



NUMBER OUR DAYS, SIMULATED CORRESPONDENCE

Name

Course

Date



Dear Fellow Student,

| Needle and Thread: The Life and Death of a Tailor

I find the chapter fascinating in its description of the way a coat was introduced among the poor Jews in world where the coat was a preserve of the mighty and the rich in the society. I like the description of faith and religion as the author brings this out in the story in the forest where believers would light a fire by praying. The story develops into a description of the beliefs, culture, religion, and rituals among the Jews in Venice ¹.

An interesting point arises in the section where Shmuel juxtaposes the synagogue and the Catholic Church together with the homes of the poor Jews in a crowded village. The church stood towering above the synagogue and the homes of the poor Jews as if reminding them of their poverty. It was the tallest structure that the people knew about, but that was until one entered the synagogue. As described by Shmuel, the synagogue was better from inside than from outside. The builders had dug deep into the ground making the synagogue look better, taller, and more magnificent from inside. The bigger picture reflects on the way the people should judge a situation and in the case of religion, one should be clean from the inside and not cleaning the outside while the inside is

¹Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*. (Touchstone Books. NewYork, 1978), 40-78

murky. I find this to be a scenario describing a case of conflict between traditions and innovation ².

In the same chapter, Shmuel expressed his discontentment with modern day graduation ceremonies. Barbara defended this by stating that the graduation ceremonies were a time for the grandaunts to celebrate their success journey. Barbara also questioned Shmuel about the perception on the Jewish ritual practices where he described the way Abraham in the Bible was set to offer her son as a sacrifice. The ritual continued over time and Barbara wondered why one would offer human sacrifice ³.

| We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page

In this chapter, the author scholarly described the day-to-day lives of the Jews in the senior citizens. The chapter demonstrates the development of a 'graduation-siyum'. This is a graduation ceremony that combines the Jewish Siyum with a modern American graduation ceremony. The ceremony took place to celebrate the completion of studies in Yiddish history. The ceremony assists a student in anthropology in understanding the importance of rituals of rituals to the Jews as well as their beliefs with regard to important rituals ⁴.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 79-112.



I like the way Barbara describes the learning process amongst the Jews. It also describes the reception of various rituals among the Jews and the importance of those rituals. The chapter also describes the hardships that the aged go through as they are segregated from their families and the community. The reason why Barbara reflects on this is because of what she had experienced with her old grandmother with whom she had grown ⁵.

| **For an Educated Man, He Could Learn a Few Things**

I like the way the author described the norms and cultural constructions amongst the Jews. Views on prides and respect take the center stage in this well organized chapter. Barbara described the way lack of cooperation amongst the people in any given society can cause problems as she brings Kominsky's business into the picture ⁶.

As stated by the author, Kominsky meant good for the Jews and he wanted them to progress. However, he lacked enough understanding of the people with whom he worked. Kominsky hated pride and did not see any importance in being proud. However, the people in the center saw him as a proud person mainly because he would not listen when the

⁵ Ibid., 79-112.

⁶ Ibid., 113-152.

people talked to him. Kominsky worked towards changing the center, but worked single handedly instead of cooperating with the people and work towards merging the old ways with the new ways. This explains the conflict between Kominsky's business practices and the beliefs of the Jews at the center ⁷.

This chapter brings out the differences and similarities between Shmuel and Kominsky. The Jews seemed to hate Shmuel since he was the most educated during his time. As such he did not receive many friends in his house due to his perspective of life and judgmental nature. On the other hand, Kominsky angered people not because he was educated, but because he never listened to people as he pursued his dream to positively change the center. As such those around him thought him as a proud person ⁸.

| We Fight to Keep Warm

In this chapter, the author describes the different ways in which people relate to anger, aggression, and fighting. I find the chapter as a good reflection of the dislike I have of people shouting or hurling insults to each other as they express their anger and as an expression of their conflict. One of the key points that I borrow from the chapter is a point put across

⁷ Ibid., 113-152.

