

Did you hear the news? Two astronauts have finally landed on Mars. Their mission, to check whether there is breathable air on the planet. One astronaut says to the other; give me the box of matches. I will strike one and either it will burn and there will be oxygen, breathable air or nothing will happen. He takes the box and he is ready to strike the match, when out of nowhere a Martian appears waving his arms, no, no don't do that! The two guys look at each other. They were worried. Could there be an unknown explosive gas on Mars? The astronaut takes another match and now a crowd of hysterical Martians are coming. All of them are waving their arms, don't do that, don't strike the match! The astronaut looks at his friend and says this looks pretty serious. What are they afraid of? We are here for science. We want to know if man can breathe on Mars. The astronaut strikes a match, it flames up, it burns down and nothing happens. The other astronaut turns to the Martian and says, why were you so worried? Why were trying to prevent us from lighting the match? The leader of the Martians steps forward and says: "My friends it's Shabbes."

My friends it is Shabbat. It is Shabbat and it is Yom Kippur. Something very compelling brings us together this evening. It's as if we're coming home. For parts of this Jewish world, Shabbat brings every member of the community together. Where we are it is Yom Kippur that has the force to bring us all together. I welcome you. I welcome all of you, to this spiritual home. It is so good when brothers and sisters come together as one.

This evening what I would like to do is to speak a little bit about that force, that force that compels us to be together, the force that unites us.

Maimonides taught that it is the coming together, the very act of being together that helps atone for our sins and our wrongdoings. As we sit here I think some of are here out of a sense of obligation to a personal past, a grandparent or a parent and that compels us. But there are others of us who are here because of some claim that this tradition has upon us, something that calls on us to unite a piece of our own selves into a larger family, to be part of something bigger than anyone of us, to feel God's presence in some way.

That's the question that I would like us to think about this evening. What is the claim of Judaism on us?

I don't have to tell you that in our times personal autonomy is very, very powerful. Our culture is based on the notion of doing it ourselves, doing it our way. There is great pride in this. America is about rugged individualism.

I can't begin to tell you the number of funerals that I have done where a family member eulogizes a loved one and says, you know the thing about Bob is he did it his way. In fact it is much more than a popular song to do it your own way. It actually grows out of deeper philosophical and theological ideas.

Not long ago there was an article in the New York Times Sunday magazine section that reintroduced us to the thought of Rousseau, who influenced European thought at the time of the enlightenment. The notion he brought into culture was ultimately that each one of us has the desire for right and to do good. Outer forms of authority, in fact, trap the soul. The idea being that we can do it our way, and do it right. How contrary this seems to traditional religions which legislate upon the individual. Religious systems that command what we can do and what we should do and what is forbidden.

This is a long standing issue and in some ways all of us struggle with different claims on our lives. In our larger culture I sense that people don't want to be determined by others, outside forces. Yet, we would admit that all of us are in some ways. We're claimed by our children and our parents, our spouses and our friends, our jobs and our commitments. And how we respond to those claims defines, to a great extent, who we are and the nature of our lives.

Recently, a young man, a beautiful kid, came to see me in my office. He happens to be a quarterback on a local high school football team. The reason for his visit was his team was scheduled to play a very important regional game on this night, Friday night, Kol Nidre. He didn't know what to do. And he was in great conflict, as you might imagine.

I asked him to tell me why he felt this as a conflict. What was pulling at his life? He described to me his role on the team. He saw himself as a leader, not just on the field, but off the field. He said: "...the players and my friends really need me. I serve as a role model. I am the quarterback." And then I asked: "So why the conflict?" He said, well, my parents want me to be with them on this day and as a Jew I feel an obligation to be with my people. I commiserated with this open young man and truly felt his pain. It is not simple to live with competing demands, competing claims on who we are and on our time and on our values. Sometimes it's clear and sometimes it's very hard to find a place in that.

After a long conversation he decided that he would NOT play...a very courageous decision. As he was leaving my office I called him back and said: you know the leaders of this community, the school, the Board of Education, and the parents aren't really being fair. And this isn't just about you. I know more than 30% of your school is Jewish. No one should have to make this decision. So I'm also going to help you. I'll try to get the game changed.

I do a lot of different things as the rabbi of this congregation. Perhaps, nothing more important than the conversation that takes place with a Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah child the week before their big day. I sit with them and I sit with their parents and we talk about the meaning of the e Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah. It's not a performance. It is very important that the message that they get from B'nai Torah is that Bar and Bat Mitzvah is much more than a celebration. There is something so critical in this rite of passage. It is meant to symbolize something very important in their lives.

