

THE JEW ZOO

Rosh Hashanah Morning – Monday, September 14, 2015

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, KS

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Susan called her mom up. “Mom... guess what? I’m engaged!”

All Susan heard was silence.

“What,” she asked with anger in her voice, “you can’t be happy for me?”

“Of course we are, sweetie,” said her mom, “but you know we were hoping you might have a Jewish wedding.”

“Mom, we’ve talked about this before. Josh has no desire to be Jewish. And it’s not important to me. And frankly, you never made being Jewish a priority in your life or in mine. You always let me skip Sunday school for the few years I went. It never mattered why...shopping, sports, it was raining. We never went to services. You never did anything to learn about being Jewish yourself. So, you know what, I’m just what you wanted me to become. So, don’t tell me to be something that you are not.”

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“And Isaac called to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” And Isaac said, “Behold, here is the fire and here is the wood; but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” And Abraham answered, “God will provide the lamb for a sacrifice, my son.”

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The novelist, William Kennedy, points us to an important lesson we can learn from this most difficult story, as he portrays the universal parent-child relationship using today’s Torah portion. Kennedy writes:

“All [children] are Isaac
All [parents] are Abraham
And all Isaacs become Abrahams
If they work at it long enough.
We are only as possible as what
happened to us yesterday,
We all change as we move.”¹

Struggle. Tension. Teaching.
Learning. As Kennedy suggests,
children become not only parents,
they become their **own** parents. And
so we ask: Who are **we** as
Abrahams? What do we wish to
teach our Isaacs?

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Our children are our future. Though they are “Isaac, the child” today, someday they will become “Abraham, the parent.” And as William Kennedy reminds us, “We are only as possible as what happened to us yesterday...” Our children cannot become the Abraham we want them to be, unless we give them the tools...unless we are willing to teach them who they **can** become.

Simply, our task is to raise our children Jewishly. To raise them – yes, to love bagels with lox and cream cheese and to dance to “Sunrise, Sunset” at their wedding – but more, to raise them with a moral system that is informed by the teachings of our sages, with an understanding and appreciation of our rituals and traditions, and with a social conscience that is motivated by the passion of our prophets. Mostly, though, raising our children Jewishly means to suffuse their beings with an identity that permits them to drink deeply from that well of Jewish meaning every moment of their life journey.

It is, in essence, the same job Abraham had raising Isaac, or any of our other patriarchs and matriarchs and their children. For three millennia, it was rather easy. Isaacs would become Abrahams because the world – both internal and external – would not allow for any other option. Our Jewish lives **were** our lives. There were no differences. Then, beginning in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, things changed dramatically. As we were let out of ghettos, new worlds opened up to Jewish families. As they began to move away from their insular Jewish existences, families sent their sons to the shul or cheder to learn about the sources of Judaism, namely Torah and Talmud. Neither the details of observance nor the mores of our faith were taught formally. They were still lived at home. Their formal learning was just an extra layer on an-already deep Jewish foundation.

Beginning in the mid-20th century and continuing to today, the process radically shifted once more. Now, we send our children to Religious

and Hebrew School not to learn Torah or Talmud, but rather to gain a Jewish identity. That has become our main task - to create identifiable Jews.

Research in Jewish education has confirmed what many have suspected in regard to this new task: our students are learning one set of values in school and are living another set at home. We teach Shabbat as a time for rest, yet many of our Saturdays are times for shopping and soccer. We teach the festivals as moments of Jewish celebration and growth, yet the festivals are often or not even recognized. Just recall the conversation between Susan and her mother. In a conflict of values between home and synagogue, the synagogue rarely wins.

Part of the problem stems from a simple fact: the more our lives derive meaning from American culture, American values, and “secular American religion,” the less time and energy we have to derive meaning for our lives from **Jewish** history, **Jewish** culture, and **Jewish** religious modalities. And since this is a pattern we – as American Jews – have fostered for the last 75 years, many children and parents today – like Susan and her mom – are not sure why they are Jews, much less what they are supposed to be doing Jewishly. Abraham can no longer take Isaac to the mountain, because Abraham does not even know there **is** a mountain.

