

"THE POWER OF PURPOSE"

*Rosh Hashanah Morning 5769 – Tuesday, September 30, 2008
The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas
Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff, Rabbi Neal Schuster,
Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner, and Cantor Sharon Kohn*

(Introduction) Rabbi Nemitoff:

I am holding in my hand a shard. If you could examine it up close, you would see there is nothing remarkable about it. In truth, it is a just a dusty, dirty, broken piece of pottery.

What is its significance? Whenever I sit with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah on the day before they lead the congregation in prayer, I give them a pottery shard similar to this one.

This is what I tell them:

"This pottery shard is about 2200 years old. It comes from the land of Israel. I found it in a place you may not have heard of, but I guarantee you know the holiday to which the place is connected. The place is the ancient town of Modi'in. The holiday is Chanukah.

The area around Modi'in is where Judah the Maccabee, his father Mattithias, as well as his brothers and their families all lived...about 2200 years ago. We do not know if Judah or his father or any of the Hasmoneans ever used the pot from which this pottery shard came. But we do know that it lived at the same time and in the same place as the Maccabees.

So, why do I give this shard to you? (I rhetorically ask the student)

Because the story of Chanukah is the story of people who loved their Judaism, who found deep meaning for their lives from the teachings of Torah. They were prepared to sacrifice even their lives for future generations to practice and grow from Judaism...because those that opposed them wanted to destroy Judaism. When you hold onto this shard, (I tell the child) I want you

to remember that fact, I want you to always be proud of who you are as a Jewish person, to find meaning for your life in that fact.

Another reason I give you this shard (I say) is because this shard is a piece of Jewish history. And tomorrow, you become a piece of Jewish history. Just as this pottery is a link from the past, you are a link to the future." I conclude by encouraging them to go to Israel someday, to find the "pieces" that match this shard, and so doing putting together a Judaism that will help their lives to be whole, to be complete.

Meaning. Connection. Continuity. That is the significance of this shard I hold in my hand and that I give to each of our B'nai Mitzvah students.

You know, it's funny. I've been doing this for the five years we've been here at B'nai Jehudah, and never consciously connected it to what our congregation has been doing over the past 3 years...discovering and articulating our core purpose.

But that is exactly what we, as a congregation, are all about: nurturing Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity.

For me, I found our purpose wrapped up in a lowly, dusty, broken pottery shard. It brings alive those elements of our core purpose in a way that informs my own life...and I hope...speaks to our 13-year-olds as they receive it as a gift.

Today, we want to share with you how meaning, connection, and continuity speak to us...how we contextualize these concepts within our own minds and souls.

Our messages today are brief, just a few minutes each. Rabbi Shuval-Weiner will

speaking about meaning. Rabbi Schuster about connection. And Cantor Kohn about continuity.

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(Meaning) Rabbi Shuval-Weiner:

....it is in the wee hours of the morn when the world is at its darkest and most raw that I believe the soul grapples with our deepest fears. Each one of us at some time in our lives will find ourselves struggling with the question of meaning. What is meaning? It is that intangible that each and every human strives for. Without it, we are empty.

I recall an encounter that has forever marked my heart: I was living in Tel Aviv and working in Jerusalem. One particular night, working late I missed my bus, by the time I got back to Tel-Aviv it was long past midnight. As I hurried from the bus stop, out of the night mist came the most painful wail I have ever heard...I didn't know if it was animal or human, but it was primal and aching. From the direction of the sound I could see the faint silhouette of a being. I approached to find a beautifully dressed woman, softly sobbing. Inquiring if she needed help, she seemed to look through me as she cried out "I am lost-my life has no meaning" and with that ran into the night.

I have no idea who she was or what became of her. What I do know, is that experience shook me to my core. As a young woman, it awoke in me the desire to live my life in a way that I had not understood prior to that moment. This may sound harsh, but I remember thinking that I never wanted to know that kind of despair. I vowed that the way that I would live my life would define the meaning of my life.

As human beings we have the obligation to seek out meaning in all that we do, in the choices that we make and what we experience, be it the mundane day-to-day or the emotionally heightened moments of suffering and celebration.

Yet over the years I have found that it is so very easy to get sidetracked, to lose one's way... or to allow less-than-important desires to blind us from the very things that nurture meaning. For me, I have to leave reminders for myself so when I get off track, I am able to find my way back. The things with which I surround myself are a reflection of all that is meaningful to me: every picture, every chotckei, the pebbles that sit on my desk, even the tallit that I wear, with its juice stains and braids platted by my children over the years...they help me make meaning, they help me remember what is meaningful.

Like so many souls in this room, I have experienced loss, struggling to make sense out of the unfathomable and desperately hoping to find the strength to move forward.

It was in darkness that I learned to see that which is most important in my life- Drifting off to sleep holding my husband's hand, watching my children grow, basking in the glow of the Shabbat candles or helping someone in need. These are the moments that are meaningful to me, because they bring meaning to my existence.

