

"JOHN, BARACK, MACHMUD, AND ME"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769 – Monday, September 29, 2008

The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

There are 36 days until we elect either John McCain or Barack Obama to become our next president. Given the uncertain times we face – between the economy, the war in Iraq, the fragility of our planet's environment – our decision will affect greatly both our country and our individual lives. In listening to both candidates, there is an urgency in their messages. They each believe they are agents of change...that they – and only they – have what it takes to move our country along on its journey.

Who's right?

I don't know...and even if I did, I would never hazard an opinion from this pulpit. To do so would jeopardize our non-profit status.

But this much I do know and am willing to say: I applaud each of these men for the courage to strike out on the paths that they have taken. I remember, almost 40 years ago, Confirmation Class here at B'nai Jehudah. Some of my classmates may remember our closing banquet. Part of the evening included future predictions for each of the confirmands. I have no idea who wrote them. I do remember what mine was. I was going to become the first Jewish president of the United States.

At the time, I was just embarrassed by the laughter of the group. As the years passed, though, I would occasionally recall the event, shake my head, and say to myself, "You would have to be crazy to want to be president."

Neither John McCain nor Barack Obama is crazy. Rather, they are two dedicated Americans who have figured out where they want their life journey to take them.

We should be so fortunate.

As we enter into this new year, do we know where **we** are going? Is the path for us to take as clearly delineated as it is for Senators Obama and McCain?

The semanticist, psychologist, and United States Senator, S. I. Hayakawa, observed that "most people don't know the answer to the questions, "How are you? How do you feel?" The reason why they don't know is that they are so busy feeling what they are **supposed** feel, thinking what they are **supposed** to think, that they never get down to examining their **own** deepest feelings. "How did you like the play?" "Oh, it was a fine play. It was well reviewed in The New Yorker." With authority figures like drama critics..., teachers and professors...yes, and even rabbis...telling us what to think and how to feel, many of us are busy playing roles, fulfilling other people's expectations...Not many of us ask ourselves, "How do **I** feel? What do **I** think?" - and wait for an answer."¹

When we do, though, when we ask ourselves – truly ask ourselves – "How are we? How are we doing" – and can listen to the answer, we can be amazed at what we hear. For there will be that inner voice – almost like a spiritual compass – that gives us our answers...not answers others have created for us, but our own...filled with our own hopes, dreams, desires. If we are prepared to ask the questions and listen to our own answers, our journeys and the visions that inform them become powerful tools for self-discovery.

Some of you may know this true story, having first been published about six years ago. It is a paradigmatic tale of a life

journey, of asking the questions and listening to the answer.

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"On his way out from shul in Jerusalem, Dan approached a young man... [with] curly black hair -- looked Sephardi, maybe Moroccan.

"Good Shabbos. My name is Dan... Would you like to eat at my house tonight?"

The young man's face broke in an instant from a worried look to a smile.

"Yeah, thanks. My name is Machi."

...A few minutes later they were all standing around Dan's Shabbos table. Dan noticed his guest fidgeting and leafing through his songbook, apparently looking for something. He asked with a smile, "Is there a song you want to sing?"

...The guest's face lit up. "There is a song I'd like to sing, but I can't find it here. I really liked what we sang in the synagogue tonight. What was it called? Something 'dodi.'"

Dan paused for a moment, on the verge of saying, "It's not usually sung at the table," but then he caught himself. "If that's what the kid wants," he thought, "what's the harm?" Aloud he said, "You mean Lecha Dodi. Wait, let me get you a [prayerbook]."

Once they had sung Lecha Dodi, the young man resumed his silence until after the soup, when Dan asked him, "Which song now?" The guest looked embarrassed, but after a bit of encouragement said firmly, "I'd really like to sing Lecha Dodi again."

Dan was not really all that surprised when, after the chicken, he asked his guest what song now, and the young man said, "Lecha Dodi, please." Dan ...asked, "Don't you want to sing something else?"

His guest blushed and looked down. "I just really like that one," he mumbled. "Just

something about it - I really like it." In all, they must have sung "The Song" eight or nine times...

Later Dan asked, "Where are you from?" The boy looked pained, then stared down at the floor and said softly, "Ramallah."

Dan was sure he'd heard the boy say "Ramallah," a large Arab city on the West Bank. Quickly he caught himself, and then realized that he must have said Ramleh, an Israeli city. Dan said, "Oh, I have a cousin there. Do you know Ephraim Warner? He lives on Herzl Street."

The young man shook his head sadly. "There are no Jews in Ramallah."

Dan gasped. He really had said "Ramallah"! His thoughts were racing. Did he just spend Shabbos with an Arab? He told the boy, "I'm sorry, I'm a bit confused. And now that I think of it, I haven't even asked your full name. What is it, please?"

The boy looked nervous for a moment, then squared his shoulders and said quietly, "Machmud Ibn-esh-Sharif..."

Hesitantly, he continued: "I was born and grew up in Ramallah. I was taught to hate my Jewish oppressors, and to think that killing them was heroism.

But I always had my doubts...I used to sit and wonder, 'Weren't the Yahud [Jews] people, too? Didn't they have the right to live the same as us?' ...I put these questions to my father, and he threw me out of the house. By now my mind was made up: I was going to run away and live with the Yahud, until I could find out what they were really like. I snuck back into the house that night, to get my things...

