

Truck Turner's Shul

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And when the cloud rose from over the tabernacle the children of Israel went onward in their journeys; but if the cloud were not taken up they would not travel until the day that it rose up. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.

— EXODUS 40:36-38

My grandfather was a master *darshan*. He learned his trade in Europe, followed his heart to 1920's Palestine and slipped into this country in the 1930's, starved and tubercular. A small man with erect carriage and old world dignity, he never found his audience here. He took a series of small pulpits, where the congregants demanded and yet derided the cultural anomaly of their European rabbis.

Darshanut — it doesn't translate well. Homiletics implies fanciful dumbing down to the layman's level. But *darshanut* was not a simpleton's learning. It was high art. The *darshan* knew text and language and twisted them to startling clarity. He knew grammar well enough but rode roughshod over it in the service of a higher meaning. The *darshan* always believed that his interpretation was in fact the true meaning, the very *pshat* [plain meaning] of the text. How could it mean anything else? Surely the text was not simply about the narrative line. The *darshan* started with the conventional reading of the week but soon slid from the quotidian to the sublime, soaring to other times and worlds and only regretfully returning to gritty soil when it was time to daven once more. Afterwards, his listeners, begrudgingly beguiled, would shuffle away to their weeks with a fill of transcendence to last until the next Shabbat's *drashah* [sermon].

We moved to Memphis a bit over a year after my eldest sister died. *Shinnui makom, shinnui mazal* — a change in locale is a change in luck —

was the putative drive behind our transplantation from a dead beach town on the Jersey shore to Memphis, Tennessee. My father, a rabbi like his father, assumed a new pulpit here. Once we settled in Memphis, however, it wasn't easy to see that our luck had changed. We lived in the wrong neighborhood. We were in midtown; the Jews were in East Memphis, ten miles away.

When you live on the wrong side of town you develop a very strong sense of "life is elsewhere." There wasn't much for us in the midtown neighborhood. Most of the Jewish community had moved out East; including the other shuls, the Jewish day school, Jewish community center, and all the families with kids. The only ones left were old couples that didn't have the resources to move out; those whose real estate had been devalued by the public housing project built by a shul member down the block from the shul. Friends, girls, sports, even spirituality were all out East. The former rabbi had packed his things, bought a house in East Memphis and opened up a men's clothing store.

There was nothing in midtown except the shul. It was colossal. A white marble rectangle, built for perpetuity, the shul squatted on its hill occupying a square block. Everything within it was similarly stolid and massive: granite columns, maroon velvet carpets, and theater seating to accommodate two thousand worshippers. There were stained glass windows and oil portraits of the shul presidents going back to the last century. This was the largest Orthodox synagogue in North America.

But the congregation wasn't ready to move. My father waged a long, bitter battle with the shul board. We heard snippets of it at home. Sometimes he appealed to common sense — there were few congregants here so why should the shul be here? Sometimes he appealed to their emotions — why should my kids live here with no friends?

Even as they debated, progress crept on. The congregation bought a trailer, parked it on a corner out East, and began holding ancillary services there. We would stay at a Holiday Inn once a month and my father would officiate in the trailer. Then came the breakthrough: Truck Turner's house was up for sale and it needed to be sold hastily. I never did learn how such a momentous decision was made so quickly, but the shul bought it. Maybe the resistance was tiring; maybe shul officials saw the folly of entrenchment in a 'changed' neighborhood. Or maybe it was the magic of Truck's estate: perhaps they too had driven by slowly and glanced past the guardhouse at

the foot of the hills, through the tangle of trees. Maybe they had seen the gold-plated Cadillac glide by, windows tinted and occupants emerging from an inaccessible world.

Truck Turner had grown up dirt-poor, the grandson of sharecroppers. He left school at age eleven to pick cotton. But he had made it, commercially and critically, with Grammy awards as well as gold records. Stax Records, the company with whom he recorded, was creating and defining Memphis soul. Truck was a composer, recording artist, and an actor but more so he was an image: Thick chains cross-wrapped on a deep muscular chest and abdomen, the glistening of his waxed bald pate. He was the picture of black empowerment, the reversal of the chains of slavery into ornamentation and symbols of strength. He bought an estate in East Memphis, the lily-white suburb. There was great irony and justice here: the grandest, most secreted estate in the very suburb built for white flight, belonged to a black man. The house was hidden up a winding driveway, shielded from view by Japanese gardens and protected by a guardhouse at the foot of the hill. The estate's inhabitants were invisible except when a car ventured out. Truck's cars collection was legendary. The crown jewel was the Eldorado with goggle-eyed headlights, gold plated bumpers and grille, and a padded leather roof.

