

From Father to Son – Three Messages

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 – 5772 (2011)
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In the days leading up to the Brit Milah of our newborn son my heart filled up with excitement and trepidation, love and fear. Those days provided me with a unique opportunity to reflect upon my own life, and its important points of choice and transition, as I dreamed of my son's life and the person he is yet to become.

At the time three particular messages resonated in my heart. I shared them in part in our shul's bulletin earlier this month. Today, with your permission, I would like to further reflect on these particular messages.

The first is that Shabbat is sacred.

When I was in my late teens, I went through a phase of religious exploration. I found myself drawn to several different congregations and their respective denominations.

Ultimately however Shabbat kept drawing me into the Orthodox community. In fact, if one day my children would ask me how and why I became an Orthodox Jew, I would have to say that in large part my vision and experience of Shabbat brought me into Orthodoxy.

Now let me make myself clear. Even today as a committed Orthodox rabbi I continue to believe that our sister Jewish denominations have important and critical insights to share with us, as well as challenging questions and concerns that we as an Orthodox community must face and confront. Further, I also believe that the sacredness of Shabbat often transcends our denominational divides and continues to be our shared religious asset.

That being said, at that particular juncture in my life, I realized that for myself the gift of Shabbat as a central and foundational Jewish experience and mitzvah was more deeply and

richly experienced on a more permanent and consistent basis within the social structure and shared religious commitments of the Orthodox community. For me, Orthodoxy offered an unparalleled communal experience that created an unavoidable sacred reality. Set in that communal context, Shabbat was no longer an idea; Shabbat was more than a commandment. Shabbat became a reality I couldn't ignore.

This communal phenomenon is captured beautifully in Tractate Sukkah (51b). The Babylonian Talmud describes in great detail the gathering of the Jewish community in Alexandria. The synagogue was packed to the brim, and "there was a wood *bimah* in the middle, and the cantor of the gathering stood upon it with kerchiefs in his hand. And when it reached the time to answer "Amen" he would waive his kerchief, and the whole nation would answer "Amen." The gathering was so full that those in attendance could not even hear the cantor as he led the services.

To us moderns, there is an obvious tension in this Talmudic passage between collectivity and informed participation, between being part of the whole and being able to experience something personally meaningful. And yet this quoted text is devoid of such anxiety. It chooses collectivity with great ease. (I thank Yehudah Kurtzer for this insight).

This phenomenon touches upon my own feelings about the Shabbat community and relates deeply to our experience here at CBI.

We are blessed to be a part of a richly, multifaceted community. And yet, no matter how we see ourselves, how much we claim to know or not know, how much we do and observe or not yet observe, or how much we believe or struggle to believe, here at CBI, in the context of our shared Shabbat community, each of us can potentially come to experience the Holy One, as it were, waiving a kerchief in our midst, inviting us as a community to respond "Amen" in unison.

In the context of sacred community, you don't always need to understand much to experience much sanctity.

To my child I would therefore say that there is tremendous power to be a part of an engaged Shabbat community. Our shared love for Shabbat, through our attention to its rituals and mitzvot, allows us to create portals of sacredness, vessels overflowing with holiness, channels to the heavens. Indeed, to my child I would say that before I became certain of God, I became certain of His Shabbat, and it was holy.

The second is that faith demands both courage and humility.

Our children and even we have been born into a world that too often scorns the possibility of encountering the Divine, of hearing God's voice echoing in our midst. Each of us can easily think of countless times in which our religious reflections, experiences, and or worldviews were met with raised eyebrows or subtle sniggers. Indeed, from the moment we are born, in open as well as in subtle ways, our society rewards our rationality and suppresses our spirituality.

I know that it took me a long time to garner the courage to admit to myself and then to profess to others as well the faith I have in the God of our ancestors.

One experience stands out in particular for me. I remember sensing the powerful and comforting presence of the Holy One while visiting a patient in the hospital during my rabbinical school training, and suddenly getting completely overcome by fear and shame that my God was the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not the abstract God of the philosophers, of Aristotle and Plato. How can a modern such as me adopt the ancient belief of the ancients?

