

I have another story, true story I wish to share with you tonight.

In his autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, the great Israeli author, Amos Oz tells a story about his father, a brilliant scholar, who because there was only one university in Israel at the time, never rose above the position of assistant librarian.

A disappointed man, he devoted his spare time to writing a book,

“The Novella in Hebrew Literature,” into which he poured all of his energies.

When it was complete, Oz writes, his father would rush every day to the local post office, waiting to receive the first copies.

When they arrived he was so excited that he invited his friends to celebrate – among them the well known and quite successful novelist, Israel Zarchi, who lived in the same apartment complex.

Just as he had rushed to the post office every day before the package arrived, so he now rushed every day to the local bookshop where three copies were displayed for sale.

Days passed. And no copies were sold.

Oz's father didn't articulate his disappointment, but it was in the air.

And then suddenly, a couple of days later, he came home beaming happily.

"They're sold! They've all been sold! All in one day!

Not one copy sold! Not two copies sold! All three sold!

The whole lot! My book is sold out and the store will order more copies immediately.

Another five! And they think this is not going to be the end of the story!

His father and mother went out to celebrate, leaving Amos in the care of Zarchi, the novelist downstairs.

Mr. Zarchi sat me down on the sofa and talked to me for a bit, I don't remember about what, but I shall never forget how I suddenly noticed on the little coffee table by the sofa no fewer than four identical copies of "The Novella in Hebrew Literature," one on top of the other, like in the shop, one copy that I knew Father had given to Mr. Zarchi with an inscription, and three more that I just couldn't understand.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Mr. Zarchi, but at the last moment I remembered the three copies that at long last had just been bought earlier that day.

I felt a rush of gratitude inside me that almost brought tears to my eyes.

Mr. Zarchi saw that I had noticed them and he did not smile, but shot me a sidelong glance through half closed eyes, as though he were silently accepting me into his band of conspirators, and without saying a word he leaned over, picked

up three of the four copies on the coffee table, and secreted them into a drawer of his desk.

I too held my peace, and said nothing either to him or to my parents. I did not tell a soul until after Zarchi died in his prime and after my father's death.

I count two or three writers among my best friends, friends who have been dear to me for decades, yet I am not certain that I could do for one of them what Israel Zarchi did for my father.

This story provides an example of someone who actually did the right thing, quietly, privately and in a way which indeed had discernible and measurable results.

It didn't take a great effort at all, rather just a few dollars, but an incredible amount of thoughtfulness.

Tonight is the night we should be ready to open ourselves as honestly and as courageously as did Andrew Leheny in his valentine's day epistle.

And it is the night when we should resolve not to ignore opportunities when even small acts can make a huge difference, following the example of Israel Zarchi so many years ago.

Let us follow this advice from Henry David Thoreau:

"Make the most of your regrets;

never smother your sorrow,

but tend and cherish it till it comes to have a separate and integral interest.

To regret deeply is to live afresh."

Instead of allowing past decisions to become a source of lament, let us examine them, honor them and

tonight resolve through atonement to transform them into sources of inspiration of menschlichkeit.

And then we will not only receive, but also actually become

Honorable Menschen!