

“IT’S THE RELATIONSHIP, STUPID”

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5775— Thursday, September 25, 2014

Congregation B’nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

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Who has heard of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? Since mid-July, it has become a pop culture phenomenon, blanketing social media, used as a tool to raise both awareness and funds for ALS. For those who may not be familiar, an individual videos him/herself taking a bucket of ice water, dumping it on his/her own head. Then, the video is posted to Facebook or other social media, with the original participant challenging others to do the same within 24 hours, or make a \$100 donation to charity. Of course, the idea is to do both.

Looking at these videos online, future anthropologists will shake their heads in bewilderment at the cultural origins of this behavior. And I wondered, as well. To find the answer, I went to the definitive source of virtually everything today...Wikipedia. And this is what Wikipedia has to say when inputting the search term, “ice bucket challenge.”

“The origins of the idea of dumping cold water on one's head to raise money for charity are unclear... From mid-2013 to early 2014, a challenge often called the "Cold Water Challenge" became popular on social media... The task usually involved the option of either donating money to cancer research or having to jump into cold water...

In early July, the Golf Channel aired an ice bucket challenge, but it was merely for fun, not connected to a particular issue. On July 15, golfer Chris Kennedy challenged his cousin, Jeanette Senerchia, to take the ice bucket challenge and she chose ALS as her charity, to support her husband battling the disease.¹

And many of you know the rest of the story. The challenge went viral. Over 1.5 million ice bucket challenge videos have been posted and ALS has received over \$100 million, as a result of the video challenges.

\$100 million! Wow!

The reason the ice bucket challenge worked is because people invested **themselves** in something connected to **others**. They did something really dumb: they poured a bucket of ice water over their heads. A. It's fun to do. B. It's funny. C. It's in response to a friend who dares them. D. They have a chance to challenge others. And E. It does good.

But, in the end, it is C and D that make the most impact – it's in response to someone we know and it reaches out to others we know. What is more meaningful than that? Nothing. Harkening back to the Democratic slogan from the 1992 presidential election, when folks in Clinton's War Room reminded him to be laser-

focused on one issue. They said to him, “remember, it’s the economy, stupid,” Today, I paraphrase and say: “it’s the relationship, stupid!”

Relationships.

It’s what this morning’s Torah portion is all about. The Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, is one of the most troubling passages in all of Torah. Why would Abraham be willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac? It’s the relationship!

Abraham is willing to do this because **God** challenged him. He didn’t think about how this would affect Isaac. He didn’t question whether it was needed. He didn’t even consider other alternatives. God asked. God challenged him. And he responded. Just like our ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. It’s the relationship.

What makes a difference is who asks. What makes a difference is how it is asked. What makes a difference is the cause.

Go back to April of this year, and the tragic murder of three innocent souls at the Jewish Community Campus and Village Shalom. Recall the outpouring of love and support during the unity service of faith and hope at the JCC, the candlelight vigil and walk two days later, and the thousands who attended the two funeral services for Reit Underwood, William Corporon, and Terri LaManno. Why did people show up? Because of relationships. Many knew Reit or William or Terri. But those who didn’t, knew people just like them. They were our cousins, our children, our mothers, our grandparents, our friends. When they were murdered,

we were challenged. And we responded. Because of the relationships.

This summer, another challenge occurred. This took the form of rockets hurtling towards innocent men, women, and children throughout Israel. More than 3,000 rockets were aimed not at anyone, but at **every-one**...intended to strike fear in both child and adult. The response from those in Israel was not the Ice Bucket Challenge, but rather the How-Quickly-Can-We-Run-For-The-Bomb-Shelter Challenge. Israelis and visitors had between 15 and 45 seconds to seek shelter and reach a fortified room.

Once more, it was the relationships that made the difference. Stories abound of people opening up their “safe rooms” to neighbors and even strangers when a “tzeva adom” (צבא אדום), a warning siren was sounded. Children were comforted by games strangers played with them in the shelters, after they had been awakened and rushed to safety. One family had a large sign outside their business: “Do not ask. Come in and be safe. We are family.” Those issues that had divided the Jewish people – who is a Jew; rights of Reform and Conservative Jews; who can pray at the Kotel – were no longer problems. We were one people, trying to survive.

