

My friends, I want to begin this first sermon of 5778 with our traditional new year greeting: *L'shanah tovah u'metukah tikateivu*—may we all be written in the Book of Life for a good and sweet year.

Seventeen years ago, a sportswriter by the name of Mitch Albom wrote a small book that captured the heart of our nation. *Tuesdays With Morrie* told the tale of how Albom had reached out to his sociology professor from sixteen years earlier, a professor by the name of Morris Schwartz, *alav hashalom*. Morrie was dying of ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, perhaps better known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. They met on fourteen Tuesdays, during which Albom learned more from his old professor than he ever had in a classroom. He learned how to live, and he learned how to die.

I would be surprised if the majority of us have not only read the book, but still remember its powerful impact on us. I know I do. I remember it now with special acuity, because like Albom, I have a friend who is coming to the end of his battle with ALS. Like Gehrig, his name is Lou, and that is what I call him, but his beloved wife calls him Louie. From that nickname comes the title of this sermon, *Sundays With Louie*.

It occurs to me that my friend, Lou Mervis, is comparable to Lou Gehrig, who was known as the Iron Horse. Gehrig was one of the all time greats, and is enshrined in baseball's Hall of Fame. If there was a Hall of Fame for self-made men, Lou Mervis would be in it. If there was a Hall of Fame for philanthropy, Lou and Sybil Mervis would be in it. If there was a Hall of Fame for supporting Jewish causes, Lou and Sybil would be in it. I loved Lou almost from the moment I met him, but I can tell you that Lou would not want me to devote my talk to his accomplishments in life, and I won't, although I won't ignore them either. But instead I will focus on conversations I shared with Lou on a couple of special Sundays, very special Sundays with Louie.

Please be clear that this is no eulogy. As I write this, Lou is still with us. But this year, I know I will be emotional when we read "who shall live and who shall die," because next Rosh HaShanah, Lou will not be with us.

To fully appreciate my Sundays with Louie, you have to know something about him. He was born into a family with a small scrap iron business. He took over that business in 1958, and he turned it into a multinational empire. Ironically, this

proud and committed Jewish man was once the President of the Illinois chapter of the Institute of Scrap Iron and Steel—ISIS. Obviously, this was decades before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the ISIS that now seeks to destroy Israel and America.

Lou and Sybil are devoted to Jewish community, and generous in supporting Jewish institutions. I could go on at length detailing what they have done over the years, but it is not the point of this sermon. I will tell you that if you do not know Lou but would like to get to know him, after the holidays and Shabbat go to my Facebook page, where there are some videos with Lou and Sybil. Now, I will move on to the heart of this talk.

Lou was a physically strong man. It was heartbreaking to see the affects of ALS on his powerful body. But Lou showed me, through our conversations on those two Sundays, that ALS could only affect his spirit if he chose to let it. He did not. He refused. He knows his body cannot defeat ALS; no one's can. But I will always remember the courage and positive attitude that Lou maintains to this very day.

The other Lou I mentioned, Lou Gehrig, is famous not only for his baseball prowess, but for a speech he gave at Yankee Stadium after being diagnosed with ALS. Standing before a

packed house on Independence Day of 1939, he spoke these famous words: “Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

I do not mean to diminish Gehrig’s courage in any way tonight, but after my Sundays with our Lou, I cannot help but notice that Lou Gehrig spoke those famous words *standing* at home plate in Yankee Stadium. Although our Lou and I enjoyed a great many conversations over the years, my Sundays with Lou came when ALS had taken away his ability to walk or even stand. He is confined to a wheelchair. Know that, and listen to what I took away from my Sundays with Lou, gifts of the spirit that I offer you tonight.

First, Lou had every right to be bitter and angry. He had been a good and generous man, a religious man, and there was nothing fair about his disease. Disease comes from nature, not from God, and nature makes no distinction between good and evil, charitable people or miserly people, those who make the world better and those who make it worse. Yet, as I know from his beloved Sybil, from the time he was diagnosed, there was never any anger in him, no bitterness, no sense that he deserved

better, although he does deserve much better. Yet Lou accepted his situation with strength and grace.

Lou isn't even angry with God. I would not blame him if he was. I've always said that only religious people get angry at God, and Lou is a religious man. How is it a religious thing to get angry at God? How many times have you been angry at the Tooth Fairy? I do not know if Lou's lack of anger comes from a belief like my own, that disease does not come from God, or if he believes it does come from God but he just accepts it. Either way, the absence of such anger is something I find deeply moving.

Next, it moved me to tears to listen to Lou talk about how blessed he was, how fortunate he was. Here was a man who had been larger than life, physically powerful, and now simply talking took a major effort for him. I would lean in and put my ear close to his mouth to hear him better, and as he spoke about being so blessed, I had to wonder if I could be so strong and courageous as he is. I have to admit, I doubt it. Lou Gehrig talked about how lucky he was when he could still stand. Lou Mervis talks about how lucky he is when he can speak only with great effort.

Third, Judaism continues to be important to Lou. We had a little Jewish ceremony one Sunday, a sort of pre-Bar Mitzvah for his grandson, Solly, and it meant the world to Lou. Lou lived his life as a committed Jew, and when he does pass on to the next world, he will do so as a committed Jew.

I am not ashamed to tell you that I love Lou Mervis, and I was not ashamed to tell him, either. I told him I loved him, and that when I talked to him, I felt connected to my own father, *alav hashalom*.

Finally, I will share some of Lou's own words with you, words that I hope you will always carry with you.

“I think if you really have to put an effort out to be Jewish, I think it makes you appreciate it more.” He went on to say, “... that's one of the things we've tried to teach our children, that if Judaism is going to continue, they have to be involved, and they have to be forthcoming with financial support.” He is so right. I could not agree more. But the statement that really touched my heart, one that I will never forget, was when during an interview, Sybil said that life in a small Jewish community is “...lonely. You think so too, don't you, Louie?” And Lou replied, “Well, I've got you, so I'm not lonely.”

My friends, no one has a perfect life. Life is not fair to anyone 100% of the time. So as we begin 5778, let us do our best to carry with us the lessons from my Sundays with Louie into the new year. May we do our best to avoid anger and bitterness at the unfairness that life includes. May we do our best to face adversity with all the strength and grace we can muster. May we focus on the ways in which we are fortunate and blessed. May we do our best to be committed Jews by being involved and by being forthcoming with financial support to whatever extent we can. Never miss an opportunity to tell someone that you love him or her, and if you have a relationship that needs healing, remember that this is our season of forgiveness. Heal the relationship now, because none of us are guaranteed a tomorrow. And may we never forget that we need not feel isolated, we need not feel that Jewish life in Carmel is lonely, because like Lou and Sybil, we have each other.

Will I ever see my friend Lou again? I hope so, but I cannot help but think of what Tevye's daughter Hodel said to her father in Fiddler On The Roof as she left for Siberia: "God only knows when we will see each other again." I must satisfy myself with Tevye's response: "Then we will leave it in His hands."