

KEN KORN YOM KIPPUR 2020/5781 via Zoom

When Sharon Ball called and asked if I would talk today, I thought ‘Why me?’ What insights do I have on Jewish life that qualify me to speak? I am terrible at Hebrew. I never lived in Israel. I was tempted to call Sharon back to say no. Not because I am lazy, or not in love with the sound of my voice, but because I don’t think I have anything to offer.

For several years, a congregant has given this talk, and surely some did not feel great about it. Next year, one of you will be giving this talk, and you may not be too happy either. In a couple of hours Michael Melasky and Dr. Hannes will read the Haftarah portion of Jonah. Jonah risked shipwreck, drowning and being eaten by a whale, so great his desire not to speak to his people.

The fact that others before me felt inadequate doesn't diminish the fact that I have no Jewish insight to offer. As far as this speech is concerned, Strike 1.

At least Sharon told me what to talk about. ‘My Jewish Journey.’ But others who gave this talk grew up in Jewish Neighborhoods in NY City with family and neighbors who spoke Yiddish. How can my Jewish Journey compare? A journey implies you have a destination. But I have no idea how or when my journey is going to end. If I did, I’d have a better speech.

Lying on my deathbed I could say that the Rabbis and Isaiah were right. I am about to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and I’m fearing no evil. But without that insight, Strike 2.

I remember from HS English if you are going to tell a story, you need to have something to say, but I’m just another baby boomer from the suburbs. Nothing extraordinary has happened to me.

I grew up in a neighborhood right off the set of ‘Leave it to Beaver.’ with neighbors and friends lifted from central casting. I did bump into Ben Vereen once in a Hotel Elevator, but other than that, Strike 3. This talk is in trouble.

As unlikely as it may seem, maybe in my childhood there is some Jewish Journey worth talking about. We don't know how my Journey will end, but we can talk about its beginning. I grew up in a suburb of Buffalo. Most of my neighbors were not Jewish, but there were Jewish kids, many went to our Synagogue and Sunday school. I became a Bar Mitzvah and was confirmed. Is this the beginning of my Jewish Journey?

Maybe we should look farther back, like when I started Sunday School and Hebrew School. Is this the beginning of my Jewish Journey? Maybe even further.

I grew up with lots of Jewish aunts, uncles and cousins, many of whom lived nearby. My earliest memories are going to the Bar Mitzvahs and weddings of my cousins and going to Aunt Sylvia's on Rosh Hashanah, Aunt Annette's to break-the-fast, and Passover at our house. With so many cousins, I remember Hanukkah parties at Aunt Harriet's, with gifts piled to the ceiling. Is this the beginning of my Jewish Journey?

My parents grew up in very different Jewish circumstances. My mother was an only child who grew up in a very small town in Louisiana. Her parents, and her aunt and uncle and their children were the only Jews in town. It is a situation some here at Beth Shalom may be familiar with. My grandfather was a small-town Jewish merchant. He and his brother ran the town's dry goods store, not unlike our Werner's here in Florida, but more isolated. The nearest Jewish community of any size was New Orleans; a day's train ride away. If they wanted a kosher chicken, they would have to butcher it themselves. Their sense of Jewishness required self-reliance, tenacity and flexibility.

When we started raising a family in Warwick, where there were not many Jews, I thought about my grandfather, and his brother taking the ax behind the shed to bless and then butcher their Shabbat meal.

Maybe my sense of Jewishness goes farther back than I realize. For I often felt bad that our children did not grow up surrounded by Jewish aunts, uncles and cousins as I did. This is something many of you listening can relate with.

Families today are smaller, and people move around more. But I also remember feeling that if my children were to experience the kind of embracing Jewish experience I had, it was just going to take a bit more work. We could not go to some cousin's house and have everything done for us. We were going to have to do the planning, the shopping and the cooking ourselves. While thankfully nothing as graphic as butchering a chicken, a degree of commitment was nonetheless required.

Contrasting my mom's childhood, my father was one of 6 children. He grew up in Columbus Ohio, near Ohio State, where there were other Jews and Jewish infrastructure, Jewish stores, kosher shops and Synagogues. For them getting a kosher chicken did not mean sharpening the ax. It meant walking across the street. It is from my dad's family that I had all those aunts, uncles and cousins and memories of lox, knishes and borscht at a time when you could not just buy food like that at a grocery store, and that pile of Hanukkah gifts that went to the ceiling.

Our people have survived for thousands of years in part because of certain attributes that are part of our cultural fiber. One of them, L'dor V'dor, from generation to generation. Our parents and grandparents prepare us, but not every lesson is necessary clear in the moment.

