

Speech to the Camp Counselors Just Before the Kids Arrive

I knew some of you in your cribs
when all you could do to entertain yourselves
was stare at a plastic mobile
hanging over your heads in the crib.
I watched some of you play with rattles.
This was before you could say three words.
I used to push some of your strollers to synagogue
as your parents walked beside me teaching me sweet Torah.

Now this camp is yours.
The campers are due to arrive in a few hours,
and if,
in a year,
some wear their Tallis with greater ease,
in five, send you copies of their grades in Hebrew
and flyers from their food drives,
in twenty, send pictures of their children
tasting the lick of honey from their Alef-Bet books,
stand at your bedside in your illness,
stroking your arm gently,
it is you-in-them at work.

You are every teacher's dream class:
in commitment, unsurpassed,
craving — far ahead of me at your age —
a world of Menschen, of Menschlich acts,
of Yiddishkeit flourishing and luxuriant
as the most productive field of grain, once sand,
any farmer in the Negev ever dreamed of.
I wish you had been my counsellors when I was eight.

I conclude with a photograph:
This is my father, screwdriver still in hand,
and this, the moment of illumination:
At the very instant the picture was taken,
he had just removed the training wheels from my bike,
set me on the seat,
and gave me that cosmic, parental push
we all remember.
In the picture (as you can see),
he has followed me the first few feet,
then stepped back.
Frozen in time in black and white,

you can see his hand still six inches from my shoulder.
This is my father.
This is you.