

Today I am 2 months old

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Change of Shift

Today I Am 2 Months Old

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Managing physician performance—a quintessential 1990s course in Baltimore. From Flexner to the millennium, Hippocrates to Andrew Taylor Still (the founder of osteopathic medicine), physician education, attitude, and management remain a theme superimposed on society's search for longevity. Before rejoining the fray of this interactive conference, I answer the urgent flashing of my telephone message light at break time. "Hello," our rabbi says. "Today you saved a life." I laughed, "I'm in Baltimore and even the general public knows a doctor in the classroom can do no harm."

He walked to shul (synagogue) even though it was oppressively hot and humid that day. Slowly moving forward to the third row, all the way in, so he could sit next to his wife with only the mehitzah intervening (the traditional wall of separation between a man and woman in an Orthodox synagogue). But as he reached his seat, he crumpled. Two physicians, one held to the standards of rheumatology, one to neurosurgery, saw, and the primal memory from their indoctrination with resuscitation rituals stirred, quickly bringing their blood to a boil. Hearts pounding they reached his side and began the ABCs of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Two congregants, one a Red Cross instructor, remembered the oxygen bottle and the automatic external defibrillator (AED) next to the fire extinguisher. My role as a regional emergency medical services director had led to the men's club seeing the potential value of placing a unit in our synagogue. Eighteen people, including doctors, dentists, emergency medical technicians, podiatrists, and nurses, as well as interested lay persons, had learned over 2 days in my basement the ins and outs of pasting on a pad, pressing a button, and opening an airway. This was almost a year and \$3,000 later: ground zero. It worked.

Two weeks later, I received a card of thanks from Mr. Firestein.* “In honor of the share you had in saving my life.” The tradition rings true: a life saved is as if you saved the whole world.

PBS channel 39: showing scenes of the Holocaust followed by footage of Mr. Firestein’s wife cupping his chin, happily chirping, “Now we can spend more time together.” The deep churn of my stomach as I remember my mother’s untimely demise, my father alone, no one to cup his chin—a world unsaved. For 49 years, together my parents would proudly say we outlived them all—Stalin, Hitler, and the heroes too, Churchill and Roosevelt.

But that part of Mr. Firestein I hardly knew. The television report continued. Scenes of the Holocaust yield to an animated survivor recounting his high-tech but eloquently simple return from the dead. He continued with a strong accent, revealing more of his personal history. “Back den things were bad, very bad, but dis time dey vas vorse—because I was dead!”

Not long afterward, I entered services on the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and there he was standing on the bimah (altar) saying the prayer over the Torah before the rabbi read the week’s portion. The series of prayers said each morning always include a line that in the past I hardly noticed, but which now seemed to be written in bold, “Faithful are you to resuscitate the dead.” This was the season of “high holidays” on the Jewish calendar. Again he shook my hand during Sukkot, a Jewish holiday of thanksgiving, a holiday said to celebrate “the culmination of a process.” Mr. Firestein joyfully informed me that, “Today I am 2 months old.” It was, after all, 2 months since his electrically charged rebirth. He told me how he flew to Washington to make a speech to 170 Red Cross instructors. “I was like Milton Berle, you know, Berle de actor—I mixed humor wit serious; you saved a life and I told dem.”

I said “And a very good life too.” This was true teamwork: preplanning by a group of interested people leading to the application of high-tech to the every day. Eighteen kind souls willing to train, so that on that fateful day 2 physicians could perform CPR, a congregant could remember the lifesaving machines, and the Red Cross instructor could operate the AED, and the rabbi could lead the congregation in prayer as good people tried their best.

Oh, and about that recording by the AED machine. My partner reviewed the event at my request, using the AED’s

rhythm and voice recordings. And he said, “You know, Alex, that was the first time I reviewed a recording with a room full of people praying during the resuscitation.”

Mr. Firestein’s successful recovery from a bout of death provided us with a sense of renewal in our daily battle to relieve suffering and provide compassion. Mr. Firestein’s return to his family and congregation provided heart warming evidence for a community’s consideration of the nature of hope and compassion even in the face of catastrophe.

I thank the following persons, whose participation in the out-of-hospital chain of survival, led to a positive outcome: Joseph Aflalo, Robert Levin-Dando (Red Cross instructor), Mark Lester, MD, Barre Kauffman, MD, and Rabbi Daniel Korobkin.

*Name changed for patient confidentiality.