This evening I want to tell you a little about those conversation and I what I relate to our children. I tell them about the history of Bar/Bat Mitzvah and that it originally was about reaching an age...12 ½ -13, not a religious ceremony at all. It's about reaching the age of maturity. In our culture it's 18 or 21... And then we speak a little bit about what it means to be mature, to be a grown up. What does it really mean to be an adult? So we talk about how one handles the freedom that comes with being a teenager and how maturity is about responsible choices. It's more than a specific Jewish notion; it's about growing as a human being.

But we were exiled and no longer defined our civil law. And so wherever we were adulthood was defined for us. Yet we kept our attachment to Torah, our values, our culture and retained Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It took hundreds of years before we made it into a religious communal synagogue ceremony. But we felt the demands of the tradition. And we kept it alive.

Most people in history disappeared when they lost their land and their autonomy. We didn't. Why did we survive as a minority population amongst majority cultures? What is the claim that this tradition had upon people? That claim included (maybe at its core), a type of family life where children were seen as precious, where life was lived for the sake of the children and the future. The claim on us to remain came from the organization of our communities, that cared for the poorest and the oldest and the sickest amongst us; welfare programs, and study groups and schools and burial societies and houses of worship. And the claim remained alive through the perpetuation of Torah and the dream of return to the land.

In his book "The Earth is the Lord's" Abraham Joshua Heschel speaks about a Christian university professor who went to Warsaw to give a lecture. After the lecture he went to the area in the town square where horse drawn carriages were to be found to get a lift to the nearby train station. He saw the carriages and the horses but none of the drivers. When he inquired where the drivers were, he discovered that they were all learning in their Beit Midrash. In Warsaw, like countless communities every group of people had their Beit Midrash where they learned Torah together; the shoe makers, the tailors, the carriage drivers, all of them. And the response of the Christian scholar was that any culture where the poorest and even the carriage drivers continue to learn will survive forever. The claim comes from how much our ancestors studied.

I tell the kids as they sit in my office they are going from being children who are cared for and spoken for and clothed and bathed by their parents to becoming adults who are going to be taking care of themselves. How fast that all takes place. It also means that they are going from total dependence to going out to the world as independent people. Out there in the world there is going to be choices that they have to make, all sorts of choices. Some of them are difficult choices and some are very clear. What system of values will claim them? How will they make those choices? The day after Bar or Bat Mitzvah they can walk out of this building and never walk into a shul again! That's going to be their choice.

But I say to them that you are having a Bar Mitzvah here and I am officiating as your rabbi and so I have an expectation! You are standing up in front of this great congregation, you are being given a great privilege to lead the congregation in prayer and we spent so much time and so much energy making a program that would train you well and give you broader meanings of this in terms of tzedakah and in terms of tefillah. So as you stand here I assume that you understand that the expectation is that you don't go away. Bar and Bat Mitzvah is not the end of your connection to the synagogue and to Jewish life. In fact, this is about the beginning of mitzvah...of obligation to live some kind of Jewish life, to help make sure the Jewish people continue...and inside, by now they are shaking their heads wondering: What did I get into? When I ask them how will their Jewish life be different? What is the mitzvah or mitzvot they will observe...so many say "Now I have to fast on Yom Kippur"!

Then I say, wait there's more! Look at what you are a part of. A tiny people less than 1/4 of 1% of the world's population and look at the incredible contribution that we have made to humanity (and you all know this and you hear it and you get them on the internet all the time.) It's unbelievable what the Jewish people contribute to this world in science and math and philosophy and literature and economics and popular culture and the numbers of Noble Prize winners and the disproportionate of Jews involved in the leadership in every area of academia and government, etc. There is a reason for all that. That is because of the attachment to this tradition of learning and learning with values. The whole tradition is a conversation about meaning, an exercise in thought and understanding and a requirement to do. This I say is what it means to be a Bar Mitzvah. That's the claim.

We might say that the claim is equivalent to the word Mitzvah. The rabbis taught in a Midrash that God offered the Torah to all of the nations of the world. Each nation of the world had a reason for not accepting the Torah for they feared the claims and obligations and prohibitions it placed upon them. But then he went to Israel and he held the mountain above all the people and he said will you accept the Torah and if you don't I will drop this mountain over you.

Obviously, they accepted, but this isn't the picture of obligation that we feel very good about.

In our world we don't accept Torah because we have no other choice. No, we live in a world with so many choices. And what we want is to choose to feel the obligation, the claim, and the mitzvah.

We could be anything or we could choose to be nothing. If we look around, we feel so good to be with so many of our brothers and sisters on a night like this, but the reality is that the majority of Jews in this country are not sitting in synagogues. Hard to believe, but it is true. It is hard to believe that nearly 75% of Jewish kids when asked if Israel were to be destroyed would they feel it as a personal tragedy. They responded no, that it wouldn't really make a difference in their lives.

There is no claim.

