

The Clock Shop Sage

By Rabbi Steven M Leapman

I

Salve Time's sting amidst instruction and risk a lesson dimmed
A state of affairs my mentor would not endure
You see, my father was a watchmaker, a trade school graduate success story
Made prosperous by the GI Bill's generosity as Korea's aftermath and worthy cast
Returned to safe democratic shores, secure despite China or Stalin's rage

Come December he was carried off, each Chanukah season's absentia,
Snatched high away by the talons of retail's American eagle in mercantile ascent
Held tight and tedious those long hours by the whims and wiles
Of owning a business blind to Jewish time
Early the next morning as ended Thanksgiving's abundant fare

My father, partially concealed by dawn's early light, did as would many dutiful men
Raise a garage door and depart to serve and sell in the year's dark twelfth month
When Light is sought and whether electrical or inspired we celebrate so as to guarantee
Income and a way of life for which his immigrant parents risked an ocean's roar
And an earlier America's accusations, on behalf of all unborn's better future

Out onto PA Rt. 30 then westward holding to 283 W. aboard his Olds '98
At 70 mph and more Dad's daily reenactment amidst hurried ruminations
Of our Lithuanian ancestors peddlers' path, though adjusted to the days he knew
Adorned and delivered in a mid 70's metal cloak of four-door, 8-track sound prowess
While snow fell and ice formed as cash registers rung and customers shopped

A mother and son of the upper middle-class and a merchant's fond, unspoken affections
Were necessarily abandoned celebrants and audience of a father-absent Festival of Lights
A proprietor and throughout all Decembers' delirium so sadly less prevalent as a parent
Whose presence became a nightly telephone line's contingency
While son and spouse kindled light and recited liturgies in a glow suburban and solitude

II

We reclined every Passover to be ready for prophetic redemption
He reclined after Thanksgiving's rich repast to rest for an arduous retail season

One winter vacation's late afternoon at his hours' drenched store,
During my insensitive high school days, while packing up Santa displays
And piling wreaths which never hung in our home
Came forth this son's decree, shallowly seeing myself a latter-day Maccabee
Now freed of an anxious mercantile legacy
My sureties soon to strike at and shove aside an industrious father's loving intent

I cringe as adulthood's unforgiving reflections rewind to a son's needless distinction
"You don't need to keep this business for me!"

Smug certainty dismissing the fragile epicenter whereupon fell
My father's duties, the sales-driven bastion of his dignity
Failing to secure validation before a boy well shy even two decades on this earth
Amidst adolescent arrogance when imprudent passions, if given tongue
All too shrill and surely proclaim, a secession from all things paternal

Yet too much a child to discern how earnestly fathers wish to vouchsafe, not separate
And pass onward a man's practiced craft into welcoming hands, strong to embrace
A previous generation's priorities, and maybe too, a profession it may come to impart
A gender lame with words hoped to find in shared skills and hours together,
The communion of deeds wherein identities and unannounced anguishes
Are remedied by proximity, not emotions' eruption when well-styled words burst out,
And leave their audience mute if dazzled

III

A seasoned merchant shall wisely display and array timely attractions
For far beyond making a living, it is virtue and vendor's skill to know one's customers
This too is an Art whose studio is shop, stall, and aisle
Availability of proprietor and product are to commerce and client as free will to the soul
These are skills books will not impart and as dawns this insight and understanding,
So too one family's Willy Loman grows forgiven as consciousness and compassion
Quicken and become the daily felt substance, indeed the penance, of all those tuitions

I ponder the sentences he couldn't form, those sentiments remain concealed
Appeals and acclamations though somehow never spoken, went better heard
Amidst the shoppers and trade well attended, while a son stood by illiterate,
So poorly attuned, to the vocabulary of the marketplace, an occlusion of the heart
Slowly pushed open as decades pass once death has come and taken my Dad away

And I now watch my young boy's eyes stare at me and scrutinize,
My own gestures of legitimacy and stumbling linguistics of affirmation
As I recall a clock shop's unappreciated soul, what will my offspring pass me by?