My mother caught me in the middle of packing. I told her that I wanted to go live with the Jews for a while and find out what they're really like and maybe I would even want to convert.

She was turning more and more pale while I said all this, and I thought she was angry, but that wasn't it. Something else was hurting her and she whispered gently, 'You don't have to convert. You already are a Jew.' ...I'm Jewish, [she told me,] so that means you're Jewish.'

I never had any idea my mother was Jewish. I guess she didn't want anyone to know. ...She went and dug out some old documents, and handed them to me: things like my birth certificate and her old Israeli ID card, so I could prove I was a Jew...

My mother hesitated about one piece of paper. Then she said, 'You may as well take this. It is an old photograph of my grandparents which was taken when they went visiting the grave of some great ancestor of ours.' Now I have traveled here to Israel. I'm just trying to find out where I belong."

Dan gently put his hand on Machmud's shoulder. Machmud looked up, scared and hopeful at the same time. Dan asked, "Do you have the photo here?"

The boy's face lit up. "Sure! I always carry it with me." He reached in his backpack and pulled out an old, tattered envelope.

When Dan read the gravestone inscription, he nearly dropped the photo. He rubbed his eyes to make sure. There was no doubt. This was a grave in the old cemetery in Tzfat, and the inscription identified it as the grave of the great Kabbalist and tzaddik Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz.

Dan's voice quivered with excitement as he explained to Machmud who his ancestor was. "...Machmud, your ancestor wrote that song we were singing all Shabbos: Lecha Dodi!"

This time it was Machmud's turn to be struck speechless. Dan extended his trembling hand and said, "Welcome home, Machmud."²

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The purpose of this tale tonight is not to focus on Israel-Arab or Israel-Palestinian relations. Nor is it meant to prejudice towards or against Palestinians residing in the region. Rather, the story's intent today is simple: to describe an amazing path one human being embarked on. And the results it produced.

For according to the source I found,³ Machmud changed his name and enrolled in a yeshiva in Jerusalem, where he studied to "catch up" on his Jewish education. He married a nice Jewish girl, and gained popularity as a lecturer, recounting his dramatic story.

All because this young man reached deep within himself and discovered a yearning. He listened to the voice inside and stepped onto his path, both creating his journey and going where it might lead him.

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Tonight, we stand at the tipping point between what we have been and what we yet hope to become. Today is the day we can step forward on our own paths, discovering and fulfilling our Jewish hopes, dreams, and desires.

Our congregation has taken its own bold step, an initiative unlike any congregation in America has embarked upon. We have committed ourselves to walking our own path...what we have described as a big, holy, awesome goal.

What is it? Simply that all members of the congregation envision for themselves what their individual Jewish paths might look like. These IJPs will be guides, google maps for one's Jewish aspirations. Using them, we will each pursue our Jewish hopes, dreams, and desires. The congregation's role will be to support these IJPs...and undoubtedly change in response to where we wish to go on our unique individual journeys.

In the coming months, we will be hearing more about this incredible congregational transformation. Yes, there are many

questions to answer. And to be honest, we don't have all of the answers yet. But a dedicated group of volunteers and staff are working on this...probably the most ambitious undertaking of the congregation in over a decade. The details of how, what, when, where, with whom will all be spelled out over the year. We will begin slowly with a couple of beta testing groups, just to make sure we have the process right. Once we do, we invite everyone here – perhaps as individuals, perhaps as families, maybe even as chavurot – to explore within ourselves where we have yet to travel as Jewish souls...and then – with volunteer guides as our partners – we will design our individual Jewish paths. This process, for individuals and for the congregation, doesn't happen overnight. We imagine our personal IJPs will span a couple of years and engaging most of the congregation will take between five and ten years...a truly ambitious goal – no less ambitious than President Kennedy announcing our country's goal of putting a man on the moon. Or a presidential candidate declaring that his path is the one leading to change and healing. Or even a young Palestinian declaring what his path will be...not one of

hatred and destruction, but of love and even self-discovery.

In Torah, we have more than a handful of extraordinary examples of IJPs, of individual Jewish pathmaking. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua...all set forth on journeys destined to expand their horizons, grow their souls, and – as we know from our traditions – change history. They didn't always know where they were headed. But each knew they had a path to walk, and were courageous and faithful enough to do so. It is our turn to walk as they once walked, to discover the journeys within our souls, and to explore where our Jewish lives may take us.

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I do not know who will be the next president of the United States, whether John or Barack. And I do not know fully the path Machmud has traveled in the intervening years since discovering his Jewish identity or what his future will yet be. But this I do know: our individual Jewish paths are open before us on this Rosh Hashanah. We – like John and Barack and Machmud – need only to step forth and begin our journeys.

¹ Hayakawa, S. I. "What Does It Mean to Be Creative?," *Through the Communication Barrier*. ed. Arthur Chandler; Harper & Row; New York; 1979; pp. 104-105

² http://www.aish.com/spirituality/odysseys/Coming_Home_From_Ramallah.asp

³ Roth, Zev; *Monsey, Kiryat Sefer and Beyond*; Targum Press; 2002 (adapted for use in this sermon)