We live in a time where well over 50% of Jews in our country will be intermarried and of those intermarried 70% of those children will not identify as Jews. We have spoken about that before and we understand the implications for us in terms of being open and welcoming. But these are times of choices. It is not out of a sense of law or the external obligation one will come to Judaism in a world of freedom, in a world where individuals see themselves as being the decision makers in their own lives. There is something else that needs to attract.

Modern thinkers from Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber to Abraham Joshua Heschel, they all concerned themselves with a changing world. They understand the impact that freedom would have on a tradition of law and obligation. And so they helped us realize that our religion was not merely a religion of justice and law, but something that grows out of love and it grows out of communal responsibility.

The Torah teaches, “You should love the Lord your God” and the simple meaning is that the love of God is the longing of something deep inside of ourselves for our creator. It is a matter of the heart. In the Talmud we learn that Rabbi Akiva understood and he taught this and the love of God was so deep, the yearning came from such a core place that he was willing to die a torturous death rather than give up the claim. Rabbi Ishmael was not quite as spiritual and he explained the love in a different way. He explained it in terms of performing good deeds. He said some people perform good deeds out of fear of God and other people perform them out of love. When we are taught that we should love the Lord your God we are commanded to act out of love. That’s the way Abraham did when he welcomed strangers. That’s the way the visitors acted when they visited the sick. Rabbi Ishmael went further. He said when a person studies Torah his conversation with people should become more pleasant, his business in dealings more fair, and his business becomes more honest and people will say how fortunate it is he who cleaves to the Torah. Our religion needs to have passion. Our religion needs to have love, but religion also needs a binding structure.

The great controversial thinker Mordecai Kaplan inferred that it is not even important if one sees it as being God given, but rather it is about carrying the life of the people. Rules, of course, are needed to create any community of people, but the community of Israel can distinguish itself by virtue of acts of holiness and responsibility and so we create a culture, a world view a way of looking at life.

And I ask how does it claim us? What choices do we make?

You know in a funny way this is my Bar Mitzvah tonight for I mark the end of thirteen years, the beginning of my fourteenth year as the rabbi of this congregation. In that time we have truly gotten to know each other much better. We have seen each others strengths and we have seen each others flaws and imperfections, but one of the things that this Bar Mitzvah realizes is that through growing knowledge of each other, I have been in your lives during times of sickness and death, the birth and brit milah, naming your babies and the Bnai Mitzvot of your children, I have stood under the chuppah

with many of you and your children. I realize that that connection creates a great claim of responsibility for each other. The realization of mitzvah, I believe is the realization of relationship. It implies responsibility and caring.

For us, it is about certain obligations that we share towards each other, that go beyond the professional. There is a partnership and a commitment that goes beyond contracts.

And this is essential to the notion of mitzvah and its claim on us. In it there is holiness and in it there possibility. In this world of rugged individualism and world of total freedom, I know that every one of us feels claimed. Family, people, community...and we believe God.

Often we try to deny it. Often we try to run from it, but in it there is such incredible power. This is the power of mitzvah. In popular culture mitzvah is seen as a good deed. And often mitzvot are good deeds, but it is much more than that. It is the obligation to behave in certain ways. It is the obligation to refrain from certain behaviors. It is the obligation to express our love for our people and for God.

Before Rosh Hashanah last year I went to visit Hospice to see a member of our shul family who was dying. I brought a Shofar and know the sound of the Shofar can be very jolting and frightening and I asked the person if they wanted to hear the Shofar blown and they nodded. I blew the Shofar. Imagine the power of fulfilling that mitzvah for the last time. *L'shmoah Kol Shofar*...The person was cognizant, aware of his surroundings and smiled and thanked me. There was a certain peacefulness and love in that room that we often find in the face of death. Then I asked if there were other Jewish patients. There was a woman next door who was in her last hours of life. I asked the family if they would want me to blow the Shofar for her. They nodded yes, but the Hospice nurse said it probably wouldn't make a difference. The woman's eyes were closed and had not been engaged in any conversation or interaction for days. I told the woman what I was going to do and blew the Shofar. I tried to do in a hush tone and as I blew the Shofar tears began to roll down the woman's face. They might have been tears of fear or tears of joy; they might have been tears of yearning. I don't know, but I did experience the power of that mitzvah.

A couple of years ago I went to visit a friend's husband in the hospital. He is a member of a local Orthodox synagogue. We spent some time talking and laughing and I prayed for his health and well-being and as I was about to leave he said one second rabbi. I thought he was going to thank me for visiting. He said something very different. He said, rabbi I am happy that I enabled you to perform the mitzvah of *bichor cholim*. I stood back for a second. My immediate response was one where I thought he lacked gratitude for the visit and then I realized the performance of the mitzvah raised my own level of existence, of being, of love and brought me closer to God. At that moment I was thankful that he enabled me to perform that mitzvah.

