

“WHAT ABOUT KAMTZA?”

Yom Kippur Morning 5768 – Saturday, September 22, 2007

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Neal Schuster

About a year ago, I decided on a topic for this year's Yom Kippur sermon.

A year ago!

And all year long I nurtured this idea; I kept little notes and scribbles and worked on it... because I knew that this idea was going to be my Yom Kippur sermon.

And everything was coming along beautifully, when all of a sudden I get this flash of inspiration. This profound and deep philosophical insight hits me. And now, it's out with the old idea, because I've got a new idea. And I love the new idea, and it's wonderful, and it's going to be an amazing sermon and I start writing and mapping notes and I'm crafting and it's coming together and every time that I step back from my work and I look at it I realize that this new sermon that I'm writing around that profound and deep philosophical insight that had hit me in a flash of inspiration... I'm realizing... that it has no point.

It's so easy for me to forget that it's a long way from a deep thought... to a decent sermon that makes a point.

In the mean time, the original sermon idea, the one that I'd had for a year, the one that I had nurtured and worked on all those months... in the meantime... I gave that sermon on Shabbat a few weeks ago.

I should've stuck with my plan.

So, after struggling and struggling to pull something really worthwhile out of the new sermon idea, I finally said I've got to go

back to the old one. So I'm going to give that sermon right now, for the second time - with apologies to all of you for whom this sermon will be a repeat. I've changed it a little bit, but you will definitely recognize it. I just decided that it's a lot worse for everyone to have to sit through a lousy sermon with no real point, than it is for some of you to have to sit through a repeat of what I hope is a decent sermon, and what I know is an important message.

So, with apologies and no further ado, I'll proceed.

...so these two Jews walk into a bar... no, I'm just kidding, that's not my sermon.

My sermon actually starts with a story from the Talmud. As far as stories from the Talmud go, it's actually a pretty well known one, at least among people who know stories from the Talmud. The reason it's so well known is because it's explaining how Jerusalem came to be destroyed by the Romans. The rabbis use the story to show how the entire destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple all came about because of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred.

So the story starts with a man who decides to have a party. Now, the guy who's having the party, he happens to have a good friend whose name is Kamtza. And he has an enemy whose name is Bar Kamtza. But when his servant goes out to deliver the invitations, he messes up, and instead of delivering the invitation to Kamtza, he delivers it to Bar Kamtza, whom the host can't stand.

Well, the night of the party comes, and when the host sees that Bar Kamtza is there, he goes ballistic and he starts screaming for him to get out of here, get out of my house, out of this party. Bar Kamtza, of course, is mortified, and he says to the host, look, I'm here already, how about, just for the sake of avoiding embarrassment, could I stay? I'll gladly pay for the cost of my meal. The host screams forget it, get out. So Bar Kamtza offers to pay for half the cost of the party, and the host still refuses and he even refuses when Bar Kamtza offers to pay for the entire party, and he throws Bar Kamtza out. And it's a terrible thing and all kinds of terrible events unfold from it eventually leading to the destruction of Jerusalem.

But what I keep thinking every time I hear this story - is what about Kamtza? I mean, poor Kamtza is sitting at home wondering, why wasn't I invited? These are my friends, we go to all of each other's parties. What have I done? Did I offend them? Do they not really like me? Am I annoying to them?

Poor Kamtza is sitting there at home experiencing that empty, awful anguish of being left out.

That feeling that comes from being left out - it is such a deep aching. When everyone else has gotten their invitation in the mail, to the wedding, the bar mitzvah, the party - and no invitation shows up for us.... Or the group that always has lunch together doesn't ask us to join them, or even a group of people having a conversation that we just seem stuck outside of - it is an awful feeling.

People being on the outside, being shut out, left out: it is so common, it happens all the time. And sometimes it is not even intentional on the part of the people who are leaving the person out.

But whether it is done intentionally or through oversight, it is a terrible

transgression. And the reason is for that is because of the devastating impact that it has on the person being left out.

There's an almost physical ache to it, that emptiness in the pit of the stomach, that sense of despair and loneliness and not being liked... it is truly one of the most horrible feelings a person can experience.

