

## Parshat Miketz Aron Kodesh Dedication, December 16, 2017, by Robert Minkus

First of all, and **above all**, I want to thank Jacob Shapiro for conceiving of, designing, and building this beautiful Aron Kodesh. We all owe him an enormous debt of gratitude

In today's Parsha, we continue the remarkable story of Joseph, who is displaced from his family, disappears for many years, only to reappear, totally unexpectedly, and prove to be the salvation of that very same family. At the dramatic conclusion to the story, when he reveals himself to his brothers, Joseph says:

“God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives....”  
Or to put, another way, “de Lord, he works in mysterious ways...”

So it is with the story I will tell you today, how it happened that a new Aron appeared in a little shul in Skokie, Illinois. The Aron that you see behind me is dedicated to my father, Marvin Minkus and my uncle, Wilfred Minkus.

First a few words about my dad. He was, to put it simply, just a great guy. Everybody liked my dad, and I am certain he never had an enemy. He was unceasingly devoted to my mother, who was not the easiest person to please, and he was the most wonderful father. I will leave you with just one perfect example. My father loved to buy new cars, and bought a new one every two years. He invariably bought an Oldsmobile 98, which was appropriately large and impressive, but did not give off the haughty cachet of a Cadillac. But, the fall before my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, when I would get my driver's license, he bought something different, completely with me in mind. I will share a photo with you.



He made me the coolest kid in the neighborhood.

The Aron was funded by our Family Charitable Trust, and therein lies a story, a fascinating, but, unspeakably sad, story, one with lessons for us all. The story has to do with my uncle Wilfred, my dad's younger brother. Wilfred was a brilliant man, with a PhD in engineering from Stanford. He spent most of his life working as a civilian contractor to the US Navy in Philadelphia, for he was one of the world's leading experts in underground sonar. But—Wilfred

was a very strange man. He was extremely socially awkward, and, consequently, had little social experience. So—I have few consequential memories of him. At my grandmother’s (that is, his mother’s) 90th birthday party, we were served salmon with the usual half-lemon wrapped in cheesecloth. Wilfred started to cut the lemon with a knife to eat it—he had never seen that before. My dad had to explain to him what the lemon was for. For my bar mitzvah, he gave me a slide rule---I still have it. Most of you probably don’t even know that that is.

As far as I know, Wilfred never had a friend, male or female, his entire life. Today, we would say that Wilfred was on the autism spectrum, but, back then, we just considered him strange. Wilfred had one peculiarity that we all knew about: he was astoundingly cheap. I mean, astoundingly. He would not fly in to Chicago unless my dad bought him a ticket, so he almost never came. If he needed a new pair of socks, he would call my dad and have him send him a pair from our family department store. So-my dad would always joke that he must have a fortune hidden in his house. Not quite. But it turned out that Wilfred had another peculiarity that we did NOT know about. He was a hoarder. I guess the thought of throwing anything out, something that conceivably might be worth even a penny, was intolerable to him. I had not even spoken a word to Wilfred in, probably, 15 years, so I was more than a little surprised when I got a phone call saying he needed to talk to me about something important, and could I come to Philadelphia. So I did.

Then, I heard a terrible, heartbreaking story. Wilfred’s home, a small bungalow in a nice suburb of Philadelphia, had been condemned. Neighbors had complained enough that health inspectors visited, and found the house filled with every conceivable kind of junk and garbage. He never even threw out an ice cream carton. I saw the photos—it was truly shocking. Wilfred was moved out to an assisted living facility, which is where I met him. How sad, how pathetic he looked. Besides all else, he was ill. His lifelong pulmonary disease was rapidly worsening. Wilfred told me that he had summoned me to Philadelphia because he wanted me to be his power of attorney, for both health and financial affairs. Why me???---I hardly knew him, and had seen him maybe 3-4 times in the past 40 years. Why me????—because he had nobody else. Nobody else. How terribly sad.

I agreed of course, and we drew up the appropriate papers (I had to pay the attorney). So---I asked Wilfred where his financial documents and records were, and he told me they were in three file cabinets in the basement of the assisted living facility. I spoke to the administrator, and she agreed to send me all the contents of his files. About a month later, a truck pulled up and unloaded a slew of large cartons at my front door, and I began sorting through the records. This was a daunting task, for (surprise!), Wilfred never threw out a single sheet of paper. Every statement, from every bank account, every stock, every mutual fund, from the previous forty years or so, was still there. It took me three months, using every spare moment, to sort it all out. I had piles of papers all over our house, but when I was all done, I added it all up: Wilfred was worth millions of dollars—many millions.

My dad was correct beyond his wildest imagination. Wilfred, who never spent a penny of his income, was great at saving and investing it. He was the poster child for the buy and hold

investing philosophy. Not once, in all those records, was there a single withdrawal or sale of anything. Shortly after that, I visited Wilfred again in Philadelphia. I asked him how much money he thought he had. He had no idea; he had simply hoarded money like everything else. When I pressed him for an answer, he said he guessed maybe it was getting close to a million dollars. When I told him the truth, he was incredulous, but he did not really care, as he would never have any interest in spending even a penny of that money. Sadly, shortly after that visit, Wilfred got much sicker, entered the hospital, and died.

So—now I had the responsibility of dispersing all that money. It will not surprise you to hear that Wilfred had no will, for to have a meaningful will requires an attorney, and that requires paying an attorney. It was up to me. I did know one thing: my father had once told me that Wilfred had mentioned that he wanted to give part of his money away to Jewish causes when he died. So, honoring Wilfred's wishes, I distributed some of the money to his nieces and nephews, and with the rest, I established the Wilfred Minkus Memorial Charitable Trust, which distributes money annually to Jewish causes, including the money for this beautiful Aron behind me.

This is a monument to Wilfred. I would like to think he would be pleased.

A few weeks ago, I took Matan and Meira to see the movie "Wonder." I am probably the only human alive who had never even heard of the book, but the story, as most of you undoubtedly know, is about a boy with facial deformities and his struggle to be accepted by other children. Afterwards, I thought, not about the movie, but about Wilfred, who must have struggled his whole life to connect to people, not because of a physical disability, but a social one. How sad he must have been, how totally isolated.

And how bad I felt—everyone in our family just wrote him off as the weird uncle, and none of us made any attempt to reach out and soften that terrible life he had. So—I guess that is the lesson I spoke of. It is so easy to be nice to people just like us, but they are not the ones who most need our kindness, our attention, our caring. You want to be a good Jew? ---be a good person.

**I love this quote, from Rabbi Beryl Wein: "The palace of Torah is entered through the garden of goodness."**

Every time we go to any large affair, Carol, my wonderful wife, will invariably look around the room, find a person who is standing by herself, and go up to her and start talking to her. Often, it is someone she does not even know. But—it is someone who is alone, and Carol cannot bear that. We can all learn from that precious example, and we can all resolve to reach out to those lonely, awkward people around us. It will not only brighten their lives, it will brighten ours.

Thank you, Wilfred.....I so wish I had made the effort to know you better.

Shabbat shalom.