Mitzvahs are more than good deeds. They are guiding principles and they are expressions of love constituted in a way for us to create holiness in our lives and be in a

living relationship with God. Our mitzvahs are expressed in the way we treat the people, who work for us, the people who cut our lawns, the people who repair our appliances. Mitzvah consciousness is living with the experience of God in our lives.

Now I want to get back to Mars. It is Yom Kippur. It is a day where we look at ourselves and look for forgiveness. Forgiveness brings us closer to that one moment where we feel that we are living in God's presence. But it's also Shabbat our weekly sanctuary in time.

Now I want to be practical. I want to translate this into something that can change you. I want it to claim you. Allow it to claim you because of its goodness, joy, and the beauty. I, perhaps, naively, but in good company believe it can serve as an antidote to so many of life's greatest challenges..

People fear Shabbat the same way that slaves feared freedom. People, I think, in our culture fear free time. If I had free time, what would I do with it? If I had free time how would I spend it? Very little frightens us as living without a schedule, without instructions of what we do, and where to go and when our deadlines are due. Of course, everyone complains that they don't have enough time. But, given 24 hours of unstructured time, people are strangely uneasy.

Psychologists refer to something as a Sunday neuroses, a mounting tension that is experienced by successful people who grow depressed when the market is closed, when they find themselves with nothing to do. The truth is we are much too busy. We are overwhelmed by responsibility. And we gain so much of our sense of self, and sense of power from the places that we work. So often the workplace is more interesting than home, more rewarding emotionally. One feels more appreciated, has a greater sense of self-esteem and there is more comradery. Work becomes an escape from home. Work is an escape from dishes and unresolved quarrels and crying babies and testy adolescents and unresponsive partners. Life is moving by so quickly. We can't gain enough and we can't do enough. We need Shabbat.

Did you see the recent advertisement for Quaker Oat Meal and a mother feeding her child in just under 90 seconds? The smiling mother who is named Sherry Greenberg held her 4 ½ year old Nicky and in the ad she declared; "Nicky is a very picky eater. With instant Quaker Oat Meal I can give him a terrific hot breakfast in 90 seconds and I don't have to spend anytime coaxing him to eat it." The ad concludes, Instant Quaker Oat Meal for moms who have a lot of love, but not a lot of time.

Hallmark recently has come out with lines of cards that for busy parents. It says, sorry I can't be there to tuck you in tonight. Another card put on the breakfast table says, I am sorry I am not here to say good morning. Our lives are frenzied. We have so much to do and we don't ever seem to have time to catch a breath.

We need Shabbat.

We're so plugged into technology...I-phones and I-pods and all of our wondrous technology but we're un-plugged from real conversation, ideas, meaning and each other...My perception is that half the men and most of the kids I meet can't concentrate on a single idea or conversation for more than two minutes. Those things which may be most important are lost. The places in our lives that should have the greatest claim is missing. Our spouses, our children, our friends...our homes and community.

We need Shabbat

Sabbath is a cry for sanity. It is a cry for freedom from the monstrous world that eats at our soul and robs us of family and friends and the gentleness that can exist inside all of us. Shabbat is the great liberator. It is our declaration that we are free human beings that we can take an armistice from work and obligation and just be. Work has drained us of poetry and romance and intimacy. Shabbat can provide time for us to return to our lives. Shabbat is a cry for family. A modern table can be filled with the best food and drink, but it rarely has laughter. When was the last time you sang at your table? It is so unusual to have a table where there is song and conversation and learning. Shabbat can do that. Shabbat does that.

We nap and we take delight in each other and in silence. Shabbat is transformation, the claim of business and technology and money and greed and tension on our lives and replacing it with the claim of family and peace. That's my message, simple. We can be claimed by family and home through this mitzvah.

A story from the Norzick synagogue in Warsaw.

You know after the war, after the Shoah there were thousands of children in orphanages. Many in churches. There was a Rav Singer who wanted to bring the children home to Israel. He went to the head of one such orphanage and requested to do so. He was asked "how do you prove which of these young children are Jewish?"

Rav Singer called the mayor of the city, officials and the directors of the orphanage. He asked that they walk into the large room when the children are going to sleep. The lights were out there was silence and then the Rav sang: *Sh"ma Yisrael Adonoi Ehloheinu Adonoi Echad*...All over the room children picked up their heads "*mameleh, tateleh*...and they joined in." Rav Singer brought hundreds of children home.

We're home tonight. Welcome home. And please, make this year the year where the claims of home are felt, realized and experienced with love and joy. Where mitzvah will speak to us. And the mitzvah of Shabbat will bring us home.

Let me return to the Martians.

The Martians may have over reacted, but I think they had it right.

On this day...don't light that match! but we will feel its light.

*Gemar Chatima Tova*, May you be sealed for a good year.