

"I WANT TO FIND MY PURPOSE"

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5768 – Thursday, September 13, 2007

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

When I was a rabbinic student at Hebrew Union College, a professor of ours – Dr. Jacob Radar Marcus – offered some advice. He said, "Every rabbi has one sermon. Good rabbis have two. And extraordinary rabbis have three." He paused, and then – quite serious – he added, "Do not imagine that you are extraordinary rabbis or even good rabbis. Just know your one sermon."

Some thirty years later, I hear his words echo in my memory. "Know your one sermon."

What's true for rabbis is equally true for each one of us.

A favorite Broadway musical, Avenue Q, offers this same lesson. One of the lead puppet characters is Princeton, a recent college graduate, who spends the entire show seeking his purpose, asking the deeper questions of life which haunt us: Why am I here? Who am I? Where do I want to go? And how can I get there? Or as Princeton, in Avenue Q, asks, "Purpose / It's that little flame that lights a fire under your [rear end]. Purpose / It keeps you going strong like a car with a full tank of gas / Everyone else has a purpose / So what's mine?"

As Princeton learns in the show, the search for a life purpose means reaching deep inside and "deep inside" is a very scary place for most of us to go. But as all life coaches urge, we have to be prepared to open ourselves up to what we hear when we listen to that still, small voice that resides within. Sometimes that voice speaks in a whisper and it's difficult to pay attention to it when so many other voices are also speaking...be another Picasso, follow in your mother's footsteps, be more like your brother.

A Chasidic tale instructs that those voices are not the ones to which we should respond. Reb Zushya was on his deathbed, surrounded by his disciples. A great fear gripped Zushya and he began to cry out. His disciples asked him, "Reb Zushya, what worries you? Surely you will be welcomed into the gates of heaven for you have been as righteous as Moses." Their teacher sighed. "My children, I am not worried that God will ask me, 'Zushya, why weren't you more like Moses?' Because I am not Moses. I am worried that God will ask, 'Zushya, why weren't you more like Zushya?'" God expects us to discover our purpose – not another's – and to be willing to go on **that** journey.

When Jacob Marcus so many years ago talked about our "one sermon," he was referring to a life purpose and passion. He, like Zushya, recognized that we shouldn't compare ourselves to others, rather our task is to reach deep inside and discover what is at the core of our very beings...find it, embrace it, and live it.

What's true for us is also true for congregations.

For the past two years, our congregation has been on a path of self-discovery, of seeking to understand our one sermon, our life purpose – or in other words – our shared vision. It hasn't been easy work. Just as with you and me, it leaves us exposed and vulnerable, for we have to peel away the layers of obfuscation that protect us. In a way, we – whether individuals or congregation – are like windowpanes that haven't been washed in long time. They are dusty; they are dirty; they are grimy. Cobwebs sit along the edges. Mud has stuck to the glass. Though the sun may be shining, light won't

penetrate because of all the dirt. Cleaning those windowpanes takes a lot of elbow grease. Sometimes, we are so repulsed by the dead bugs and grime we want to give up. But we don't. And neither has the congregation.

Over these last 24 months, you have helped us clean the windowpanes of our congregation, to permit the light of who we are to shine through. Hundreds of you offered personal perspectives, through focus groups, surveys, and large group presentations. Dozens reviewed and reacted to the synthesis of that information. And our Board of Trustees devoted many hours focusing on what we said is important to us. We labored to find the right words that describe that vision, our communal journey...our one sermon.

We believe that our congregation exists to nurture Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity. That is our path, our vision. Like "Nike: Just Do It" or "Coke: It's the Real Thing" or even "Bounty: The quicker picker upper," nurturing Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity is not earth-shattering or radical. Instead, it presents a simple fact...one, which upon hearing it, we respond, "Well, of course."

Nurturing Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity: this is what our congregation has been about for 138 years and it is what we will focus our considerable resources on into the future. It translates into those activities that are most precious to us because you told us what they were – teaching our children, being supported in life-cycle moments of joy and sorrow, making our world a better place in which to live, creating space to commune with God, all the while surrounded by our congregational family.

Knowing who we are – what our vision, our purpose is all about – is essential. Yet, how we go about this task is equally important. While Starbucks makes quality products, what makes me **enjoy** spending more than \$2 for a simple cup of coffee is the **way** that Starbucks goes about its business. Recently, Starbucks was named one of the most ethi-

cal businesses in America. I appreciate the "how" of their business, as well as the "what."