⁸ Ibid., 113-152.



by Dr. Cohen where he stated, "Every one of us is a valuable, unique individual, whose opinion is worth hearing, for its own sake, the son of a rabbi or the son of a butcher ⁹.

In the chapter, Barbara Myerhoff expressed the importance of conflict resolution through mediation. This took place when Sadie and Anna entered into a quarrel, which resulted to the calling insulting each other. Other people in the center took sides and instead of trying to find a solution to the problem they made the conflict more intense. It was at this point that a psychologist was invited to mediate. However, the old people continued to shout at each other during the mediation. The chapter has a happy ending ¹⁰.

| Teach Us to Number Our Days

In this chapter, Barbara Myerhoff borrows a psalm from the Bible, where it says, "So teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom". Barbara uses the chapter to reveal to us the way the old people desired to live longer and thus they spent their time telling stories. Barbara states that just like her grandmother and the old people at the senior citizens center, everybody was a story teller. The old people told stories to avert the thoughts of their nearing death. Barbara also talked

⁹ Ibid., 153-194.

¹⁰ Ibid., 153-194.



about Jacob Koved stating that he died a good death ¹¹.

I found myself asking whether there is anything called a good death. The story of Jacob Koved opened my eyes to view cultures in a different way from what I assumed before I read the chapter. One of the reasons that Barbara gave to substantiate her argument was that Jacob Koved was able to celebrate his birthday on a Sunday, and he always did it individually on the same day. Secondly, Jacob was highly held in the society and people respected him. He was educated and was able to control and manage his life to the time he made his final speech. He left a legacy as a person who had managed to fulfill his dreams and even left enough treasure for those he left behind to enjoy the Passover after his death. Barbara shared in the belief of the old people in the center who had the view that Jacob Koved died a good death ¹².

| Jewish Comes Up in You from the Roots

I love the straightforward setting of this chapter and more specifically the way the title has been put forth. It simply means that the cultural values, beliefs, and religious inclinations exhibited by the old Jews in the senior citizens center were injected into their lives since they were children. This describes the reason why senior citizens still believed in the Jewish Angel

¹¹ Ibid., 195-231.

¹² Ibid., 195-231.



of Death. However, this belief was more prominent with the old women who unlike the old men just believed in those words without arguing. The chapter also describes the process the perception of the domestic religion among the Jews through the dishwashing analogy, which reveals a young religion failing to wipe the dishes at her young age due to lack of understanding, but later she becomes proud of the duties. This describes the process through which the women among the Jews learnt about religion. One thing that I do not understand from the chapter is the reason as to why the reception of Jewish domestic religion would differ from one sex to the other ¹³.

In the same chapter, the author describes the process that led to Basha into leaving her home into a nursing home. This was Basha's own resolution and it was against the will of her children. Her friends had also advised her against taking that decision. The essence of this on the chapter is to reveal the meaning of old age in a society where old people were segregated. It revealed a state of fear of leaving the world as well as a desire to live longer ¹⁴.

| Epilogue and Afterword

In the afterword section of the book "Number our Days", Barbara

¹³ Ibid., 232-268.

¹⁴ Ibid., 232-268.

Myerhoff concludes by stating that we are all *human narrans*, which means we are storytelling humankind. This conclusion came after an extensive research through involvement with the old people in the center for senior citizens in Venice LA. Barbara was furthering what she had observed with her own grandmother with whom she had grown ¹⁵.

I agree with Barbara's views just by observing the entire documented information in this book. I believe that her experience and analysis was intensive and extensive enough to support the claim. As she illustrated, culture grow and develop via continued story telling as illustrated by the studied cases in the Jewish culture ¹⁶.

In attempt to validate her argument, Barbara gave an analogy that likened stories to pieces of cloth that are used to make a complete garment, which represents culture. Children are taught about culture through stories and they live to tell and retell the same stories to precedent generations. Through stories moral values are passed on through generations. Stories make lessons more memorable and that is why they are used to pass values, morals, and other virtues to children ¹⁷.

¹⁵ Ibid., 269-281

¹⁶ Ibid., 269-281

¹⁷ Ibid., 269-281