

Yom Kippur 2020 “Reflections”

What a great challenge and opportunity it is for a rabbi to address the congregation on this day of Yom Kippur. So much that is so urgent and that impacts upon our lives.

The horrific virus, and what we learned about ourselves and those with whom we’ve spent these months.

And there is the matter of the pain and anger across our country, and the racial issue that stares us in the face as we consider the Torah’s commandment: “You shall have one manner of law” for all who dwell in your midst. Not to mention our Jewish historic quest for justice and righteousness.

And of course, there is Israel, and what an incredible time this is as we hope for peace, and an end to the anguish that so many people of our world suffer.

For sure, all of these matters are worthy of thought today. But in thinking about this day and what my speaking to you means to me, I want my words to be more personal, as this is a very different kind of High Holy Days for me...rewarding and much less stressful.

Family legend has it that I promised my grandfather, at the age of three, that I would become a rabbi. While I do not recall that promise, I do remember my grandfather, who I knew as Zada Abie, as perhaps the most significant Jewish role model of my life. He was a modest and humble man; a faithful and observant Jew with whom I would share this day of Yom Kippur. And I recall the great pride and joy that he felt as I would be in the synagogue with him, singing some of the same melodies that we have sung today. And though he passed away some sixty years ago, I still recall him as a man of kindness and warmth who very much embodied our Jewish values of integrity, generosity of spirit and faith.

Well, many years have passed and I did fulfill that promise, whether real or imagined. And now, especially on this Yom Kippur, I look back upon the many years that I have spent in this community and I ask myself: What stands out most, and what have I learned about people?

You see, I became a rabbi out of love for our Jewish heritage and my desire to be involved with people as they mark the milestones of their lives. I became a rabbi because I believe that our Jewish value system has much to say to us about the challenges and struggles of living, and because I have always found in Judaism a way of life that adds rich meaning to my own life. Add to all of that, a sense that the synagogue or temple has such an important role to play in educating and inspiring us to embrace and proudly live our Jewish heritage. A heritage rooted in the quest for morality and human decency. A heritage so much concerned with bringing light and hope where there is darkness and brokenness.

And now, as I mark my 45th Yom Kippur with this congregation, I reflect upon these years which seem to have passed so quickly, as life does for all of us. I was young when I came here. I was twenty-seven and younger than all the early members of this congregation. And yes, I had a vision that together, we would build a worthy congregation that would serve the needs and desires of a very diverse group of people who were choosing to affiliate with this fledgling Reform congregation.

And I guess that you would have to say that that vision has been realized as we are today a vibrant center of Jewish life, still committed to the ideals that have always characterized this congregation. That we be a warm and welcoming community where people feel valued, not because of how much money they can contribute, but how much of themselves they can give toward our collective well-being and the values for which we stand as a Jewish community.

I am often asked: What do I like most about being a rabbi? And to answer that question, I go back to an old Jewish book entitled “Life is with People.” The book is really about Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, but the message is relevant to us: That life is made rich through the people who are a part of our lives. And in that sense, my life has been very rich. I’ve shared in hundreds of births and baby namings. A few thousand Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and Confirmations. And I’ve shared so many weddings with so many couples, many of whom are here with us today. And always have I felt that there is something truly sacred about all of these occasions, as each evokes feelings of gratitude and awe for the miracle that is human life and our capacity to grow into something more than what we have been.

So the simple and honest answer to the question of what I like most about being a rabbi is in the title of that book that life really is with people, even as it exposes you to some of the pain and suffering that people endure...and the unfairness that is often the way of life. Yes,

being with people has caused me to know that we're all trying to do the best we can in life, even as we all need a Yom Kippur because we know we can do better.

And there is something more about being a rabbi that I find very gratifying. I've been able to teach and hopefully influence a deeper appreciation for our religious heritage, and the centrality of Torah in our Jewish lives, whether we know it or not. And by that I mean, not the rituals that we perform or the prayers that we recite, but by living the worthy values and ideals that have their roots in Judaism. Yes, let us not forget that ideals such as freedom, human dignity, and the sanctity of every life really have their roots in our sacred Torah and the experiences of those spiritual ancestors to whom we link ourselves.

