

## **"THINK DIFFERENT"**

*Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767 – Friday, September 22, 2006*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas*

*Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

My guess is that at least half of you here tonight have cell phones with you, right? And most of them are on, right?

So, here's my question: Why? Why have a cell phone on during Rosh Hashanah services?

Rabbi Schuster had his with him at all times just over a year ago, when he and Tamara were expecting the birth of their son, Judah. Some in the congregation tonight are physicians and they need to be reachable in case of emergencies. Some of you are parents with young children at home and you want the babysitter to be able to get you. And others may have sick relatives for whom the phone is their life line.

All these reasons? They are potential crises. For those of us who are old enough to remember the days of party lines and trunk calls, when the phone rang late at night...our first thought was, "Oh my gosh, something's wrong." When we would get a long distance phone call from a relative, we would instinctively ask, "What's wrong? Who died?" Our phones have historically been our crisis hotlines.

As Jews, living with crisis comes as second nature. From Egyptian slavery to the destruction of the first and second Temples to the Crusades to the Inquisition, even the

Holocaust...all were moments when crisis shook our very foundations...crises that transformed us as a faith community.

Our responses to crisis provided the key to our survival. When it looked like our exile following the destruction of the second Temple was not going to be short-lived, we committed to writing our oral traditions. Thus, the Mishnah and Talmud were created. When we suffered unimaginable physical degradation and pain during the early centuries of the Middle Ages, we turned to the only place where we controlled our lives – inward towards our own souls – and discovered the mystery of mysticism.

However, there has also been a price to pay. Like the way so many of us still consider a late-night phone call or why our cell phones are with us on Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish way of looking at the world is skewed...tilted towards a crisis modality.

A midrash, a rabbinic tale, relates how the children of Israel were gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. When God – having selected the Jews to become the Chosen People – shared with them the contents of the Torah, they refused to accept this "gift." God responded by taking Mt. Sinai and lifting it directly over the heads of the Israelites. God then

asked, "Now will you take My Torah as your possession?"

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Such is the state of our Judaism. We never seem to enjoy it. Rather, we are people of the mountain, responding passionately only when crisis occurs, when the mountain hangs above our heads. A number of years ago, a UJC poster I saw displayed five significant dates in Israel's history, accompanied by pictures depicting events which occurred in those years: 1948 - Israel Independence; 1967 - Six Day War; 1976 - Entebbe; 1985 - Ethiopian Rescue; 1986 - Anatoly Scharansky. Emblazoned across the bottom read the caption: "Remember How You Felt? Be Proud Of Your Past. Take Part In Your Future." It is not by accident that the UJC's daily email on Jewish news is called "Daily Alert." Not update. Not info. Alert! Alert! When we are threatened, we shore up our defenses. We man the ramparts.

When Jews are attacked, we do declare our Jewish unity. This summer, when Israel fought to defend its borders against Hezbollah terrorists, there was an outpouring of financial and vocal support for Israel. Together, our congregation raised almost \$13,000 in just over two weeks to help pay for bomb shelters to protect innocent lives.

That's the good news. For whenever we have acted out of trauma, we performed at our best. More than at any other time, we are involved, committed, really Jewish — with a capital "J" — during those occasions,

where we are fighting for our Jewish survival.

The problem with this approach is that we turn Judaism into a reactive experience.

We hear this sentiment echoed in Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment. Fackenheim, a contemporary Jewish theologian, maintained that, after the Holocaust, an extra commandment has been added to the Torah's original 613. It is, he said, that "the Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler a posthumous victory." This is the ultimate in crisis-living, a mandate to turn our people's paradigmatic trauma into a modern religious testament. Having survived the Holocaust, we no longer have to respond except to crisis.

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A recent Gallup Poll<sup>1</sup> showed that Americans view Jews more favorably than any other religious group in our country. We Jews got the highest positive rating (58%) and the lowest negative rating (4%). In analyzing the statistics, Michael Medved, a nationally syndicated talk show host, suggests the numbers reveal a fatal flaw in who we are. He writes, "People across the country rate Judaism positively not because the messages of our faith come across with so much strength and influence in our society, but because those teachings seem so confused [and] uncertain."<sup>2</sup> Our lack of negative perception is our weakness, not our strength, for we — as a community — are a religious cipher in America. We do not regularly display passion for who we are and

what we believe. We show devotion to our faith only at moments of crisis.

To quote Gerald Bubis, founding director of HUC-JIR's School of Jewish Communal Service, we are an "ever-dying people."<sup>3</sup> We are at our best when we react, when the mountain is hanging above our heads. Sadly, this basis for Israel's and Jewish survival leaves little room for joy and dynamism.

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Instead, I would suggest that we hearken back to an ad campaign done by Apple Computers in the late '90s. It's advertising slogan was "Think Different."

In a series of print ads, individual black and white pictures of Neil Armstrong, Mahatma Ghandi, Pablo Picasso, Maria Callas, and Thomas Edison filled a newspaper or magazine page. In one corner, the Apple logo was displayed...along with the tagline: "Think Different."

The message was subtle and simple: Apple computers ARE different than the way the rest of the Windows-based machines work. But different is not bad. Different is good. Different makes a difference.

It is time for us – as a faith community – to begin to "Think Different." It is time to stop being afraid that the mountain will fall on us, to respond only when danger rears its hoary head. It is time – again to quote Gerald Bubis – "[to reject our label as] an ever-dying people. We are an eternal people...When the last anti-Semite

dies, we [will be forced to] confront our essence as Jews. Why wait? Why not...marshal the will now to [experience] this marvelous reality we call Judaism...The pleasures and fulfillments are too enriching to keep [from] ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

It is time to "Think Different."

