

RH2: Relationships & Change

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Shomrei Torah, Wayne, NJ

In our Torah reading this morning we once again returned to the text of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. This section is painful to read, difficult to discuss and important to spend time on. We might think that on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, that we should be reading the creation story from the beginning of the Torah, but instead we are reading about relationships, since the essence of life is our relationships. It's about the relationship between God and Abraham, Abraham and Isaac and also between Abraham and Sarah. It's about dysfunctional relationships and what we can learn about them – what kind of God asks you to sacrifice your son? Abraham and Isaac both survive their ordeal, but never speak again; Sarah dies; God and Abraham never speak again. It is so very sad and speaks so eloquently to us who struggle and fail at our own relationships. How many of in this room have a loved one from you are estranged? It is a painful reality.

We come to the synagogue seeking solace and comfort from the pain of life. We come looking for the familiar and the comfortable and discover that everything changes and that we too need to change. Change is not easy. We all resist changing, but discover that change is inevitable if we wish to avoid stagnation. The question is what to change? How to change? Here at Shomrei Torah we've come to the realization that we've been doing the same things, in the same ways

for too long and that it has not enabled us to keep up with the times. Judaism has always been about tradition and change; we need to adhere to our traditions and yet do it in such a way as to be vibrant and compelling the needs of today's Jews. We've tried a couple of experiments this year – we held our first Friday Night Live instrumental music Shabbat service. Many more people came to see what it was about than normally show up on a Friday night. Some people loved and can't wait for us to do it again; others found it strange and alien and disquieting to have it taking place in our House of Worship. It led to strong reactions and some heated conversations and email exchanges – and highlighted our need for a Shomrei Torah Blog on our website, something our webmaster, Lisa Cohn, set up and now it's just a matter of my getting on board and starting it off – something I promise to do right after the Chagim are over!

So there are few questions for us to consider – as a Conservative congregation, the first is what is the *halakha*, the Jewish laws on the subject. In truth there is not a lot of halakhic material on the subject. We know from reading the Psalms that musical instruments were used in the Temple in Jerusalem as a part of worship even on Shabbat and Festivals. We also know that rabbinic Judaism forbid the use of musical instruments. There is a category know as *Shevut* – resting, these were activities that while not technically prohibited were banned as not being in the spirit of Shabbat, this is where the ban on music came from. There were some who said that after the destruction of the Temple that we should refrain from the use of musical instruments as a sign of mourning and there were those who forbid the use of instruments because of their concern that

if it were to break on Shabbat while being used that one may be tempted to fix it – a prohibited act. Today there are those who argue that our understanding of what is in the spirit of Shabbat has changed. Support for this conclusion can be found in our own movement. At the most recent UCSJ Biennial Convention attendees had the choice of attending a Shabbat morning service with or without musical instruments – our own Sheryl Sarin was in attendance and you can ask her which minyan she attended. If you look at the placement questionnaire of the movement when seeking a new rabbi or cantor, one of the questions is “Musical Instruments Used on Shabbat? ___ Yes ___ No”.

Friday Night Live started in a Conservative congregation and there are many of our fellow USCJ congregations here in North Jersey that hold them. As far back as the Talmud, we find reference to rabbinic disputes being resolved by going out and seeing what the people are doing. It is clear to me that our people are allowing music on Shabbat; during Kabbalat Shabbat, during Mariv and on Shabbat morning. So then the question becomes one of comfort and preference. Do we want to have musical instruments as a part of our Shabbat worship? There will be people in favor and people opposed, so the better question is are we satisfied with current state of our worship services? I for one am not. I have had the opportunity from time to time to attend other services and some of them have been truly inspiring, I find our service to be uninspiring. You might find that surprising coming from me as your rabbi, but the truth is that the power in the services I have liked come from the *kehilah*, the community. You can go to a FNL service and be moved by the experience, but if it is the worship that moves you

and not a concert experience, then what have moved you is the feeling that comes from many voices joining together in joyful prayer.

When I've been in Israel and davened in Jerusalem on Shabbat, especially on Friday nights, they don't use instruments, but they have *kehillot* that join together in joyful prayer, the harmonies that they create move me to the very core of my being. But you don't have to go to Israel to find this, just spend a Shabbat at Camp Ramah or visit a USY Shabbaton and you'll find our young people engaged in the same type of prayer and you can't help but be moved by the experience. In the end if we want joyful, powerful, moving prayer experiences, then we have to be willing to come, to learn and to sing together. It's not about the amount of Hebrew vs. English, it is not about the instruments or not, it's all about the *kehila* and currently we don't have a *kehila* that comes and prays together. We can become that type of community, but you have to want to do it; please let me know if you are interested! As I've said, change is not easy.

For a long time we've been doing the same things in the same ways and consequently with the same results, people see Shomrei Torah as a place to come for the High Holy Days, a place to give their kids some sort of Jewish education and place to celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. What we are not is an exciting dynamic community. Which is what I'd like us to be and what our leadership is interested in becoming as well. So we tried a new program called Java Nagila; it was a coffee house here on a Sunday morning and like FNL drew about 100 people – a great turnout for us. If you missed it don't despair, we're doing it

again in December. It was a lovely morning with people just coming hanging out and spending time together building a community. You see that is what we are, we are a community. If you continue to think of the synagogue as a commodity, something that you pay for and then use when and if you choose – like a health club membership, then we'll continue to be what we have been – a resource. But we can be so much more.

To be all that we can be, we have embarked on a strategic planning process working with a professional provided by UJA NNJ. We have assembled a team of 25 diverse members working together with a small leadership team, we are trying to formulate what is the mission of the synagogue, we are examining what are our core values and we are studying our critical issues. Thank you to those people who filled out the congregational questionnaire that was the starting point of this endeavor. Our goal is to come up with a direction and plan for us to follow for the next few years, to plan and chart our growth and development.

