

Your Mission Should You Decide To Accept It

Rosh Hashanah 5779

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

In 1896 Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, identical twin daughters of a worldly Scottish widower, returned to Cambridge, England from a trip to the Middle East bearing pages from several ancient Hebrew manuscripts they had purchased from a Cairo bookseller. They showed the parchment leaves to a Cambridge University professor named Solomon Schechter, who was startled to discover among them an original copy of a second century BCE Book of Wisdom from a famed scholar named Ben Sira. Schechter set off almost immediately to Old Cairo, making his way to the Ben Ezra Synagogue, located according to legend, where baby Moses had been found in the reeds.

In a sealed dark room, he found the *Genizah*, a hidden space where he uncovered 1700 Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts. Other than the Dead Sea Scrolls, the documents in the *Genizah* are some of the oldest records of Jewish life in existence. The two oldest *Haggadot* in the world were found there, for example. These documents painted an illuminating picture of Jewish life throughout the ages showing that though there were times the Jews were isolated in their own world or exiled simply because they were Jewish, many times Jews lived a fuller, more integrated life than most of us would imagine.

Jewish merchants partnered with Christians and Muslims, running perfume shops and silk weaveries. There is ample evidence of close relationships with interfaith neighbors, like letters seeking rabbinical advice about husbands who kept apartments for their Muslim concubines. These materials conveyed the truth that more often than not, Jews were full contributing participants in the world we inhabited, proud Jews, proud members of the societies which were blessed to have us. These texts put to lie the fears that if led into majority culture Jews would assimilate and disappear.

That was Moses' obsession many years earlier. Knowing that he would not be permitted to enter the Promised Land, he was deathly afraid that his people would take on their neighbors' crude and immoral actions, like the Canaanites regular use of child sacrifice to appease the gods. Moses was afraid that if we came in contact with them, we would act like and ultimately become Canaanites.

In large measure, that did not happen. In fact, when permitted to do so Judaism became an *attraction* to countless outsiders. As time went on, the population of world Jewry swelled to 2 ½ million by the year 70 BCE, partially due to a great number of converts. Famed historian Salo Baron estimates the Jewish population of the world during the Roman period at 8 million, fully 10 percent of the Roman Empire.

In impressive numbers, then, people were drawn to a religion in which God not only took an active role in the affairs of the world, but had concrete expectations for its adherents. Not just *worship and adore me*, not just *obsess over the salvation over your own soul*, rather grasp the realization that every person you would come in contact with—Jew and non-Jew alike, is to be treated as a holy vessel—to be

fed, clothed, housed and freed from the obstacles that keep them from achieving their full, human, spiritual potential.

From Sinai on, Judaism pronounced to the world the most radical of all assertions: while *we* need God to survive in an often-savage world, God needs us too to accomplish together—justice, dignity, well-being, happiness—that neither God nor we could accomplish alone.

That is the message this rabbi on this bimah teaches almost obsessively. Do you know why Cantor Garfein, I and all the clergy on this bimah love officiating at B'nai Mitzvah, why I call it the greatest ritual ever devised by any faith? We take an impressionable thirteen-year-old who often lacks self-confidence, who often spends way too much time buried in their phone whose goal when they wake up in the morning might be to beat the level on that video game, we elevate that child on the bimah and we say to them, “Do you realize how important you are—God needs you.” and we need you to perpetuate the miracle of Jewish survival. Even more important, we need you to make a difference in the life of another human being.

Remarkably, at that age, so many are beginning to realize that they have a spark of the divine within them and much to give. Into the chaos that we sometimes have to deal with on a daily basis, God sends out an urgent cry—

ובשופר גדול יתקע וקול דממה דקה ישמע

The great shofar is sounded. But what we hear is the still, small, yet persistent, insistent, voice within.

God is calling to your child as God calls to you: I need you. I need you to become aware, to see human pain and to *know* that there is something you can do about it.

And you know what? Many of our children already are doing spectacular mitzvot and making a difference in the health and well-being of other people. At the age of thirteen.

