

Graduation Shabbat 2013

The usual message of the commencement speaker is advice to the graduating students as they set off on the next stage of their life-journey. The difference between me and the high school and graduation commencement speakers that you will encounter soon and then in several years, is that I know each one of you. So when I say ‘this is advice that you ought to take to heart’, you know I’m speaking directly to you. What follows are three life-messages from me, and then one from this week’s Torah portion.

“Experience is not making the same mistake twice.”

You are about to enter a new and radically different world from the one you’ve inhabited for 17 or 18 years. You will have to work your own way through it, learning what to do when, and how to do it most productively and effectively. You will be responsible for your time and finances and energy and health and cleanliness in ways you’ve long dreamed about, but are probably unprepared for. You will learn that what was expected from you in high school is nothing at all like what will be required of you as a college student. This will be a transition of magnificent proportions, one that is at the same time incredibly exciting and unexpectedly perplexing. And to manage your way through this world of new-found independence and added responsibility, you will have to rely on yourself—and only yourself. Your most important guides will be common sense and the values you’ve acquired growing up. And the truth is that no matter how prepared you are, you *will* make mistakes and misjudgments—but *that* is how you will learn. In fact is the *only* way to learn. So remember this: “Experience-- is not making the same mistake twice.”

“Being Jewish doesn’t make you better but it *does* mean that you are special.”

You have been blessed with having grown up in a Jewish family and embraced by this Jewish community. We stand at the end of a continuous historical heritage that began almost 4000 years ago. You are, in a very real way, immediately connected to hundreds of Jewish generations. Yours is a legacy and a history that has changed Western Civilization: our Hebrew alphabet was the beginning of all alphabets, our Rabbinic legal codes are the foundation of Western Law, our Jewish values of justice and righteousness and mercy are the basis for the morality and ethics of our culture. We gave the world the Sabbath and we made monotheism the religious norm. And it’s our Bible that’s in the front of all of theirs. You, and your history, and your heritage have changed the world—and that makes you special. But it doesn’t make you better! What it makes you is *responsible*! Standing at the leading edge of our history, you are responsible for maintaining and protecting and preserving the values that have us brought us this far. Our Jewish tomorrow depends on you. And that brings me to my third life-lesson.

“Belief means ‘live by’”

As Jews, we are first and foremost, members of a faith community. What ultimately defines us as Jews is our religious identification, and what primarily defines and describes a religion is its system of beliefs. Throughout your religious school education you have never been taught “what” to believe, only that it is important that you struggle with what it means “to” believe. Your religious school education was never meant to be the sum total of what you need to know, or ought to know. This has been only a beginning, a push to get you started on your own. And the one “religious” message I want you to take away from your Temple Emanu-El school experience, is that deciding what you believe about God, and what it means to be a Jew, and what it means to be a person, is only the first stage. Deciding what it is that you believe has no value whatsoever unless it is given expression in how you live! Belief must always mean “live by”, because if your beliefs are not translated into action, if they exist only in the theoretical and artificial construct of pleasant-sounding phrases—then they really have no meaning, or value or existence at all! Find your faith, decide what it means to be a Jew, identify the values you believe in, and live your faith and your Jewishness and your values every day.

With those, my three life-lessons to you, there is one more that comes from this week's Torah portion of *Sh'lach lecha*. Tomorrow morning we will read that the Israelites in the desert are complaining about everything! Never mind that God has freed them from slavery, never mind that God has provided food and water and protection in their trek through the desert. Never mind that God has sworn to take them to a rich and fertile Promised Land. No, tomorrow we'll read that they cry out 'Why has God brought us to this wasteland, to die here in the desert? It would be better for us if we went back to Egypt!'

We read this story with great sadness that the Israelites are so quick to complain that God is not taking better care of them. How can they have already forgotten the wonders and miracles that got them out of Egypt, and the splitting of the sea, and the manna from heaven, and the water from the rock? Though we might be upset at this behavior of the Israelites, the truth is that there is something inherently Jewish about 'complaining'! We even have a Yiddish word for it: to *kvetch*. And if we were honest with ourselves we would say that *kvetching* is a something of a Jewish characteristic. But tonight, I suggest that *kvetching*, complaining, is an important value for us.

For centuries we lived in countries that barely tolerated our presence. We suffered greatly, we were treated poorly, and there was nothing we could do about it. And then we came to America! And the first lesson we learned here was that the ones who complained the most—got heard! In a free society we're supposed to complain when something is wrong. And in fact, it's considered a sign of weakness to quietly, passively "sit back and just take it." The Jewish greenhorns from Eastern Europe coming to America at the turn-of-the-century realized that politely ignoring an injustice, just brought it back on them again. We learned: "Ya' gotta complain if you want things to change!"

That's what's right about America-- a free society depends upon the raised voices of its citizens to protest injustice, to become active and involved in the correction of social wrongs. That expectation is, more than any other value, the hallmark of one's freedom: the right and responsibility to *kvetch* is guaranteed by the first amendment! A right that is nicely expressed in this story about a Jewish immigrant from Soviet Russia.

He was asked: "So how was your life in Russia?"

"I can't complain", he said.

"And how were your living conditions there?"

"I can't complain", he responded.

"And how much money did you make?"

Again, he answered "I can't complain."

"Well, if everything was alright, why in the world did you come to America?!"

"Oh," said the new immigrant, "here, thank God, I *can* complain!"

Torah reminds us that we have the responsibility to insure that oversights, errors, and evils are not allowed to go unchallenged, or permitted to continue. And though in Torah God gets angry with us when we unreasonably complain, God is probably more angry with us when we do not complain enough! We cannot remain silent when protest is called for, we are not to "stand idly by when our neighbor bleeds", as Leviticus states, nor close our ears to the cries of others. Our world is imperfect, and we need people who are not afraid to *kvetch*-- who will raise their voices in protest, who will stand up and work to correct a wrong. And that too is your responsibility.

Learn from your mistakes, be proud that you're Jewish, live by what you believe, and be a social *kvetch* if necessary. And though in our Torah portion this week the Israelites are frightened and fearful of the future, by the end of the story, when they finally cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land, they are ready for the challenge that awaits them. Moses bids them farewell with these words *chazak v'amatz*—be strong and courageous. And so we send you off, into your future: *chazak v'amatz*—be strong and courageous and make us proud of you.

Mazal tov

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