

## **Playing Monopoly with Melvin**

by Herb Levine

This story takes place in a synagogue long before the pandemic, when the community was able to offer hospitality to homeless families for two weeks at a time, after which they went on to another church that participated in the Family Promise network. Members of the synagogue volunteered to spend time with the families while they were in the building – serving dinner, playing with the children, sleeping over. One Sunday afternoon more than thirty years ago, most of the families were out of the building, but one family had nowhere else to go, so it was our responsibility as hosts to keep them company. That family consisted of a father, Melvin, and a ten- or eleven-year-old boy, Robert, about the same age as my daughter Sarah. I had signed up for that shift and brought Sarah with me. I also brought along a bag of board games.

Melvin chose Monopoly, and we all started to play. Robert had never played the game before and had a hard time learning the rules. He became frustrated and dropped out within the first fifteen minutes. While the two adults and Sarah continued the game, he amused himself riding little kids' bikes around the big, empty room.

Sarah, who had been playing Monopoly for about three years, played her usual careful game. She'd already learned that buying the lower-priced purple, browns, red, orange, and yellow properties in the first couple of rounds put you at a disadvantage, depriving you of the cash you'd need to afford the more expensive green and blue properties at the far side of the board. So she bided her time and bought greens and blues as she landed on them. Eventually, she acquired Boardwalk and Park Place, built hotels on them and claimed huge rents.

Given that Sarah had chosen what our family had deemed the best strategy for winning the game, I had to pick another, so when I landed on railroads and utilities, I bought them, building up monopolies of those properties. Even if I wasn't going to build lots of houses and hotels, I could frustrate the other players by getting large infusions of cash each time they landed on my properties. Perhaps, if I had enough money, I could even break Sarah's monopoly.

Melvin, meanwhile, bought whatever property he landed on. He bought Arctic and Mediterranean and St. James Place – a smattering of purples, oranges and even a more expensive red or yellow, if he happened to have enough cash. Whenever he landed on one of my utilities or one of Sarah's high-rent properties, he had to fork over cash, sometimes very large sums. When he had no money left in his kitty, he

simply mortgaged a property and borrowed from the bank so he could pay. As the game went on, he had to mortgage more and more of his holdings, for Sarah's rents continued to rise as she gained monopolies and built hotels. Melvin also had some good luck. When he picked a Community Chest card that got him some cash, he inevitably bought back his properties from the bank.

At one point, I turned to Melvin and asked him why he continued to buy every property he landed on, since it didn't appear that he was ever going to get a monopoly and win.

"All I want to do," he said, "is to stay in the game."

Melvin's answer sounded like an urgent news bulletin, proclaiming, "Notice this. It will change how you think about the world." His answer put into bold relief for me how a person who had never been encouraged to succeed might end up homeless, whereas a person brought up in a family like mine absorbs so many strategies for winning, not just at Monopoly, but at life. At age ten, my daughter could make a choice about a course of action, invest resources in that course, patiently defer gratification and succeed in her goal of winning the game.

Melvin's goal was simply to stay in the game. I often think about him and hope that he's still at it.

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