These B'nai Mitzvah fill me with optimism, not only about the Jewish future, but about our collective future. For so many years the Jewish world has been filled with sociologists and pollsters who shake their head wring their hands and cry out, not just ‘oy vey,’ but ‘oy gevalt’ because of the uncertain prospects of the Jewish people in the years ahead.

Reminds me a bit of the story of the man who heard about a talking dog living somewhere in the Midwest. He pulled up to the farmhouse and asked,

“Do you have a talking dog?”

“Sure do. You’ll find him out back.”

So he goes to the back and sees a non-descript looking mutt and asks, “Are you the famous talking dog?”

“Sure am. Not only that but I am a certified hero. I went to Iraq as a bomb sniffer and I saved hundreds of lives.”

“You’re kidding! You are not only a talking dog, but a national hero to boot. You deserve worldwide recognition.”

He went back to the owner feeling a genuine excitement to publicize this canine treasure.

“You want him?” the owner exclaimed with a yawn, “I’ll sell him to you for twenty bucks.”

“You will sell this genuine hero to me for twenty dollars? Why? Why would you do that and so cheap?”

“I’ll sell him to you for twenty bucks because that mutt is a total liar!”

These hand wringers are not liars exactly, but they do not fully appreciate all we have contributed to the societies we have helped to shape. They do not appreciate our strength and perseverance, how we have overcome so many difficult chapters in our history.

The late scholar Simon Rawidowicz in his essay, *Israel, the Ever-Dying People*, published in 1974, chronicles the way in which each generation of Jews has fretted that they would be the last. No way, we thought, could we survive: The destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile, the Roman onslaught and plunder of our people, the end of the Golden Age of Spain, fully 905 expulsions, and of course, exterminations like those many of our own families experienced just a very few years ago.

Ah but the ever-dying people still lives. *Am Yisrael Chai*. We have fewer arms and legs than we might have had if virulent anti-Semitism hadn’t ravaged our numbers, but our heart beats strongly, our covenant with God is intact and so is our resolve that our precious years on earth are not exercises in obsession with self, but opportunities to manifest the compassion with which we have been blessed.

We are descendants of Moses who went out to his people, saw human suffering, he looked side to side, he saw there was no one else to respond to human pain.

Moses responded.

ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש
(Torah, Exodus 2:12)

He knew, and so do we, that there is something we can do.

You know and I know that this remarkable period in American history will be studied obsessively by historians. Not only how did it *happen*, but how did the citizenry respond to the chaos and cruelty manifest in too many places.

Historians will want to know how it is possible that in a country where virtually a hundred percent of its citizens were immigrants or children of immigrants, how could the same people harden their hearts and slam their doors in the face of desperate people begging for a modicum of humanity, wanting to walk the same path *their* families trod when they first came to look for America.

Historians will want to know when they separated babies from mothers at the border, mothers whose only crime was witnessing members of their own family shot through the head by a drug cartel and not wanting the same fate for their baby. They will want to know how did we respond? What did you *do*? Who showed courage, who showed indifference, who went about their daily lives oblivious to wrenching pain around them? They will ask: How did you respond to the bigotry of the dangerous populism that was threatening to undermine sacred American values?

What did we at Rodeph Sholom do? We rushed to the aid of a woman who had found sanctuary in the Fourth Universal Society Church, Central Park West and 76th Street. Two of her brothers had been slaughtered in Guatemala, she was resolved to get her family out of there by any means possible. Somehow she made it to the border and, as her price of entry, she was raped by a member of the United States Border Patrol. She came to live with her sister in Westchester and driving down the street on her way to church, which was one way only on Sunday, she was arrested, and later served an order of deportation. The church took her in proclaiming to the world that in no way will we, children of God, sentence this mother and baby to certain death back in Guatemala.

How do we at Rodeph Sholom respond? By being one of the few synagogues to apply to HIAS to resettle refugees, not caring what is their religion or nationality or skin color or sexual identification or gender identification. Wanting to provide not just compassion but concrete help to people whose lives had been full of danger and misery, people who sought from a religious community like ours the conviction that they are human beings deserving of our embrace. This is who we are, proud members of Congregation Rodeph Sholom, proud Reform Jews.