Judaism is how I actualize my existence, it provides for me a framework to live a life imbued with meaning, seeing the Divine in each human being, expecting of me participation in perfecting the world and providing me the language to express my gratitude for all that I encounter in my life.

I have learned that by breathing, living in the moment and keeping my eyes open to all that is around me, I am able to nurture the things that bring meaning to my life. By doing this, I know that I will never be lost and it will be impossible for me to question whether there is meaning to my life..

This is my context for meaning. What is yours?

* * *

(Connection) Rabbi Schuster:

About two years ago we were in Seattle for a family Bar Mitzvah, and my friend Alan Waldbaum came over with his wife and kids to visit with us. Alan and I were roommates together for three years in college, and before that we went to the same high school, and we used to go to the same summer camp, and going back even further, we went to Sunday School together. So we have known each other for a long time. And it was nice for us to see each other; to spend some time together, and to see our kids playing together.

And what was really amazing about it was that on the wall of the living room where we were sitting, and where our kids were playing with each other, there was a photograph from the late 1940's, from the wedding of my Great Aunt Millie and Great Uncle Irv, both of blessed memory. There were maybe 30 or 40 people in the picture, and all of them were either from the Waldbaum family and the Rogers Clan – that's Alan's family, or from my family, the Schusters and the Glucks.

And it really just blew me away to be sitting there in that living room and realize that our families had, essentially, been playing together for four generations. And these are the kinds of connections that really make me miss being in Seattle. Like when I look at my friend, Craig Levin, who had my mother as a Bar Mitzvah tutor, and I see his kids and Alan's kids growing up together at the JCC preschool, it makes me wish that my kids were growing up with them too.

And especially on days like today, when I look out into the congregation and I see groups of extended families sitting together, it fills me with a sense of absence, of longing, knowing that half a country away, my brothers and my nieces and nephews, sisters-in-law, cousins – they're all sitting clustered together in a social hall a lot like this one, for Rosh Hashana services.

And as I began to reflect on this question of connection and what it means in my life, these are the kinds of relationships that immediately came to mind. And while I do feel that sense of being absent from the unfolding lives of all of these people with whom I share such a meaningful past, I know that wherever we go, we make new connections, new friendships. That, ultimately, we make a new past, giving new roots to our connections with the important people in our lives.

But, in my mind, while I was wrestling with this idea of connections, and how they give our lives meaning and context, how vital they are to our sense of being a part of something more than just ourselves, of how fundamental our human drive is to seek out and forge connections with other people and other families...

...I kept on thinking of the more deeply rooted historical connections as having the greatest significance for me. As if those are the ones that really count for something.

And the new ones? The new connections?

Well, we've got to make some new connections, so here they are.

I realized that I had been thinking of the new connections as a kind of pale substitute or replacement for the ones that I have back home that are so deeply rooted in history. And that's when I realized that I had it all backwards. As powerful and evocative as the history is that we share, that is what pales and fades. Picturing my kids playing with Alan Waldbaum's kids beneath that photograph, I am struck by the fact that it is not the photograph of preceding generations that makes the moment so meaningful, it is our children playing beneath it that makes it so.

The past may give our connections depth and texture, but it is what connection mean for us in the present that makes it profound. It is not just about the past we share, it is about the past we are making together in the present.

The connections of my past will always be meaningful for me, and it is especially

important to me to be able to renew and resume those connections whenever I can. But, in the same way that we aren't nourished by memories of the great meals we've had, it is the relationships that I have now, today, that sustain me and give my life a sense of meaning and context, of connection.

There was a point of transition for me, when flying in to Kansas City stopped feeling like arriving in a strange place, and finally started feeling like coming home. And I think that what made it feel that way is the sense of connection that we have to people here; that sense of having people we want to call when something important happens in our lives; that sense of having people that we can invite over for Shabbat dinner or Havdalah at the last minute, and not have to vacuum.

Having people that I wouldn't hesitate to call upon, God forbid, in an emergency; having people in my life who I can imagine, someday, our great grandchildren playing in a living room where there's a photograph on the wall – from now - of our families together.

Whether or not it actually happens is not what is important to me. It is the possibility of it happening.

It's the parts that we play in each others' lives at this moment in time; these are the things that matter to me; these are the connections that give my life a sense of presence, as well as past and future.

And for me, that is what connection means.

What does it mean... for you?

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(Continuity) Cantor Kohn:

In my childhood home, there were 2 Matza covers.

Why 2? We only need one. There were 2, because one was made by my mother's

mother, embroidered with the motifs found often in her work. The other was made by my father's mother, white thread crocheted into bold lace.