Our congregants experienced that rain of rockets and terror. They arrived at Ben Gurion Airport to return home and the “tzeva adom” (צבא אדום), the warning siren was sounded. Hustled into the airport’s shelters, the Iron Dome defense system cleared the skies and it was soon

safe to emerge. When I heard what happened – I was not with them at the time – I experienced three emotions: relief, that they were safe; anger, that my friends were endangered; and resolve, to return to Israel as soon as possible. Why? You know the reason: it's the relationship.

Especially in the light of what happened this summer, I want to speak with you about Israel. With anti-Semitism on the rise in Europe... with the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanction) movement against Israel growing on college campuses...with countries lining up to support Gaza and condemn Israel...with Israel accused of crimes against humanity, it is important for us to talk.

Israel is part of our historical, cultural, and emotional DNA. Our history is intertwined with that small spot of earth on the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean. For almost 2,000 years, our people prayed for Jerusalem and towards Jerusalem. Our people viewed a return to Israel as a journey towards salvation. Our people yearned for the chance to touch that holy soil. Whenever that soil on which Jewish souls have planted themselves is threatened, each of us feels it deep within.

Israel is in my personal DNA. My great-great grandfather was said to be Avraham Mapu. He was a Lithuanian Jew, whose novels served as the basis for the Zionist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. His seminal work, *Ahavat Tziyon* (אהבת ציון), is recognized as the first modern Hebrew novel. Another great-great grandfather was a man, named Alter Winkler. He migrated to Israel from Vienna in the mid-1800's to the area

that would become the city of Petach Tikvah. And in 1886, during the first recorded attack by Arabs against that nascent Petach Tikvah community, it is written that "only Reb Alter Winkler remained on the battlefield, striking on all sides with his stave, standing alone against the entire Arab camp."²

Though I own nothing that my ancestors may have accomplished, I share these facts to illustrate my relationship to the land. Israel is a part of **me**. On more than one occasion, I have considered becoming an Israeli citizen...not to move there, but to express solidarity. It is the relationship.

Israel **is** personal. Ask those who went to Israel this summer on our first congregational trip in six years. Issues of economy kept us from going in the intervening years. But then, people who wanted to go asked others. And our trip happened. And magic happened. Why? Because the people on the trip bonded and cared for one another. Because we were able to see the land and the people and the history not through books, news reports, or movies...we saw it with our own eyes...we experienced it through the eyes of our friends. What made the magic? It's the relationship.

But, one has to be in the relationship in order for it to move us. According to one set of statistics, only 34% of Reform Jews ever visit Israel. If you are part of an interfaith family, that number goes down to 22%. While Birthright has been a phenomenal experiment, sending almost 40,000 young Jews a year, 18-26 on a free 10-day trip to Israel, there remain at least an equal number of young

adults in that age range who do not go...and that is with the offer of a free trip. If one doesn't have Israel under one's skin, it is hard to identify with a place seemingly rocked with violence constantly. For those millennials who do not discover the "other" Israel, their world-view is not of a Jewish dream or hope. Far from singing Hatikvah, they often view Israel as Ha-Nakba, a catastrophe needing to be – at best – curtailed...and at worse, eliminated.

Israel is under attack, whether from Hamas, ISIS, Hezbollah, Iran...whether from anti-Semites who mask their loathing of Jews with anti-Israel rhetoric...whether from Palestinian apologists who wish to make Israel the scapegoat for Arab indifference and rejection of their own Palestinian cousins. Yes,

even if the rockets have ceased, the challenges to Israel are immense. And it feels often like they are alone in the world.

That said, Israel is not always right. The way it deals with the rights of non-Orthodox Jews, with women, with minorities, with its own Arab population...Israel has many, many faults. But, then again, so does this country. So do my family members. But whether country or family, I love them nonetheless. Why? It's the relationship.

So, today, as we begin this new year, as we consider those relationships that are essential to our Jewish selves, I have a challenge for each of you. Please look at the screens! (To view the video, go to the web address below.)

<https://vimeo.com/107363479>

¹ <http://mashable.com/2014/08/15/ice-bucket-challenge-not-als/>

² Levi Soshuk and Azriel Louis Eisenberg; *Momentous Century: Personal and Eye-witness Accounts of the Rise of the Jewish Homeland and State, 1875-1978*; Associated University Presses; 1984; p. 43.