So, shouldn't that be the case with congregations, as well? In addition to who we are – nurturing Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity – **how** we will live out that mission is critical. Our "how's"? **We will behave in a manner consistent with three values: open hearts, kedushah, and derech ertz.** While entire sermons could focus on each of these, for our sake today, let's define them through the following descriptions:

Open hearts - Our congregation values each one who walks through our doors and we will accept others for who and what they are, recognizing ourselves in them.

Kedushah - We infuse holiness into the world when we create moments that heal brokenness. Every situation and every person holds the potential to bring it about.

Derech Eretz - Our behavior is guided by principles of respect, honor, honesty, integrity, dignity, and humility. They are the foundations of our relationship as a community and with one another.

Again, there is nothing shocking about these values, these "how-to's" for living our congregational life. But just like Gates' Bar-B-Q workers greet every single customer with, "Hi, may I help you?" so too do we start this New Year with a congregational promise, a commitment to treat each person we encounter with open hearts, with a sense of kedusha (holiness), and with derech ertz (common decency).

Permit me to offer three brief stories – each connected to one of our core values.

She walked into our building about two years ago...clearly out of place. Judy Kraft (z'l) was the greeter that evening, and she welcomed the young girl warmly. When Esmie sat down during Shabbat services, she behaved in a way to call attention to herself. A couple of congregants gently took her aside, to see if they could help her.

Later, Rabbi Schuster called her, seeing what he might do. The story, sadly, has an unfortunate ending. Within a few weeks of her visit to us, her mother was stabbed to death and Esmie was charged with the crime. Despite the horror of these events, what I ask we focus on is **our** response...the way **we** approached this young lady. It was with open hearts. Our first and foremost value.

Before I returned last January to Ethiopia, a 9-year-old girl in the congregation handed me an envelope. Inside was \$57.25. I asked what it was for. Her reply gave me goose bumps. "Rabbi," she said, "can you take this to Ethiopia and save someone's life with it?" She continued, "I remember what you told us about the people there and I felt really bad. So, I took all the money I had in my piggy bank and figured someone else needed it more than me. So what do you think? Is it enough to save a life?" As tears welled up in my eyes, I assured her it was more than enough. Not quite sure what I would do with the money, I kept it until the last day of my trip. Outside Mother Teresa's mission was a beggar orphan child, blind, with no home. Upon investigation, I learned that she could live at a special boarding school for the blind, for essentially \$1 a day...shelter, food, clothes, and education. Our young congregant helped with two months of room and board and education. She saved that little girl's life. It was an act of kedusha, of holiness. Our second value.

A little over six years ago, our congregation was almost torn asunder. With a mixture of acrimony and mistrust, the atmosphere within our synagogue was toxic. Congregants were wounded in ways that I do not pretend to comprehend. Leadership, staff, and congregants were accused of duplicity. It was a troubling time for B'nai Jehudah. But good people came together. They refused to give in to false accusations or to seek retribution. Instead, they vowed that our "kehilat kedusha," our holy congregation, would be just that – a sacred institution. How to achieve that? By committing themselves and us to a series of Derech Eretz principles. So important were these

principles, our Board of Trustees adopted them more than four years ago, as the basis for our living together as a community. They speak of honesty, of listening, of communicating directly with others, of not gossiping, of acting with integrity. Because of our commitment to these principles, I have no doubts that we are a more respectful, open, trusting community than we were six years ago. Derech Eretz, common decency. Our third, and final value.

As simple as these ideas are to state, they are most difficult to implement. If it was easy, then our tradition would never have needed the institutions of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These holy days remind us that we are not perfect. Despite best efforts, we slip. It will take all of our concentration to keep our focus and to live by these shared purposes and values. We hope our purpose and values will be so ingrained in our culture that their recitation will flow easily from all of our lips.

In Judaism, though, it is not just enough to be or to react. One must contribute. You can be a Jew on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. But you cannot be Jewish. To be Jewish means to act in context of community. We are commanded to honor, to welcome, to visit, to rejoice, to console, to pray...all action verbs. To be Jewish is to do. So, the question becomes, since we know who we are – to nurture Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity – and how we are to behave – with open hearts, with kedusha, with derech eretz – what should we be doing?