It calls to mind what the rabbis in the Talmud say about embarrassing a person in public, which is another absolutely horrible feeling to experience. The rabbis say, ha malbin p'nai chavero b'rabim, k'shofech damim - one who embarrasses a person in front of others, it's like spilling their blood. It's like killing them. And we can see that in the language that we use. We say something was so awful, I wanted to die.

Being left out is exactly the same. Excluding someone from something, especially something in which they should be included, is also like spilling their blood. The feeling is like a feeling of death, of wanting to die. That's how deep it is.

And the rabbis give us another story that reminds us that it is very easy for that hurt and despair to turn into anger and bitterness.

They tell us the story of the origins of Amalek. In the Bible, the Amalekites are the most vicious, bitter and cruel enemies that the Children of Israel have to face. They're mean, rotten and nasty. Terrible. And where do they come from? The story the rabbis tell us is that there was a woman named Timna, and she wanted to join the tribes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they refused. They rejected her. So she went to Esau and said I would rather be a servant among your people than a princess among my own. So Esau gave her as a concubine to one of his sons. And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son whom she named

Amalek. And out of the bitterness of her having been rejected, came his horrible, intractable hatred and cruelty toward the Children of Israel.

And this is a story the rabbis tell.

It reminds us that it is so easy for the person who is left out to end up acting out with anger and with cruel behavior; if not against others, it may be against themselves.

But if we can muster the courage and the sense of moral imperative, then we can prevent it from happening in the first place. It takes a conscious decision to look around and decide that we are not going to let it happen, that we are not going to just stand by while someone is shut out or left out. It takes some courage and the determination to act a certain way, not because we want to, but because we know it's the right thing to do.

About a year and a half ago, as I was putting my oldest daughter to bed, we were talking about her day and stuff, and I could tell that something was bothering her. And when I finally got it out of her, what she told me was that at recess that day, there was a girl who wanted to play with her and the two girls my daughter usually plays with. My daughter wanted to include her, but the two other girls would not let this fourth girl play with them. So what did my daughter do? She decided to spend her recess playing with this other girl instead of with her usual group, because she didn't want that girl to feel left out.

I could not have more proud of my daughter than when she told me this. And when I told this story a few weeks ago, someone came up to me afterward and told me a story about her teenage daughter. She was planning a birthday party, and she decided to send invitations to all of the girls in her class, even though she really wasn't

friends with some of them. She didn't want them to feel left out.

I love stories like these. Stories like these are important because they serve as inspiration and as a model of how to behave. I mean, if a little girl and a teenager can do it, can't we?

Of course, stories like these also make us stop and take stock.

Hearing my daughter's story made me wonder what excluding have I done in the past? Is there any excluding of people that I am doing now in my life?

Because these sins that are "like spilling someone's blood" as the Talmud puts it, we can't undo them once they've been done. The pain has already been caused.

We can't fix it once it's happened, but we can certainly prevent it from happening any more. In order to do that, we have to pay attention to situations where we might be excluding someone without even realizing it. And we've got to decide not to allow it to continue when it is being done intentionally.

We've got to reach out to the person being left out and welcome them in. And, of course, we've got to treat them decently once they are there. We can't invite them and then ignore them or be unkind to them. We don't have to be their best friend; we just have to be courteous and welcoming.

Now, to be reasonable, they can't behave in a horribly disruptive way. And, this being a day of self-reflection, it's important to say that a person who finds that they are always being left out should ask themselves why that is. After all, there is, in Jewish law, an actual obligation to try to be pleasant to be around.

That being said, if we are having a party, and we can prevent someone from

experiencing the anguish of exclusion by including them, we should do so. And if someone should ask us why we invited this person, we can tell them, angh, they're not so bad, or we can even say, privately, of course, you know, you're right, they're not my favorite person in the world, but it's a mitzvah not to exclude someone – so I invited them because it's the right thing to do.

After all, the moral cost of excluding someone is far greater than what might be the mild annoyance of having them at the party. In fact, when we stop and remember poor old Kamtza, we might start to realize that this person is actually giving us an opportunity to do a mitzvah.

Then, when they come to our door, we can greet them with arms open wide and be proud to know that we have done the right thing.

May all of our deeds, in the year ahead, may they merit for us to be written for blessing in the book of life. Gamar chatimah tovah.