When Israel was at war with Hezbollah just two months ago, we recognized it was a crisis of unparalleled dimension. This was a war about Israel's very survival. And we responded.

Now that the crisis has abated and Katushya rockets are NOT raining down on Israeli towns, what are we doing – how are we responding? My guess is Israel has gone from headline to footnote in our daily lives. It is all but forgotten.

So how do we "Think Different" about Israel?

Israel is not just a place that we should worry about or just "save" – even though we should surely do both. Instead, Israel is a place and an idea to celebrate, to embrace with zeal. Probably the most meaningful way is to visit Israel. 27 of us went this past summer, and we had a life-changing experience. Our congregation is returning once again, in late June through early July. You want to "Think Different" about Israel and not just respond to crises? Join us and gain a love and a knowledge and a passion for this land that you never knew you possessed. That small act will – quite simply – change your life. You will no longer be the same as everyone else. You will be different.

However, not every one of us can travel to Israel. For some, it is time. For others, it is economic. Still for others, our bodies may not permit such travel. Just as Apple's ad campaign presented individuals from various areas of our culture – the arts, science, politics – there are many ways in addition to Israel that we can respond to our traditions differently than we have in the past.

Simply “Think Different” about being Jewish. Here are but three ideas.

First, see yourself as being part of the Chosen People. Being Jewish is NOT a burden or a bother. It is a privilege and an opportunity to make the world a better place in which to live. To paraphrase President John F. Kennedy, “ask not what your Jewish community can do for you, but ask what you can do on behalf of the Jewish community.” Begin to see your role in life as a giver; not a taker. Commit to some act of Tikkun Olam, of healing the world. Here is what Jarret Levin, a 14-year-old in our congregation, did. He collected over 1000 Beanie Babies and we have taken 700 to Hadassah Hospital in Israel, for the children who are patients there. Or what Bob Cutler did. As president of his company, C3, he gives every employee a week off to do Tikkun Olam. Not only does he pay them for the week but also assists the employee in setting up the mitzvah project. That's what they did. Whatever you do, connect it to your Jewish identity and to your covenantal commitment. Act because you are Jewish. It will completely alter your self-perception.

Second, pay attention to your spiritual life. Anyone here ever diet? Is it easy? As anyone who has tried to lose weight knows, it only works when we begin to think different about the way we eat and live, right? So...try a spiritual diet for 90 days. Instead of viewing services as burden or bother, discover what is nourishing about being part of a praying community here at B'nai Jehudah on Shabbat. Just as we eventually see the pounds begin to shed away if we stick to our diets, you will discover soulful elements up 'til now dormant if you try this. 90 days. It will change everything about you.

Third, consider taking intellectual ownership of your faith and traditions. Many of us stopped learning about our Judaism at age 13 or so. No wonder being Jewish is a reactive experience for most of us. We have no context...no perspective to view it in any other light. It is time to think different. Take one class...ANY course we or any other synagogue or Jewish institution in this community offers. Recognize that learning isn't a bother or a burden. You have the right to learn about who you have been all these years! And my guess is that you will enrich not just your mind, but your Jewish soul.

In each one of these three examples – in caring others; in caring about our spiritual life; and in caring about our intellectual life – Thinking Different will cause you to feel different!

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My great-great grandfather was Abraham Mapu. He owns a footnote

in Jewish history as the author of the first modern Hebrew novel. He lived in Lithuania in the first half of the nineteenth century. He took Biblical Hebrew – which many Jews knew from the synagogue – and used it to write a novel, called “Ahavat Tziyon – The Love of Zion.” What makes this event noteworthy is that no one had ever before used Biblical Hebrew as the language for a modern novel. That, in and of itself, would qualify for thinking different. But Mapu went one step further. He used the novel as a platform to contrast “the resplendent romantic ideal of Zion with the depressing, impoverished world of the European shtetl.”<sup>5</sup> So doing, he suggested that the pain of exile, which had been the *raison d’être* of Jewish life since the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE, was no longer capable of preserving Jewish life. It needed something more. It required a belief in the essential goodness of Judaism and the land of Israel, in its dynamism and its beauty. For Judaism and Jews to survive, Mapu opined, we must think different.

So, some 153 years after his great-great-grandfather challenged his generation to do so, I humbly repeat his message tonight.

It is not enough for us to live as though a mountain is hanging over our heads, prepared to crush us if we do not respond. When we are threatened, we must act, of course. But to live our lives merely in response to hatred and danger, to live in a Fackenheim-614th commandment universe...how is that living?

Rather, it is our opportunity tonight, at the beginning of a new year...just as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century...to see Judaism in a new light...to see Israel in a new light...to see ourselves in a new light. Let us spend the coming days and weeks and months ahead not afraid of the mountain but embracing that which was presented atop the mountain. Let us think different, and as we do, may each of us live different. L’shana Tova.

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<sup>1</sup> September 7, 2006; as reported by Michael Medved; Townhall.com; September 13, 2006; Salem Web Network

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bubis, Gerald; “Back to the Future: Jewish Awakening and Renewal”; Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs – Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoint; No. 340 30 Av 5756 / 15 August 1996

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Band, Arnold J.; Hebrew Literature and the Zionist Narrative; Lecture; <http://fpnew.ccit.arizona.edu/judaic/bilgray/band/Band2.htm>