The power of these covers is not just that my grandmothers made them. I have other things from them that are far more beautiful. It is the multiple meanings and memories they represent that make them so precious: The many Seders presided over by my father of blessed memory. The Hebrew I learned. The songs that I sang around the tables where those covers were present. The songs I've taught for others to sing at their tables. The food prepared with my mother over the years, first in her kitchen and now often in mine. All these strands create a strong thread, which anchors me to a past and to a future.

In my leisure time, I sew, knit, crochet, embroider and needlepoint. I love how a single strand can be manipulated to make a pattern of complexity and strength. I treasure the people I have met who have taught me the meaning of my grandmother's German pattern books. There is an instant connection with others when I discover that they share my pleasure in the colors and textures of yarns. There is something special, almost holy, when I hold something made by hands belonging to generations before me.

A single thread or bit of yarn is easily broken or frayed. One rarely takes notice of it. When braided, twisted or knotted it is strong and interesting. It can withstand pressures and time. What it becomes can have multiple uses and be passed from one home to another, perhaps being imbued with meaning because of the memories it evokes.

Our lives are like those threads. Only by manipulating them, by having an idea of the design we wish to create, by joining with other threads, can our actions withstand the pressures of living and the passage of time. The presence of other threads strengthens our ability to maintain the integrity of the life being shaped. It is

the interweaving of all the facets of our lives which can strengthen and enrich us. It is the memories we are touched by that give us the insight and vision for the patterns we hope to weave. It is the memories we leave with others that ensure we are remembered: our fabric, if you will, cherished by those who come after us.

Where I am in life was determined by decisions made before me. Others made many of those decisions and I am the beneficiary of the good and must decide how to handle the miscalculations. The patterns I create in the present are mine, but unlike my knitting, which is a discrete object, my life is intertwined with the lives of the people I meet. I also have the opportunity to be mindful of the future. Do I leave openings for new threads to be joined? Do I leave some colors for others, so that the work can be better integrated? Do I tightly bind off the edge or do I leave the ends ready for the next generation?

One of the first ritual objects I made was a Matzo cover-mine needlepoint on an Israeli canvas, the work begun in Jerusalem. Did my family need 3 covers? Perhaps-there are 3 siblings in my family, each living far away from the others. Or perhaps, because making a Matzah cover is what I was drawn to do, in recognition and appreciation of those who came before me, with a great hope in those who will come after. I have grandchildren. Maybe, just maybe, some day, one of these covers will be on their Seder tables, providing them with a tangible thread from their past to their future. This is my context for continuity. What is yours?

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(Conclusion) Rabbi Nemitoff:

I was on a flight last week on the way home to Kansas City. I boarded and settled into my seat. The flight attendant got on the P.A. system, and I imagined it would be routine...please fasten your seatbelts, stow your tray tables, and put your seats in the upright position...but I was wrong. Instead, this is what she said, "I know each of you

has already fastened your seat belt, and I know that your tray tables are put away, and I know that everyone's seat is in the upright position, and since no one wants to fall if they need to get out of their seat, I know you have already stowed your carry-on luggage tight under your seats." She spoke with both humor and a gentle tenderness, that my retelling doesn't convey.

I asked her name and inquired about her variation on the standard FAA safety script. Peggy told me that she decided her role in life – her purpose – was to affirm the goodness of others, the goodness of life, and to enjoy and help others enjoy each and every moment.

I was intrigued. When I asked why, she asked me why I was asking. I told her I was a rabbi and found her interactions with passengers to be inspiring. And I pressed her for more.

This is what she said: "You know, I wasn't always like this. I spent years grouching about this or that, nothing was ever quite good enough. Then, a bunch of things happened in my life that taught me to take each day that comes and to fill it with humor, joy, and meaning. My folks are both in their nineties. My mom has Alzheimer's; my dad has Parkinson's. When you – [and now I am going to paraphrase] tend to your parents' most personal and intimate hygiene needs, you get a certain perspective on life. We recognize that such a state of existence is a possibility for all of us, so today needs to be meaningful, not to be wasted. I try to find meaning in meeting people and making their lives just a bit happier. I want to make connections with others, knowing that while they exist only for my flights, hopefully my actions will somehow continue through them...and they will make the world a little bit better to live in. Life is way too short. You have to have fun and make a difference at the same time."

I have no idea what my flight attendant's faith traditions were. But I know that she

wasn't Jewish. But her comments were completely aligned with our congregation's core purpose – meaning, connection, continuity. Some would say it was beshert that she and I were on that flight, that God put us together.

Whether fate or happenstance, this much is true: Peggy articulated a way of living – a purpose, a reason for being – that incorporates those elements so many in our congregation told us were essential to them, as well. And it changed her life.

We are like Peggy...each of us has the capacity to reach inside and discover how to bring meaning, connection, and continuity into our lives. Our task – our mutual challenge to you – is to do the work in this new year that Peggy did – to do the work that Rabbi Shuval-Weiner, Rabbi Schuster, Cantor Kohn, and I talked about. We have offered **our** context for finding meaning, connection, and continuity in our lives. What's yours?