Truck had a break with Stax, which soon went bankrupt, as did he. Truck needed cash. A retired scrap metal man bought the Eldorado and began driving it to shul to say Kaddish. I lingered in the parking lot, furtively running my fingers along the leather roofline — leather on the exterior! My father came home one day with the incredible announcement — the shul had bought Truck's estate. We went for a visit the day after the shul closed the purchase. The house was empty though not devoid of evidence of its prior occupants. Downstairs in one of the kids' rooms I found a movie poster of Truck, in his famous pose — shaved head, fierce sneer of confidence and bare-chested except for the glistening chains crisscrossing his chest. Soon the house was cleaned up, shorn of its prior occupants' residuals. It didn't need much renovation to work as a shul. The cathedral-ceiling living room could easily hold 100 or more folding chairs, with the aron [ark] situated in front of the fireplace flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows looking into the woods. The kitchen had industrial-sized refrigerators and the foyer was large enough to hold a kiddush.

The shul closed the trailer and began holding Shabbat services in Truck's house. We continued to go out East once a month though we no longer stayed at the Holiday Inn. We slept in Truck's house on those Shabbat nights on cots set out in the nooks and turns of the master bedroom suite. We ate around a folding table with chairs borrowed from the shul.

In midtown, back in the main shul, the cantor with his scratchy drone labored on. Out East it was just us, cantor-less, singing freely among the treetops. And here in the empty living room, surrounded by tree-filled windows, I imagined that dreams come true. It didn't matter that come sunset we were going back to our house; that every other time we returned from a night away we would find our house had been broken into; that nobody lived near us and we had no friends; that Truck's family had been forced to sell this magical castle and was exiled in Atlanta. For the moment we were in the promised land. We were without home and furnishings, possession-less and unburdened.

One Shabbat in early spring, in Truck's shul, my father repeated a drashah that he had heard from his father. It started with a question: the *pasuk* [biblical verse] tells us that "the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day.....throughout all their journeys." Now a straightforward reading of this passage from Exodus 40 is that it reiterates how the Children of Israel traveled and camped when the Lord indicated, by taking up the cloud when it was time to move on and resting the cloud when it was time to set up camp. The darshan, however, with the thrilling liberty to splice a *pasuk* any which way, sees a complexity in "throughout all their journeys:" Wasn't this precisely the time when the cloud was not on the tabernacle, that is, when they were journeying? Wasn't this the time when the cloud was taken up, floating, and no longer upon them? Why does it say, "The cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle...throughout all their journeys"? Should it not have said, "The cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day throughout all their encampments?"

B'khol masseihem — throughout their journeys: Yes, the cloud was upon them when they decamped, but the *pasuk* is calling these encampments "journeys." For indeed all your encampments are simply rest stops. When you think you are settled that is precisely when the pillar of cloud rises and indicates, Go! Travel on! To wherever I lead you. If you think you have roots, then the Lord deems you must move on. For your roots are not in any country, state, county, or house. Your roots are not in any soil — they are in

heaven. You are rooted to the ethereal, the heavenly, and the transcendent. "Ye are strangers and sojourners with Me," saith the Lord, therefore you are free and unencumbered.

And the words floated to me and lifted me to the heavens, levitating in hope and potential.

And the cloud moved on. I left Memphis when I was seventeen, returned for a few years in my mid-twenties, and then left for good. Truck's house is gone, the hills flattened, the pool filled, the gardens uprooted and the brook dry, all replaced by a development of proud McMansions built by former shul presidents. If you look to the right on the main street where Truck's driveway once wound, there is a small bamboo grove growing, a refugee from the Japanese garden. And the clouds still hover, glide, and dip, yanked by the winds, as if a hand were pulling on unseen strings.



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