

REMARKS FOR EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5777

What is the best gift you ever received? Now, don't get all philosophical or deep on me. I'm not looking for responses like "the gift of life" or "the love of my family." No, I mean something more tangible. An object. A present that came from someone else and was just for you. I'll let you think about that for a moment.

And now I'll tell you my favorite gift EVER.

It was a book. Stop. I know what you're thinking: She's a rabbi so naturally her favorite gift was a book. But this was long before I even dreamed that girls could grow up to be rabbis. I was six years old and had just learned to read at school.

And one day – it wasn't my birthday; it wasn't Hanukkah, just one ordinary day - a big package arrived, addressed to me: "Miss Debra Sue Cantor." Nowadays, given my Amazon Prime membership, packages arrive at my home on an almost daily basis. But back then, back *then*, getting a package in the mail was nothing short of a miracle. Later that same year, my brother and I would get Marky Maypo oatmeal bowls and Roy Rogers slippers, which my mother ordered with cereal box tops. But this package was just for me, and it wasn't from my parents; it was from my Auntie Judi.

She had sent it from New Haven, where she lived with my grandparents. She couldn't have been very old at the time, maybe a year or two out of high school. And what had she picked out to send me? Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*. It was an oversize edition, with colorful illustrations by the artist, Gyo Fujikawa. (I always pictured Gyo Fujikawa as a small Japanese man. Only later did I find out that she was an American woman, with Japanese parents who named her after a famous Chinese emperor. She was one of the first American illustrators to depict children of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. At the time, though, I knew none of this.)

How did my Auntie Judi know how much I would love this book? Because I opened it up and I was smitten. With the poems, many of which I promptly memorized. With the man who had written them, Robert Louis Stevenson, whose life as an upper-class British man raised by nannies, was so very different than mine, but who nevertheless was able to capture what it felt like to be a child. With the pictures, so bright and beautiful.

Where is that book now? I confess, I literally read it to pieces. But it doesn't matter. The book is inside of me. I can still recite many of the poems.

Yet what I remember most vividly is that very first moment. That moment I saw the box. Addressed to me, the girl who could read. That moment was pregnant with possibility. It was pure sweetness.

I will think about that moment when our service comes to an end tonight, as we share apples and honey and other goodies at our Honey Oneg. That childhood moment of sweet possibility. May you - may all of us - be

Rabbi Debra Cantor

blessed with such moments in 5777, this year which begins tonight. May you receive your best present ever and may you be privileged to give someone else theirs.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah! A good, sweet new year!