

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5772

As many of you know, I was invited last July to take part in a rabbinic mission to Russia led by the UJA Federation of New York.

My experience in Russia allowed me to be an eyewitness to the rebirth of Russian Jewry in a way nobody could have even dreamed of twenty years ago, and at the same time, it strengthened my commitment to the work of the UJA Federation in the former Soviet Union, in Israel, and here at home.

As I shared with you in my written message in the bulletin, the highlight of our trip was spending 24 hours with Natan Sharansky, and at the center of that unforgettable day were the stories he told us, one in particular, which I would like to share with you today.

Natan Sharansky told us the story of the first time he arrived in New York after his liberation. People were greeting him in the streets like a national hero, trying to touch him or even to get a glimpse of the man for whom they had fought so hard, for whom they had signed countless petitions and for whom they had rallied in the thousands.

Natan Sharansky told us with his great sense of humor and his heavy foreign accent (I love people with foreign accents): "One woman in her seventies embraced me and told me, 'Natan, it was so great when you were in prison! You united us; you gave us a sense of purpose! Those were really amazing times when we went to Washington, D.C. to rally for you!'"

Sharansky told us what he didn't tell the sweet lady - that he didn't find anything great or amazing about being in prison, and that he wished they had never had to go to Washington to rally for him or for anybody else.

Sharansky's anecdote was complemented by some unique reflections: "We took more than 1,000,000 Jews out from the Soviet Union and we brought them to Israel, to Germany, to the United States. Everybody who wanted to be out is out, and now what? What do we do with them? How do we re-connect them with their tradition, with their history? How do we undo 70 years of anti-Semitism, assimilation and indifference? You thought getting them out was difficult? Filling their lives with meaning and purpose is much more difficult; less heroic yes, but much more difficult!" or again, in his own words: "To take the Soviet Union was easy. To unite the Jewish people is a different story!"

After sharing the story with us, Natan Sharansky confessed that he himself was faced with the same challenges after his liberation. He was out, he was reunited with his wife, and he had settled in the land flowing with milk and honey. What was he supposed to do with his free time now? Who was in need of his passion, his energy, his enthusiasm?

The truth is that as difficult as it is to put up a good fight, the day after is even more challenging!

What do you do the day after you defeat Pharaoh? What do you the day after you have your own state? What do you do the day after the fall of the Iron Curtain?

What do you do the day after the honeymoon, the day after the baby comes home, the day after the shivah is over and everybody has left and you are all alone in the midst of a silent home?

What do you do the day after you graduate from college, after you retire, after the last of your children leaves for college and your nest is empty?

Many people are fascinated by wars and by revolutions because during wars and revolutions everybody is busy, everybody feels alive. The challenge, again, is what to do the day after.

I am sure all of you heard about "Evita," probably the most famous Argentinean. We also have Maradona and Messi, disputably the best soccer players in the world. The one who completes the list (albeit, a very short list), is Ernesto "Che"

Guevara. "Che" Guevara, also known simply as "Che," was an Argentinean doctor who went to Cuba to fight along with Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution. After the Batista government was defeated and Fidel Castro came to power, "Che" Guevara performed a number of key roles in the new government. These included instituting agrarian reforms as minister of industries, helping spearhead a successful nationwide literacy campaign, and traversing the globe as a diplomat on behalf of Cuban socialism.

However, in the end, he couldn't take it; he couldn't deal with the day after. "Che" Guevara left Cuba in search of new revolutions, first in Kongo-Kinshasa and then in Bolivia where he was captured and executed by Bolivian forces.

Many of you with young children may be familiar with the movie "The Incredibles," a 2004 American computer-animated action-comedy superhero film.

Mr. Incredible (A.K.A. Bob Parr) and his wife Helen (A.K.A. Elastigirl) are the world's greatest, famous, crime-fighting superheroes in Metroville. Always saving lives and battling evil on a daily basis. But fifteen years later, they have been forced to adopt civilian identities and retreat to the suburbs where they have no choice but to retire from being superheroes and are forced to live a "normal life" with their three children Violet, Dash and Jack.

I won't tell you the end of the movie but what I can tell you is that the Incredibles are not having an easy time adjusting to their non-heroic life. Fighting evil is fun, exciting and rewarding, while sharing a quiet meal with your spouse, taking out the garbage, and doing homework with your children, well... that's another story.

And speaking of stories, at the center of this morning's Torah reading is probably one of the best known stories in the entire Torah: Akeidat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac.

According to the biblical story, Abraham sets out to obey God's command to sacrifice his son without questioning but does not state in front of Isaac that he is the intended sacrifice. After Isaac is bound to an altar, the angel of God stops Abraham at the last minute, saying that "now I know you fear God." At this point

Abraham sees a ram caught in some nearby bushes and sacrifices the ram in Isaac's stead.¹

To do justice to the story I may need another dvar Torah and I almost used all my time for this one, so since you are familiar with the story I won't go into all its details. Let me share, however, a curiosity, about our story, one I discovered only a couple of weeks ago.²

Our story, chapter 22 in the book of Genesis, contains the only dialogue in the Torah between Abraham and his son Isaac:

Isaac spoke to Abraham.

"Father."

"Yes my son"

"Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?"

"God will see to a lamb for an offering, my son," replied Abraham. (Genesis 22: 7-8)

Beginning and end of the dialogue.

Now, Abraham is a man of words. He speaks to God, he is being spoken to by God, and he speaks about God. Abraham speaks to his servants, to Avimelech, to the King of Sodom, and he also speaks to his nephew about cattle issues.

However, for his wife Sarah he has only a few words, for his son Isaac, even fewer, for Hagar and Ishmael, none.

Abraham is the father of the entire Jewish people but probably at the expense of his own progeny. Abraham is ready to sacrifice Isaac, but to talk to him, to spend time with him, even after the test is over, this is too much. Like many of us,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binding_of_Isaac

² My appreciation goes to my brother in law, Rabbi Gustavo Surazski, for bringing this point to my attention.

Abraham does well with heroic moments but he struggles with ordinary life. At the top of the mountain, with a knife in his hand, he does fine. Finding words as he comes down the mountain, with his son, that's not so easy.

Those who know me well enough, know that when I write, I write for myself, and when I speak, I speak about myself. Day after day I spend hours building community, helping congregants, and saving the Jewish people. However, like our father Abraham, I struggle with ordinary life and I rarely find time for myself and for my family. This is something I need to work on harder during this coming year.

And what is true about our personal lives, is also true about our Jewish lives.

We, the descendants of Abraham, must ask ourselves: how do we recover the dialogue? How do we find meaning, passion, purpose in our daily routines?

We must build a Judaism that is not dependant on tragedies, on mythical heroes, on extraordinary individuals. We found God as a people on the mountain. Now we need to learn how to find him in shul, at work, at home.

Here at Hillcrest Jewish Center, we work very hard to get new members, new young families to join our shul, to keep the Hillcrest dream alive, and thank God, we are succeeding. However, the real challenge begins the day after, when we need to work even harder to fill the dream with content, to transform our ordinary routines into meaningful routines, to transform all of us, clergy, staff, and old and new members, into more learned, more spiritual and more compassionate human beings.

May the sound of the shofar help us find meaning in our daily lives. May we find purpose in a renewed dialogue, may we find the presence of God in the simple interactions with our loved ones, in the simplicity of giving, of learning, of praying together.

May we all be blessed with a good, sweet, joyous, healthy and meaningful year!