From my mom's family there was the lesson of tenacity and self-reliance. From my father's family there was connectivity and interdependence. Each of these lessons were prepared before I was born and were learned without me knowing it. It is becoming difficult to pick a date when My Jewish Journey began.

Another uniquely Jewish attribute is a reverence for scholarship. That my father's family grew up in the shadows of Ohio State University was not a coincidence. In the 1940s with the depression persisting, and the war starting, only 4% of Americans finished college. Yet my parents and every one of my uncles and aunts went to college, including advanced degrees in law, optometry, fine arts, education and even a PhD in botany. This commitment and dedication to education is a remarkable accomplishment and I am proud to say it was passed from the generation of my aunts and uncles to their children and now to their grandchildren. But I also know among you listening to me it is not unique. Many of you could tell a similar story about your family. It is woven into the Jewish psyche. I would really like to tell you how my father and all my uncles were also big-time stars of the Ohio State football team...But it is Yom Kippur...and I cannot bear false witness.

I had thought my Jewish journey began when I realized that to help Anders and Ingrid with their Hebrew I would have to practice. But it goes back before then. Maybe it started when we joined a synagogue, or enrolled in Sunday School, or, maybe back to my Confirmation, or Bar Mitzvah, or that day when I started Hebrew School. But doesn't it begin before that?

Was it those memories of being with all my Jewish cousins and aunts & uncles? Or before that, with the choices my parents made? How even though my mother was southern and rural, and my father was northern and urban, they still shared a heritage that brought them to a wedding canopy.

My talk had 3 strikes against it. I was asked to write about a journey, with no start, no finish and about a topic I felt unqualified to discuss. But now I realize that maybe that is the point. The shared knowledge of the past 5000 years has given us, even those as unqualified as I, a reservoir of insight that goes beyond what we think we know.

When Jacob was in the desert, he dreamed of a ladder rising to heaven. When he awoke, he realized God was with him all along, but he did not know it. Perhaps our shared heritage has provided us with knowledge that also is with us, of which we may not be fully aware.

So, my apologies to Sharon, this talk is not about my journey. It is about our journey. It's a relay where we each carry the baton for as long as we're blessed, before passing it on. It is a journey that began long ago, and we pray can go on for generations to come.

But maybe a relay race is not the best metaphor. Life should not be a race. Perhaps a more fitting metaphor is a stained-glass window. We pay little attention to the particulars of any individual piece, but collectively they produce something magnificent. Believe it or not, this picture on the left is my hometown synagogue in Buffalo, a significant spot in my Jewish Journey. It is where I was a Bar Mitzvah, and where members of my family have both celebrated and grieved life's events. Not just the stained glass, but the 10 commandments are all mosaics. These towering Lameds have been made by thousands of seemingly insignificant tiles. The dark blue area in the center of the stained glass represents the hand of God. It is hard to see in these photographs, but it is a highly abstracted hand. That the artist, Ben Shahn, made the hand abstract and not representational, is appropriate for we cannot expect some fully realized hand of God to come and solve our problems. The hand of God is in our hands, even those like me, who wonder if they are qualified.

This zoom screen is our stained glass for 5781. We cannot gather in a synagogue, and enjoy the religious art that normally surrounds us, yet during this time of strife, pandemic and crisis, this computerized stained glass can still teach and inspire us.

I started today's talk saying I was not qualified to speak to you. But then realized just how much I had learned from my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. However, Jews are blessed to have more than just one family or one generation to learn from. This zoom mosaic is a reminder that our Jewish Journey is an amalgamation of many families and many generations.

Our heritage has gifted us with insights, attributes and obligations. Like Jacob awakening from his dream, they are with you now. And as Jonah learned, they cannot be run away from. They are part of who we are, and something that we, even you, and yes, even I, are qualified to engage. They may be obligations as trivial as having to speak to your congregation, even when you don't want to, or as crucial as wearing a mask or voting. They go beyond our commitment to education, or our shared proclivity for certain foods. They include the obligation to learn to do good; Seek Justice, Rebuke the Oppressor; Defend the Fatherless, Engage in Tzedakah, and to Repair the Earth.

Let's wish all those in the stained-glass window of our computers a year that will overflow with the attributes that have guided, girded and gifted our people for millennia.

Let us be granted a year of strength, tenacity and connection. A year that banishes the idolatry of hate and the false god of fear. A year that embraces the wisdom of truth, and the truth of wisdom. A year of righteousness, a year of action and a year of goodness.

Shana Tova.