Yes, I've been blessed to be able to teach and bring so many people, adults and children, closer to such a worthy and noble heritage as is ours. A religion that emphasizes that kind and giving deeds are the truest

embodiment of holiness; and that our historic task is to bring that holiness into our world. The holiness that is uplifting the fallen, giving strength to the weak, and hope and comfort to those who despair.

But I have also been asked many times: What do I like least about being a rabbi? And I don't have to think very hard about that. It's losing people to whom I feel close and with whom I have shared a lot of life. It's seeing people have their lives ripped apart by a sudden death or tragedy. It's seeing children lose a parent, and even more painful and tragic, is a parent losing a child. In truth, those experiences are very trying as people ask questions for which there are no satisfactory answers. Only to cherish life for as long as we have it and to continue to hold those memories dear. Yes, at different times in our lives we are all like Job as we ask "why?" only to realize that there is no good answer to that question at all. Only to be there for each other, offering caring, if not comfort.

And there is something else that I find very painful and it has to do with the increase of anti-Semitism in our society and world. Yes, it hurts to know that anti-Semitism is on the rise and that we really don't know how to mitigate against this horrible plague. What a year this has been; one that witnessed so many horrific episodes of Jews being violently attacked. Yes, racism and prejudice are rampant in our society, with our Jewish heritage calling out to us: "You shall not stand idle while your neighbor bleeds" for we know only too well that all that evil needs to prevail is for good people to remain silent.

And something else that I find painful or disappointing, and it hits very close to home. It has to do with those families who leave our congregation with the claim that "we don't need the temple as much as we used to," or those who choose to leave after the Bar or Bar Mitzvahs of their children. And then years later call upon me for a wedding or a funeral. Our sages long ago declared: "Do not separate yourself from the

community.” They knew that every person was a valued part of the collective whole, and that we all have a great stake in the continuation of Jewish life. At least for me, to leave the synagogue after Bar or Bat Mitzvah is to negate the very meaning of that occasion, which is to affirm and pridefully embrace one’s place in Jewish life.

And to those of you from whom I have heard that you don’t need the temple as you once did, I know that there are some of you out there who are joining us virtually. And let me say in all sincerity that it is good to have you with us. But let me also ask of you to come back to us. Come back to celebrate our worthy heritage with us. Come back and affirm that Jewish identity and the well-being of our people are important to you. Come back to us and help strengthen us and our presence in Northern Westchester.

So what are the most important lessons that I have learned after all of these years of sharing life with you?

I've learned that life is too short to be too little. I've learned that we make a living by what we accumulate, even as we make a life by how much of ourselves we give away. I've learned that most of us, if not all of us, are carrying some kind of a heavy burden, and that life is often compromised by those burdens, whatever they may be. I've learned that kindness, empathy and compassion are among our highest values, and that our actions of reaching beyond ourselves count far more than our good intentions. And I've learned that most of us are like Jacob of the bible as we wrestle with ourselves in our desire to become the best people that we are capable of being. Yes, through you I've learned that each of us is a sacred vessel, each of us capable of bringing true holiness and light into this world through our kind and loving actions.

And something more that I have learned during all of these years. And that is that we all need this day of Yom Kippur. We need at least one day each year that we dedicate to introspection and to evaluating how we are living and what we are living for. Every one of us: we all have a

yearning to reveal that better self that is inside of us, and that more than anything is the purpose of this holy day. To reach deep within and to yet again uncover that which is pure and innocent about ourselves, and to do all that we can to be that person that we know ourselves capable of being. For sure, it's no small task, even as the quality and meaning of our lives depends upon our engaging in that compelling challenge.

For me, it's been a long road since the time that I sat on my grandfather's lap and sang the same prayers and melodies that we have done here today. And still those melodies of Shema Yisrael and Avinu Malkenu echo through a lifetime of involvement in Jewish synagogue life, and the knowing that we are bound together as we share a past, a present and a future.

So what is the meaning of this day of Yom Kippur? It is told that an angry reader once stormed into a newspaper office waving that day's newspaper, asking to see the editor of the obituary column. He showed

him his name in the obituary listing. “You see,” he said, “I am very much alive. I demand a retraction!” The editor replied: “I never retract a story, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll put you in the birth column and give you a fresh start!”

So let us realize that on Yom Kippur we too are given the opportunity of a fresh start. May we be granted to act upon the truth that God gave us the gift of life. It is up to us to give ourselves the gift of living well. So may we give ourselves that gift in this new year. Amen.