It is not only Shomrei Torah that is undergoing change, Israel is as well. This is a time of transition there. Prime Minister Olmert has resigned due to a scandal; Tzipi Livni has become the head of Kadima, the majority party in the current government. Now we wait and watch to see if she can form a coalition government or if there will be new elections. Who her partners are will in large measure determine the next government's stand on the Palestinians and the peace process.

I find it interesting to read the writings of Israeli bloggers sharing their thoughts and perceptions on life in Israel. Two that I like to read who are very different from one another are Danny Gordis and Naomi Ragen. It was very interesting this summer to read what they had to say at the time of the prisoner swap with Hezbollah for the return of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser. Ragen posted that she was ashamed to be an Israeli on that day; that by freeing terrorists and especially Samir Kuntar was an abandonment of the ideals for which the IDF fights. Rather than making Israel safer, she placed in greater danger by the freeing of these known and captured terrorists. Her exact words were, "I am deeply ashamed to be an Israeli today. And I'm not very proud of being a Jew either if this is how a Jewish country behaves. To lead the world in ever more despicable acts of appeasement is nothing to be proud of. The torch we always carried, the 'light unto the nations' has been blown out by the hot-air of our politicians."

Gordis wrote that he was proud of Israel on that painful day. That he hated the freeing of terrorists and their reception in the Muslim world was disgusting, but that Israeli teens who put their lives on the line for their country need to know that their government will do whatever is in their power to get them back if something should happen to them. He wrote, "What we did this week is that we did right by the families who paid the price. We showed that at the end of the day, it is not only strategic calculus that matters in this country. There will be other ways to get our deterrent edge back. We'll get around to that; there's sadly no way that Hamas in the West, Hezbollah in the North, Syria to the East of them

and Iran off in the distance will not force us to. We'll attend to that in due course. But in the meantime, we showed ourselves once again that this country is about soul. They won, and we lost. They celebrated and we buried. They cheered and we wept. And I'd rather be one of us any day."

That Ragen and Gordis disagreed was not surprising to me, I've been reading them for years. However, what I found interesting was that in the blog Gordis entitled, "When Mistakes are Worth Making". He acknowledges that giving back Gaza was a mistake, but that it was a mistake that had to be made because it finally proved to the left that the Palestinians don't want peace, they want to eradicate Israel; that trading land for peace won't bring peace, that nothing will bring peace; so the challenge now is to learn to live in the midst of hostile neighbors; to accept that the status quo is the way that things will be. It was a sad comment. For years the right wing in Israel has been saying that you can't negotiate with a terrorist, but the country whose national anthem is entitled *Hatikvah*, the Hope, hope is not easily extinguished. We clearly can't live with the Palestinians now can we get rid of them, so the only viable option is a two state solution with secure borders, since we won't be able to trust them either. Not a very rosy picture, but an honest one under the circumstances.

How do you dialogue with a people who welcomed the likes of Kuntar back as a hero? Do you remember what he did back in 1979? He viciously murdered Danny Haran in front of his four year old daughter and then smashed her skull in with the butt of his gun; while this was going on Mrs. Haran was hiding in the attic with their newborn and in the process of trying to stifle the baby's cries

smothered her own child to death. This violent terrorist was welcomed home to Lebanon as a hero. We value life, they clearly do not. We can't reason with them, we can only protect ourselves from them. A sad reality; but every reality can be dealt with and Israel is dealing with hers admirably. Terrorist attacks are down, tourism is up, there are more American students visiting and studying there than ever before. I have to tell you that we are well behind our Orthodox brethren when it comes to sending our kids to Israel. Nearly 100% of Orthodox teens spend the year between high school and college in Israel studying. Our own movement has a program called Nativ that does the same thing and it is growing from year to year, but it is still a small percentage of our children who spend that year in Israel. Birthright is great, but it is a far cry from spending a year in Israel. Encourage your young adults to go, for a short time or for a longer time, but get them to go – it is an important part of our relationship with the Jewish homeland.

As a congregation we are planning a trip to Israel for the spring, if we can get 15-20 members who are interested in participating, then this trip will happen. So far we are short of the mark. If you are interested, please let us know; because if we can't get the minimum by Yom Kippur, then we're going to have to give up on this trip and I'll go to plan B – promoting the UJA NNJ's J2J2 trip in February.

Finally, I want to talk to you about your personal relationships. Ask yourself, what's broken? What's in need of your time and attention? What can you learn from Abraham and the Akedah that you can apply to your own life, your own broken relationships. First and foremost, relationships need communication.

There are some commentators who say that Abraham misunderstood God's command that it was not to sacrifice his son, but rather to educate his son in the way of sacrifice and that the angel was needed to prevent Abraham from making a terrible mistake. Abraham and Isaac never speak again after the experience, perhaps if they had been able to discuss what transpired, if they had worked with a therapist, together they might have been able to get past that horrible ordeal and continue their relationship. There is a midrash that says that Sarah died because Satan revealed to her what Abraham was doing on the mountain top, again if he'd taken the time to discuss his vision with her, then she may have been able to help him see the error of his ways; or she may have accepted the inevitability of what he was doing and while she would not be happy about it, it might not have killed her. It's hard to know, what we do know is that the communication was poor amongst all parties and the relationships were ripped asunder by the experience. So take the time to communicate with those that you love, some relationships are so badly damaged that you can fix it on your own, but that is exactly what counselors are for, seek them out, get help. Make a change. Make it now. Make it one small step at a time and God willing, a year from now, we'll all be in a better place than we are now.

Wishing you and your loved ones a Shanah Tovah u'mitukah – A Happy and Sweet New Year.