To be very clear, I am not speaking about a stable and constant faith. I have always felt that the image of the angles on Jacob's ladder descending and ascending expressed the idea that faith ebbs and flows, that our faith strives towards the heavens and then gets grounded in earth

again. And yet, even within this framework, each of us is graced with moments of ascent, times where spiritual meaning defies rational explanation. When those moments occur, and they do occur, they challenge each of us to garner the courage of faith to simply utter the ancient words, “our God and God of our ancestors” without pause for a philosophical preface or need for theological citations or justifications.

To my child I would therefore say that he should learn to trust those ultimate experiences of transcendent meaning. I would urge him not to listen to those who insist on the improbability and impossibility of God’s reality. Simultaneously however, I would also urge my child to remain just as wary of those who rush to identify God in the yellow pages and in newspapers’ headlines. God is too great for us to belittle Him in such ways.

The third and final message is that our tradition requires that we speak and stand for justice.

The book of Genesis makes it plainly clear that Abraham was chosen to be an agent of justice in the world. Modernity however is filled with ambiguous moral choices that at times may seem to force us to break with long held traditions and ways of believing. These touch upon questions of tradition and equality, tradition and inclusivity, tradition and the outside world. Challenging as these may be, and they are, inaction is always a form of action, and not to decide is to decide.

Every once in a while I am asked whether I support each and every cause adopted by my beloved teacher, Rabbi Avi Weiss. These causes include among others the recent ordination of Sarah Hurwitz, women leading kabbalat Shabbat services, political positions in regards to Israel, and so on, and so forth. My reply has always been the same: R. Weiss is my teacher when I agree with him, and R. Weiss is also my teacher when I disagree with him.

When I agree with him, R. Weiss is my teacher because of the positions and stances that he takes. When I disagree with him, R. Weiss is my teacher because of his sheer courage to take a

stand. At times, he role models an important position with which I agree, and at other times, he simply role models the courage required to take a position, even one with which I disagree.

Late in the summer I took a strong stance here in shul in support of the tent protests in Israel. I have done similarly through my personal trips to Israel, at times of war and at times of greater calm. We as a shul have done this as well when as a community we refused to buy or serve Rubashkin meat. We did it again when we had a Bat Mitzvah girl lead kabbalat Shabbat a couple of years ago.

Taking a stance is not always pretty. It's not always good for *Shalom Bayit*, for keeping the peace in our home. As your rabbi, I spend sleepless nights weighing these options, calculating our internal needs and our ideal strivings. And yet despite all that, at a time where leadership, especially the leadership of the pulpit rabbi, is threatened to be solely relegated to the role of pastor, you and I must still insist on prophecy. We must insist on a Torah that combines comfort and rebuke. We must insist on a Torah that both validates and castigates. This is important to me and it is critical for our community.

Let me be clear. I am not asking you to adopt my stance, but I am asking you to insist that in our community, a community committed to justice, a stance is to be taken. Let's disagree. Let's even disagree deeply. But God forbid, let us not callously stay silent. And yes, at times we might make mistakes; at times our judgments will err. But God forbid, let us err on the side of justice than err on the side of silence.

And so, in the face of moral tensions that call for a response, I would urge my child to trust that tradition is alive and not dead, that tradition is real and not a relic. That our tradition speaks not only of the past but also in the present. I would tell my child to review our tradition again and again, for it is all there. Indeed, to my child I would say that responding justly to these questions is the traditional way of continuing Abraham's and Sarah's bold spiritual path.

These are three simple messages for a child born into a fragile world and for each of us living in it: Shabbat is sacred; faith demands both courage and humility; tradition requires that we speak and stand for justice. "*Torah, avodah, gemmilut chasadim*" – "Our Torah, our relationship with God, our commitment to justice."

This Rosh Hashannah, I pray that as we strive to experience our rebirth as individuals and as a community, and as we strive to renew our covenant with each other, with God, and with the world, we merit to live up to the ideals that we speak and teach. May this Rosh Hashannah inspire greater *teshuvah* in our lives, as we return to the bold response of our ancestors, to the audacity and humility of their faith, and to the sacredness of the Sabbath and the mitzvot.