

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5770

One Saturday morning on Memorial Day weekend, the rabbi noticed little David staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the synagogue. It was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the rabbi walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good morning, David."

"Good morning, Rabbi," replied the young boy, still focused on the plaque. "Rabbi, what is this?"

"Well, son, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service." Somberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Little David's voice was barely audible when he asked, "Which one, the Friday night or the Saturday morning?"

If this well-known joke made you laugh, it is only because "little David," full of candor and innocence, is saying something to the rabbi that the more sophisticated and politically correct "big David" doesn't dare to say, namely, that many people find religious services in particular, and the religious experience in general, not only boring, but also meaningless.

This, of course, is not the only joke on the matter. Both clergy and lay leaders alike are inundated before the High Holy Days by emails with jokes that portray in a funny, albeit sometimes grotesque fashion, the sacrifice the average congregant endures when attending religious services.

The truth of the matter is that the above is not limited only to religious services or to the Jewish religion.

Those who saw the hilarious movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," might remember the last scene where Toula drags her own daughter to Greek School (their version of our Hebrew School) while the daughter complains: "I don't want to go to Greek school; I want to go to Brownies." In the words of a former congregant to her daughter: "I suffered through Hebrew School when I was a child and now it is your turn to suffer!"

If you are still laughing maybe we should cry together, or at least explore together where this strange idea comes from, that prayer, Torah study, and religious experience ought to be achieved at the expense of suffering and unfathomable sacrifice.

I believe that what makes us laugh when we hear the joke is that the concept of sacrifice, so well known to many of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents 50, 60, or 70 years ago, is foreign to many of us and totally foreign to our children.

Our ancestors lived shorter and more miserable lives, usually exposed to sickness and early death in the best of cases, and persecutions, pogroms, and martyrdom in the worst. They didn't enjoy the pleasures of life and they knew too well that death was just around the corner. To sacrifice your life for a higher ideal was a good way to go, especially when your daily life wasn't much better.

Our history books, both Jewish and American (and Argentinean as well), are full of stories of people who died for their country, for their faith, for their convictions. In many cases, their deaths were accompanied by an ideological statement, like "Shemah Israel," or "I die happy, General; we have beaten the enemy."ⁱ

The modern State of Israel is also full of such stories and declarations of faith and courage. One of the most famous ones is about Joseph Trumpeldor, who died defending Tel Chai in the Upper Galilee on March 1, 1920.

"After his death, Trumpeldor became a symbol of Jewish self-defense. His reputed last words when he was mortally wounded, *'Never mind, it is good to*

die for our country' (*En davar, tov lamut be'ad artzenu*), became famous in the pre-state Zionist movement and in the Israel of the 1950s and 1960s." ⁱⁱ

Today, by the way, there are some scholars that maintain that Trumpeldor's last words were not the ones he supposedly uttered in Hebrew, but some words in his native Russian which the holiness of this place prevents me from quoting and translating.

I don't know about you, but I personally prefer to *live* for a good cause rather than to *die* for it, and suffering is out of the question. Sure, life is not always rosy, but that is certainly my favorite color for life if given the choice.

Life is beautiful and America is beautiful and I want to live long and enjoy it.

When the children in our generation are ready to make a sacrifice, it is only to postpone an instant gratification for the sake of one which they believe will arrive only a little later.

America is not only a free country but also one full of choices. I really believe that I have more choices on where to go on one Sunday afternoon in New York than my grandfather, who barely left Buenos Aires, had in his entire life.

Sometimes, on my way to the shul on Shabbat, I meet some Hillcrest congregants dressed for a walk or a bike ride. The weather outside is beautiful. They wave a Shabbat Shalom; then I go my way and they go theirs.

Not only are we not ready to sacrifice our lives in the service (either the Friday night or the Saturday morning service), we are not even ready to sacrifice a sunny Saturday morning.

And -here comes the essence and novelty of my dvar Torah- I think we shouldn't!

If there is a lesson we can draw from the complex and challenging Torah portion of this morning, it is that God doesn't want, or need, sacrifices for us to prove our faith. I'd like to suggest that God doesn't enjoy hearing adults

repeat words they don't understand, or children being dragged by their parents to religious school with threats, bribes, or Jewish guilt.

I have news for all of you: threats, bribes, and Jewish guilt not only are far from being the best parenting tools, but they don't work anymore.

Prayer, Torah study, and religious experience will only survive if they are meaningful and we, the religious leadership of the Jewish people, need to make it meaningful.

A sacrifice in which one part gives, and gives, and keeps giving and doesn't receive anything in return may work only in the short-run. I often encounter many members and former members of the shul (this shul and my previous ones) who literally gave thousands of hours and dollars to Jewish causes, such as the UJA, the Joint, and The JNF; who chaired this committee and that committee; who served on this board and this board and this board; and who suddenly "close the curtain," and you never see them again. If you talk to these people and you get beneath the surface, you will find a constant: they were so busy giving and sacrificing themselves that they didn't have time to receive! They attended meetings but no classes, they collected money but not friends, and they got aggravation without connection.

The only sacrifices that work are the ones out of love. You need to build the love first, and then the sacrifice will come, and then it is not a sacrifice any more.

At Hillcrest Jewish Center we are working hard on building that love!

The Torah I want my children to learn must be meaningful. The services I want them to attend must be inspiring. And the Judaism I want them to live must be a committed one.

It may not happen overnight but we are working on that. We have a long way to go but we are making small but steady progress. You also should work on making small but steady progress in your Jewish spiritual life. Start with one hour of meaningful Torah study during the week, volunteer one hour to visit

the sick or the lonely, and make new friends at Hillcrest Jewish Center by participating in Israeli dances or by joining us at a Friendship Kiddush. Not because you have to, but because it will bring blessings to you; not as a burden, but as a gift to yourself.

I believe our lives shouldn't be Jewish or beautiful. I believe they can, and should, be both.

May the sound of the shofar help us reconnect with the beauty of our Jewish experience. May we find richness where others find suffering, may we see love where others see sacrifice, and may we all be blessed with a good, sweet, and meaningful year!

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Bautista_Cabral

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Trumpeldor