In business, this is called a BHAG, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. BHAG. It's a strange-sounding term, but it is a powerful idea. It's some 10-to-30 year highly stretching, exciting, major goal. It's like 3M saying they are going to be the best in innovation (and they have Sticky Notes™ to prove it). Or Apple Computers declaring that they will change the way we interact with the digital world (and they have the iPod™ and the iPhone™ to prove it).

Individuals have BHAGs, but we tend to call them life goals. Some want to retire by the time they are 50. Others want to write and publish a book. One woman I heard on the radio the other day said she wanted to raise her children herself, and not rely on nannies or pre-schools or babysitters. The next caller said his goal was to visit every major league baseball stadium in North America.

Congregations can have BHAGs, as well. However, we have chosen to redefine the term. For us, it stands for Big Holy Awesome Goal. What will that be? What big, holy, awesome goal will stretch us, challenge us, inspire us for the next decade or so?

Well, we listened carefully to what so many of you told us. Things like education, community, inclusion, personal experiences – these are what moved you in the past and encourage you for the future.

So, while it's still being formulated as to how we will implement it, we think that our BHAG will be: **Every congregant pursues an individualized Jewish path, an IJP. In so doing, the individual, the community, and the world become better.**

We have lots of ideas how this might happen. Our President, Milton Brod, is forming a task force to begin experimenting with different models. But just think of what this BHAG could mean for us. If each one of us consciously searched and struggled and chose our own unique Jewish path and – through the congregation – had available to us the resources we needed to make that journey successful...well, as the BHAG states, our selves, our community, and our world would be transformed.

So, just as we are challenged during these High Holidays to examine our lives, to perform a "cheshbon nefesh," an accounting of the soul, our congregation is in the midst of this same process. We have uncovered our "one sermon." And now we begin the task of fashioning tools to support us along our individual and communal journeys.

Our congregation has done it's work...now what about us? Are we open to embarking on our individual journeys, to reach deep inside and reveal our life purpose and the values that guide what we do? Are we prepared to go home and – in these next ten days – write down and commit to our own BHAG, some big and awesome life goal? Whether we are twenty, thirty, fifty, or seventy-something, we continue to have purpose. Life goals can energize us, regardless of the season of life in which we find ourselves. I cannot stand up here and tell you there is a single formula to follow to accomplish all this. But this I can tell you: we **will** find the answers...if we are willing to struggle and search.

* * *

In 1988, Paul Hoffman was living in an old post office truck parked behind a hippie restaurant where he washed dishes in exchange for one meal a day. In the middle of the night, he was awakened by a powerful dream of making stickers with a photo of the Earth taken from space, and getting them out to people. In that moment, he recognized that his life purpose – his passion – had to do with people...he believed that what makes us marvel at our planet – as we view it from outer space – is that **we** are all in that picture...**all** of us, together. It was that sense that we are one and we are connected that became Paul's life purpose.

Paul saw in the dream his BHAG. He got permission from NASA to use their famous photo of the earth, gave his life savings to a printer who made 88,000 stickers, and gave them away to everyone who might possibly want them.

When Paul sought the advice of business gurus, they all said he had to charge for the stickers. Paul disagreed. It went counter to his values. He went ahead and gave away 30,000 of the stickers for free. He found that when people did start sending back donations, the amount they sent was often several times what he would have charged if he had set a price.

Paul still wanders around at events, “Earth-Sealing” the crowd. “Want a sticker of the Earth?” he asks with a huge smile. At last count, Paul Hoffman has distributed over 15 million EarthSeals to people all over the planet.¹

* * *

Whether we are Paul Hoffman, who realized that his life purpose was to bring people of the world together through a simple sticker; or Princeton, a puppet, who discovers his purpose is to pass his wisdom on to others through theatre; or a congregation, who is dedicated to nurturing Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity...finding your purpose— as the character, Princeton, in Avenue Q reminds us – “keeps you going strong like a car with a full tank of gas.”

* * *

I invite each of us to pursue personal introspection and self-discovery in the coming days, to reach deep inside and uncover our individual life purposes, reveal those core values by which we live, and continue the journey towards recognizing and fulfilling our life goals. As we do, may we also embrace our communal purpose, live by our shared values, and join in reaching towards a big holy awesome goal...to spend the coming years journeying forth on individual Jewish paths. While they are individual Jewish journeys, undoubtedly, our paths will meet, converge, and they will lead to healing and wholeness, the “one sermon,” the essential message of these Days of Awe.

¹ Hollis Polk;
<http://www.inspiringcommunity.org/inspiringstories0304>