

2015 Yom Kippur

It is a great honor to address you as the President of this extraordinarily vibrant Jewish institution on this, the holiest night of the year.

During my first Yom Kippur speech last year, I took the opportunity to introduce myself to you, describing my early childhood in the Bronx. I spoke about my parents, both Holocaust survivors, and my memories of the orthodox synagogue in the Bronx and the somber Yom Kippur Yizkor service that they and their friends – all Holocaust survivors – attended.

This year, I want to share another Yom Kippur memory from my youth – one that occurred 50 years ago, in September 1965.

This Yom Kippur was quite different from the somber memory I recounted last year.

I was 15 years old, my family had moved from the southeast Bronx to Pelham Parkway in the northeast Bronx. I had just started 11th grade at the Bronx High School of Science, and - I know everyone will find this impossible to believe - I was as nerdy, as immature, and as socially awkward as you can imagine, a teenager still living in a Jewish shtetl, but just beginning to glimpse a route to assimilation in this country.

At that time, we belonged to the Pelham Parkway Jewish Center, a conservative congregation. I still put tefillin on every morning, I was a leader of the Temple's youth group, and I even played in a Jewish baseball league that played its games on Sundays. But like any teenager, I was beginning to question the many rules that governed my existence.

And then something quite magical happened, something that helped me to cement my relationship with Judaism. Sandy Koufax, one of the greatest baseball pitchers of all time, refused to pitch in Game One of the 1965 World Series because Game One was scheduled on Yom Kippur.

Instead of pitching that day, Koufax, who was the star pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers, attended synagogue in Minneapolis.

This was front page news throughout the United States, and this decision – his personal act of conviction – became a source of enormous pride, and a life lesson, for every Jewish child – male or female – of my generation.

By affirming that there was something more important than his work, or even his fame, and by resisting the pressure to conform, Koufax taught us that being Jewish mattered, and that even as we assimilated in this country, and achieved great success in this country, we should never forget our heritage, never forsake

our values, and always take the principled path. That was an important lesson for a 15 year old.

Being Jewish mattered. And, of course, if I needed confirmation about the wisdom of Koufax's decision, I received divine confirmation that very week. Although the Dodgers lost that first World Series game, the Dodgers ultimately won the World Series in seven games. Koufax pitched Games 2, 5 and 7, shut out the Minnesota Twins in both Games 5 and 7, and won his second World Series most valuable player award.

Being Jewish mattered.

As I have gotten older, I have realized that one doesn't have to be the best pitcher in baseball to make a difference in other people's lives. We all have that power. As Rabbi Levine has preached for years, each of us is capable of so much more than we think, and each of us in our own way, is seeking to make our life more meaningful – to find that extra spark, that extra time, that additional energy, for service to others – whether it be for community, the synagogue or both.

It was not an accident that Koufax went to a synagogue in Minneapolis to make his statement.

The synagogue was then, and remains today, the most vital symbol of continuity in Jewish history, the source of community and of caring, particularly in a city like New York where it is all too easy to feel lonely and alienated.

The synagogue is the place to put your faith into action.

During my speech last year, I stated that if my tenure were to be successful, I would have to count on each and every one of you for your wisdom, energy, financial support and dedication. You have not let me down, and I need you to continue that support this year. By all visible metrics, this past year has been a truly

significant one in strengthening and enhancing Congregation

Rodeph Sholom. And next year promises to be even better.

We are moving ahead with plans to commemorate the 175th Anniversary of Rodeph Sholom in 2017. We have an energetic and dedicated steering committee in place, and are planning a year-long series of events – spanning worship, social action, education and celebration – that will not only honor the history of Rodeph Sholom, but also will help to secure the future of this great and beloved institution.

We are living evidence that being Jewish matters.

Our Friday night, Saturday and holidays services are thriving.

On many Saturday mornings, there are as many as five different services – for all age groups and abilities – being held throughout our buildings. Worshipping at Rodeph Sholom has become a more joyous experience, as our clergy continue so successfully to combine tradition, prayer and music in an innovative and exciting manner.

Our schools are off to a wonderful start this year. In RSS, and in our religious school, we are educating nearly 1100 children throughout the week in our various buildings, justifying our enormous pride in the continued excellence of our schools.

We are continuing to expand our social action projects.

There is no better measure of our work as a synagogue, and no accomplishment more important than our work together in providing food for the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and care for those with special needs, and those who simply need special assistance.

None of these programs – or the hundreds more that take place each year – would be possible without your time, your commitment and your generous financial support. I urge you all to be exceptionally generous this year. Your dues cover just 60 percent of our congregational expenses. The Yom Kippur Appeal

is vital for us to remain the diverse, open, welcoming congregation that we strive it to be.

Last year, we set a new record total for the Yom Kippur Appeal and, even more importantly, we increased participation among our families by over 10 percent from the year before. Let's do even better this year. Please contribute generously. Every gift matters.

Towards the end of Kate Atkinson's powerful new novel set in World War II, *A God In Ruins*, she recounts a Hindu legend, which also has analogues in a Jewish midrash, about a time when

all men were gods. But because man abused his divinity, the god of creation decided that this divinity would be taken away.

Wanting to hide it somewhere where men wouldn't be able to find it, god called a council of his advisors. Some of the advisors suggested that they bury the divinity deep in the earth, others that they sink it in the ocean, others suggested that it be placed on the top of the highest mountain. But god said that all mankind was ingenious, and that he would dig down far into the earth, trawl the deepest oceans, and climb every mountain in an effort to find that divinity.

The advisors were on the verge of giving up, when god finally said, “I know where we will hide away man’s divinity, we will hide it inside himself. He will search the whole world, but never look inside, and find what is already within.”

Ruth and I, and my children – Martha, David, Anna and Judy – wish you all a 5776 filled with good health, happiness, success and peace.

Let us all look deep within ourselves. Being Jewish matters.