Affirming – John M. Cooke

Earl and I met in law school. A Jewish kid from Winnipeg and an Ottawa Valley boy, we were a slightly unlikely pair. But we became lifelong friends.

Earl married Annee. The set about the business of making a family but wouldn’t realize that hope. On a heartbreaking autumn day some 20 years ago, Earl and Annee buried their infant child. They couldn’t have another.

After an interval of sorrow and regeneration Earl and Annee found themselves in Moscow to bring home their three-year-old adopted daughter Yael, a captivating child with an inextinguishable life force. From a joint family vacation an image of Yael is fixed in my mind’s eye: tiny and determined, swimming against a fierce current in clear blue Caribbean waters.

Three years ago, Yael’s Bat Mitzvah was celebrated with great joy. Then last year Earl and Annee’s adopted son Chaim had his turn. This occasion was extra special. Not only was Chaim being welcomed into young manhood before his God, family and friends, but so also was his older brother. In the intervening years Yael had transitioned and there before our eyes was Max: a proud and joyful young man.

The story has a moving coda. Chaim, though reserved by nature, persuaded his Rabbi to accede to an extraordinary and unprecedented request. The upshot is that during worship in the Synagogue, Max takes his place sitting with the men. Thus the blessing of diversity and inclusion was realized.