

PEEING (A Memoir)

For most of my adult life, I gave little thought to the act of urinating. It was simply one of the bodily functions that we took for granted, like breathing, eating, or sleeping. As we get older, we no longer take things for granted. Earlier this morning, as I was waking, and had that gnawing feeling that I had to “go to the bathroom,” my mind drifted back to my earliest memories of peeing.

I do not remember diapers or being toilet trained, nor any stories my mother may have told me about my early accomplishments. I suspect there is a “competition” among some parents to brag about how early their child was toilet-trained. Many pre-schools today will not take children if they are not toilet-trained, so if you want to get your two-and-a-half or three year old in pre-school, get him (or her) out of diapers.

I do remember a joke my mother told me about peeing: There was a little boy, too small to go to the toilet by himself, who always went to his mother telling her he had to pee. Whereupon, she would take him to the bathroom. Once, when his mother had guests, and he went to his mother and said he had to pee, she found it embarrassing. She told him not to say pee, but to say “whisper.” From then on, he told his mother he had to “whisper.” One day, his grandfather was visiting. His mother had left the house. He had to pee. His grandfather was lying on the couch. The little boy went to his grandfather and told him he had to whisper. The grandfather replied, “whisper in my ear.” I thought it was a very funny joke, as did my children. (I have not told it to my grandchildren.)

As a child, I was aware that there were kids who had trouble controlling their bladders. They were the ones that peed in their pants or wet their beds. When it became public knowledge, other kids would make fun of them. I thought that it was a cruel thing to do, and was glad that it wasn't me. It was embarrassing to be in an elementary school class and have to pee. You sat there, first, holding it in; then shaking and rocking back and forth. Finally raising your hand, being recognized by the teacher, telling the teacher that you wanted to leave the room, being given a pass, and rushing out of the classroom. If it took a long time before you were recognized, you might not make it. I remember boys moving back and forth in their seats, and frantically waving their hand. I felt sorry for them. I believe it was in elementary school that the distinction was established: urinating was termed number one, and defecating was number two.

Another memory: I am not sure how old we were, but we were young enough to be unselfconscious about our penises. A bunch of us would line up on the sidewalk to see who could pee the furthest into the street. There were very few cars on the street in those days. The curbs and the streets in front of our houses were empty.

During the summer, there were horses and wagons that would come through the neighborhood with fruit and vegetables. The housewives would come out and buy the produce, which would usually be cheaper and fresher than that in the fruit and vegetable stores. As kids, we always got a kick out of the horses relieving themselves. When a horse peed, it was as if someone turned on a hose. There is a Yiddish expression, “Er

pisht vi a ferd” (he pees like a horse.) I guess it is supposed to be a compliment. (The horse droppings that frequently accompanied the pee served as food for the birds that came after.)

Another joke that dates back to my mother is about a prosperous English Jew who had a very unJewish name: Morris Fountain. When asked about the origin of his name, he explained that it was a literal translation of the name he was called as a boy: Moishe Pisher. And there’s the one about the man standing at a urinal in the Los Angeles airport. He turns to the man at the next urinal and asks him if is he from Brooklyn. His “neighbor” responds yes. He then asks him if he grew up in Flatbush. Again, a surprised, yes. Finally, he asks him if he knows Rabbi Ginsberg. “Absolutely, he was my moel,” the neighbor replied. “How did you know?” “Because he cuts on a bias, and you are peeing on my leg.”

Of course, mentioning peeing (and the other bodily functions) caused snickering among us kids. A popular book title at the time was “The Yellow Stream” by the author I. P. Daily. And to this day, when joking with my children, if we want to say something dirty it is: “pishy, cocky, duty.”

The years pass and we discover another use for the same body part that we used for peeing. And more years pass, and we find that we are having problems in both departments. So here we are—the yellow stream has become a trickle. The prostate or something else, is causing pressure on the bladder, making greater demands, requiring us to answer the call more frequently. The call may come at awkward times of the day or night. We have come full circle. There are those in my cohort that have become incontinent. When I first heard the word, I wondered what not being able to control your bladder had to do with a geographic land mass. I looked up the word continent, and found out that it also means restraint. We learn something every day.

When I was in rehab after knee replacement surgery last year, I was given a cute plastic bottle. It looked like a bottle that might have contained a quart of milk, except that it had a wider mouth, had a bend at the top, a handle, and a plastic cover hooked on to the handle. I was told it was a urinal. And I thought that urinals were porcelain, and were attached to walls in public bathrooms. It was such a handy device, that I took it home. It now stands unobtrusively next to my bed, so that when nature calls at night, I don’t have to get out of bed. (This is the first time I am revealing this, publicly.)

Finally, if there is a connection between one’s prostate and one’s ability to urinate, I hope to find out about it next week, when I have my first visit with a urologist. My doctor suggested that I see a urologist when he noticed that my PSA was increasing. The “number one” step I plan to take before I see him is to Google PSA and prostate. Penis, I think I know about. Interesting that they all begin with P.

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