



Cantor Allen Leider  
Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778  
The Cab Ride

The following is a true story about a cab driver named Kent Nerburn.

When I was still driving a cab back in my younger days, I always enjoyed the graveyard shift. It's not that I loved driving around late at night, though I did enjoy the lighter traffic, if there is such a thing in New York City, and I also enjoyed the way in which passengers were more laid back. In fact, many customers, because they were traveling anonymously, would enjoy telling me stories about their lives. Some stories are so-so while some are pretty inspiring. However, one passenger's story stuck in my mind for the past twenty years and I can still recall vividly the exact conversation that I had with that woman.

It was a cold November night around midnight when I was called to pick up someone in one of the remote parts of the city. Initially, I thought that I was about to pick up someone who would be heading out to an early work shift, or perhaps a drunk party goer unable to pick himself up.

When I arrived at the given location, it was far from what I had expected. The place looked a lot like an abandoned building. The only room with lights on was at the farthest end of the building. Now I know a lot of fellow drivers who would honk once or twice, wait a minute and then drive off. After all, anyone alone in an unfamiliar place could be vulnerable to a lot of trouble. I nearly did the same, but on this night I said a little prayer. I do that sometimes to try to get past any negativity - my prejudice or gut reaction. I paused for a brief moment and said, "Open my eyes to truth." Yeah, that was it. No big convoluted prayers for me. I felt the stillness of the moment and decided to knock at the door to call out the passenger. "They may need my assistance," I thought to myself as I left my cab.

I knocked at the door. "Just a moment," said a weak and elderly voice.

After what seems to be an eternity, but actually only a few seconds long, the door opened revealing an old lady about 5'4 in height and is wearing a very old-fashioned dress.

“Evening madam.” The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters.

I greeted her as I started to help her with her belongings – a single box in the corner of the room. She asked me to give her a minute before we left and she looks around her place with a sad face. It almost seemed as if she was memorizing every corner of the room.

Finally, she asked me to help her get to the cab as she is having trouble walking alone. Not really feeling like carrying the box and taking responsibility for walking this frail woman, I breathe deeply and think to myself, “Open my hands to give freely.” I pick up the box and walk the woman slowly to the car. The cold wind made her quiver as we approached the car.

When she finally settled in, she gave me an address and asked me to take the route through downtown.

“I know a much quicker way,” I told her in an attempt to be nicer to her and save her some cash. However, her response made me realize that she was not really concerned about reaching her destination immediately.

“I am going to a nursing home,” she said in a frail voice. “I can no longer live at home on my own. The doctors told me that I will receive the care that I need there, although if you ask me, I won’t be around for too much longer.”

Struck by the simplicity and directness of her words, I looked inwards again – “Open my lips to good words, pure words, open my heart to love.” I looked at the woman, turned off the meter, and told her that we could take any route she wanted.

Apparently, the lady knew the place very well. It was almost as if she was my tour guide. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they had first been

married. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a teenaged girl. Sometimes she would have me slow in front of a particular building or corner and she would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As I looked at her in the rearview mirror, I could see tears forming into her eyes but she was unwilling to let go. It felt like her whole life was being experienced once again - the sweet and bitter memories altogether. I am deeply moved by the experience and reflect on what I'm learning from my experience with her. I think to myself, "Every day, (shake head) – every hour, (shake head) – every moment – open my heart."

At the first sign of dawn, she tapped me at the back and gently nodded to indicate that we could now go. I walked her up to the entrance of the nursing home. She was greeted by two friendly employees and was assisted gently onto a wheelchair.

"How much is my bill?" she asked.

"It's on me," I told her.

"No, I insist."

That moment, I felt a shivering cold down my spine and I am quite sure that it was not because of the weather. As if my body moved without me thinking, I bent over, reached out to her and gently gave her a warm embrace. I could feel her fragile body shake as she sobbed quietly. She held onto me tightly like a little child who doesn't want to let go. I didn't notice that I was also crying, and I didn't even know exactly why. She was a complete stranger yet I could feel her pain so closely in my heart.

"You made an old woman happy for the last time," she whispered. "Thank you."

As I get back to my cab, I could hear the front doors of the nursing home closing, indicating the closing, not just of a facility, but of a well-lived life.

This got me thinking, a moment so simple and profound as this would not have been possible had I honked once and went away. My eyes, my hands, my lips and my heart were all open – what a difference that can make. Great moments in life are truly unexpected when they hit us.

When that old woman embraced me, thanked me and told me that I made her happy, I felt a sense of fulfilment that I almost believed, that I was here for that sole reason.

We may not all live holy lives, but we do live in a world alive with the potential for many holy moments. The world only requires of us to be open to them. May this be so for each of us in this New Year. Kein y'hi ratzon – may this be God's will.

Kol Machar choir sings Julie Silver's "Open My Eyes to Truth"