Some people make fun of the early pillars of our Movement. The foundational statement of American Reform Judaism is the Pittsburgh Platform written in 1885. This document is sometimes panned because it announces that we are no longer a nation and, in 1885 many did not anticipate a return to Palestine. Panned because it did not automatically embrace the ritual side of Torah law, but urged us to maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives. What people miss about the Pittsburgh Platform is its soaring directive that as full members, not only of the Jewish people but of the American people, we have responsibilities for the welfare of others. Then, as now, it was our job to help realize the messianic hope for the establishment of a kingdom of truth, justice and peace for all people.

The Cairo *Geniza* actually reminds us that we always felt this responsibility when society allowed us to contribute.

The Pittsburgh Platform, all of Reform Judaism, cries out to us: You and I were put on this earth for a reason, we have a mission, not to wring our hands, but to move our feet to repair a world so riven with conflict and division.

Our mission in this very political year is to make sure that everyone that is eligible actually has a right to vote, that people who were not convicted of crimes should not have to languish in prison for years simply because they cannot make bail, that frightened pregnant women should not lose the

right to make basic decisions about their lives simply because they are too poor or live in the wrong place.

It is our responsibility to make sure that every child who lives in New York City is able to go to the same schools of quality just as we insist for our own children.

It is our responsibility to know when our children are victims of bullying and definitely when they are, in fact, the bully.

I was profoundly moved by a recent cover of the *New York Post* (I read *The Post* religiously from right to left, making sure the sports are covered) but I could not escape that cover of a beautiful, young Jewish girl who had committed suicide after having been consistently and persistently cyber bullied by kids who said things like, “You have no friends,” and even, “Why don’t you commit suicide already?”

Can you even fathom that?

We cannot always prevent tragedy, but we need to know in what conversations our children are participating, we need to *try* to know how they have been influenced by their peers. We need to be pains in the neck, to take responsibility to make *them* responsible and more sensitive human beings and compassionate Jews.

I was not there, but, the story is told seventy years ago, 1948, the legendary Jackie Robinson was called up to the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers were playing the Reds in Cincinnati, Ohio. The fans who filled the stadium were raining down vile taunts and curses. Jackie Robinson stood at first base, isolated, protected from neither fan nor teammate.

Then something extraordinary happened. The Dodgers shortstop, Pee-wee Reese, who had grown up in the nearby southern city of Louisville, simply walked across the diamond, paused and placed around his arm around the shoulder of his teammate. Hush descended over the crowd. They were mesmerized at the sight of two baseball players standing next to each other, a white arm draped over a black one. That one act of human decency buoyed the hopes of many black Americans that someday they would find common cause with whites to help fulfill the promises of this great land of the free.

Well, someone waits for you to put your arm around them. Maybe it’s a long estranged family member. Maybe it’s a child who has long yearned for your embrace. Maybe it’s an immigrant who searches eyes around them for some hint of humanity. Maybe it’s a child in your kid’s classroom who goes to bed hungry on the Upper West Side.

This is a new year, a chance to recalibrate, to do more. This is no time for passivity. There is no excuse for indifference. Reform scholar Leonard Fein said in a memorable talk, right here at Rodeph Sholom in 1992, “Judaism is a living commitment or a vestigial curiosity.” The genius of the Jew was the proposition that the world was not working the way it was meant to, that we live in a broken, fractured world, and that we are implicated in its repair. Judaism is not a shawl that we put

on and take off as occasion seems to warrant. Judaism is a way of life....so it's not the services we attend, but the services we perform that really defines us.

As Jews, we have a mission.

As a human being, you have a mandate. Someone stands isolated and alone. Waiting. You simply have to walk across the field. Put your arm around them and say, *Hineni*. I am here. You are alone no more.

May it be God's will, but first, may it be our own.

Amen.