This has placed the synagogue – us – in a profound predicament. Our role is now – what one educator has claimed – that of a zoo-keeper. Like a zoo, it has become our responsibility

to create an artificial environment in which a certain species – in this case, the Jewish child – can hopefully survive and breed.

Recently, a news story appeared that the last Sumatra Rhino outside of Southeast Asia – housed in the Cincinnati Zoo – was being shipped to Indonesia. There are only 150 of these rare animals left. By sending the rhino home, it is hoped it will help produce more of these magnificent creatures. How is this different than sending our children away to Jewish summer camps, youth groups events, or even Birthright trips to Israel. Our goal? To create Jewish souls.

The Isaacs of today and the Abrahams of tomorrow – you, me, our children, our grandchildren, our friends' children – dangle on the precipice of extinction...not literally, like the Sumatra Rhinos...but culturally, intellectually, spiritually. Remember Susan and her mom. Who we **are** is who our children **will** become. And the question is: What are we willing to do to save ourselves?

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Here's the good news. The cure is not as painful as Abraham's choices in this morning's Torah portion. Rather, our solution lies in William

Kennedy's statement, “We all change as we move.” To change means to grow. We grow when we move from where we are to someplace else. In other words, we change when we learn. When **we** pay attention to **our** Jewish souls and **our** minds, we will be successful in growing a Jewish “next generation,” for they will see what we value. We spend a considerable amount of effort and resources on our physical, intellectual, and professional health. We make sure that we eat right, exercise, attend good schools, surround ourselves with wonderful mentors and colleagues. What would happen if we devoted **equal** energy to our spiritual and Jewish health?

A number of years ago, at High Holidays, I made a simple suggestion: Light Shabbat candles. Once, twice. See what it does. Today, I offer another suggestion: Learn something Jewish in this new year. Grow in some Jewish fashion. And show the next generation...whether child, grandchild, or any one younger than us...that Jewish learning matters...that Jewish living matters...and it never stops.

There are lots of suggestions here [hold up Adult Ed brochure]. Commit to taking one class, attending one program. In addition, when you leave today, you will be given a pamphlet with some more ideas of what you might do. As well as some warnings as to what happens when we act like Susan's mom, as Susan was growing up. It's pretty simple.

Whether we have children or not, when we demonstrate for the next generation what being Jewish looks like and how we change as we learn

– do you imagine that does not impact them? Quite plainly, if we want the next generation to be Jewish, we can't just send them to a "Jew zoo." They will – like a Sumatra Rhino – or Susan – simply disappear. Instead, we must start with ourselves in order for them to thrive.

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And yet, if we don't...if we don't...

In a story called "The Old Grandfather and the Grandson," Leo Tolstoy writes: "The grandfather had become very old. His legs wouldn't go, his eyes didn't see, his ears didn't hear, he had no teeth. And when he ate, the food dripped from his mouth. The son and daughter-in-law stopped setting a place for him at the table and gave him supper in the back of the stove. Once they brought dinner...to him in a cup. The old man wanted to move the cup and dropped and broke it. The daughter-in-law began to grumble at the old man for spoiling everything in the house and breaking the cups and said that she would now give him dinner in a dishpan. The old man only sighed and said nothing.

Once the husband and wife were...watching their small son playing on the floor with some wooden planks: he was building

something. The father asked: "What is that you are doing, Misha?" And Misha said: "Dear Father, I am making a dishpan. So that when you and dear Mother become old, you may be fed from this dishpan."

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Who are we as Abrahams? What do we wish to teach our Isaacs?

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In a moment, we are going to sing, "Sweet as Honey." It comes from the idea that words of Torah are sweet and inspiring. What will we do this year to make our lives sweet with words of Torah – and therefore teach the next generation how to become Abraham?

¹ William Kennedy, Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, Viking Press, 1978.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*