

Erev Rosh Hashanah – September 24, 2014

Shanah Tovah – It is so nice to see you all here tonight and to wish you well as we begin the journey that is the High Holidays. I look forward to joining the congregation as we daven together led by Hazzan Dulkan and I also cherish the opportunity to share my thoughts with you about important issues for the holidays and to strive to connect them to our contemporary lives. In the past on Erev Rosh Hashanah, my custom is to find a modern song or relevant story to share in the hope it will inspire us throughout the holidays.

Since we Jews like to tell stories, you won't be surprised that your Rabbi also likes to tell stories. So tonight I want to share a High Holiday story with you that comes from my colleague Rabbi Eddie Feinstein, who happens to be one of the best Rabbinic Story tellers I know.

The story is about the founder of the Hasidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov who lived in Ukraine in the 18th Century. When the Baal Shem Tov died, his disciples gathered to distribute his worldly possessions. One was given his tallit and another, his shtender – the lectern he used every time he spoke to lead the congregation in prayer. Some were given his prayer books and others his Kiddush cups. At the end of the line, there waited one faithful Hasid. But by the time he got his turn at the front of the line, there was no material gift left for him. Instead he was given the master's stories, and charged with the responsibility of sharing them with the world.

The Hasid was dismayed. He would much rather have received something of tangible value. But he accepted his lot and set out into the world to share the stories. As he went out to communities all over Europe, he didn't starve. But neither did he make much of a living. After all, Jews were poor in those days and how much could poor Jews give for even the most enchanting of tales?

So when word came to this Hasid that there was a Jewish nobleman in a far off land who was prepared to offer a great fortune for stories of the Baal Shem Tov, he praised God for this blessing, and set off for the nobleman's estate. Arriving late Friday afternoon, he was invited to stay with the nobleman for Shabbat. He was welcomed with great warmth and escorted directly into the magnificent banquet hall. After dinner, the nobleman and his guests turned to Hasid and begged him to grace the evening with a story of the Baal Shem Tov.

At that moment, his mind went blank. Not one story could penetrate the fog: not one anecdote: not one reminiscence. In all the years of storytelling, this had never happened. Blushing with embarrassment and stammering in fear, he apologized. "No matter!" responded the gracious host. "You are no doubt exhausted from your journey. Perhaps tomorrow you will share your stories with us!" But the same thing happened at Shabbat lunch and again at supper. Just as he was about to begin one of his favorite stories, his mind went blank. Embarrassed, frustrated and fearing the nobleman's disappointment, the Hasid decided it best that he steal away. But as he slipped out of the palace that night, he was met at the door by the nobleman. "I beg your forgiveness sir," the startled Hasid pleaded. "I know a hundred of tales of the Baal Shem Tov and his miracles, I have recited them for years, but for some reason I cannot remember even one of them."

"Not one?" begged the nobleman, suddenly quite bereft. "Can you remember even one moment of your master's life?" As the Hasid thought hard about the request, he realized that he could recall one memory but it was not really a story. It was a vague memory of a time when I was young and first began to follow my master, the Baal Shem Tov. I was with him on Shabbat. He was distant and gloomy but would tell none of us what the matter was. As soon as Shabbat was over, he ordered us into his wagon and we began a long trip. By morning, we entered a town, a town known for its vicious hatred of Jews. And this was the worst of days to visit, for this was Easter Sunday. We entered the town and found that the entire Jewish quarter was boarded up. No one would open a door to take us in. Finally we found the way into the synagogue's attic.

In this town, there was a Bishop famous for his fierce hatred of the Jews. On Easter, the Bishop would preach to the town, whipping the Christians into a killing frenzy that was let loose on the poor Jews. On that Easter Sunday morning, the master ordered me to go to the Cathedral, of all places, to tell the Bishop that the holy Baal Shem Tov was ready to see him. I protested. I trembled in fear. But the master was adamant, and so I went. The Christians looked at me in wonder, trembling, as I ascended the pulpit to deliver the message. When I told the Bishop that the holy Baal Shem Tov was ready to see him, he turned and accompanied me back to the synagogue.

I do not recall what happened next. The master and the Bishop spent an hour or so in private conversation. Then the Bishop emerged and returned to his pulpit in the Cathedral. All I know is that there was no riot, no killing that year. The Bishop dispersed the crowd and declared the Jewish community under his personal protection. After that, I heard that he disappeared, and has never been seen again."

At that point, the Hasid turned his gaze upon his host who was weeping. "Thank you," he stammered. Composing himself, he explained. "I was that Bishop. I was the one who sent the mobs to kill and plunder the Jews of the town. But months before that Easter, I was haunted by strange dreams. I was told that on Easter, a holy stranger would come to release me from my nightmares. It was me who you summoned to the Baal Shem Tov that morning.

In that hour, he revealed to me my own secrets; that I was born a Jew, but was stolen from my mother before I could know. I was raised in the monastery, raised to hate the Jews and spread that hate. But the dreams came, and in them were visions of the inferno that awaited me. I pleaded with your master -- was there no way for me to repent these terrible sins? And he showed me my only chance. To respect Judaism and to help other respect religious differences: to open my doors to the poor and the homeless, and use all my resources supporting the helpless and the abandoned. This I promised to do. But how can I know, I begged him, that my repentance has been accepted? And he told me: When one comes, one who can remember none of his own stories, but tells you your own story. Only then will you know that your repentance is accepted and you are again one with God. Now I am free."

I share this story with you tonight to help us begin the holiday that asks us to take account of our own actions. Just like the bishop in the story, we have all made mistakes in our lives that we need to take account of and think of what we can do to learn from our mistakes. We need to be mindful of the consequences of our actions and we should strive, as the bishop ultimately did, to help bring people together and not push people apart.

I share it because I want us to consider the impact the actions of one person can have on others. We are part of a community and a family and various other social groups and we come together on the holidays to stand in God's presence as individuals who have the potential to do our own part to improve our small corner of the world.

I also share this story tonight because of my great concern about anti-Semitism in our world today. We can look back to almost any time in the history of the Jewish people that included countless people who caused us harm and had great anger for the Jewish people. Europe of the 18th Century during the time of the Baal Shem Tov and for Centuries afterwards until the 20th Century when 6 million of our sisters and brothers were murdered in the Holocaust, our people who have been the victims of countless acts of Anti-Semitism in Europe and today is no exception. The stories from Paris, London, Berlin and other major cities in Europe are something we all need to be concerned about. I will have more to say about this tomorrow but for now I want to state that it is clear the Anti-Semitism of the past has led to the anti-Zionism of today in Europe and other parts of our world. Recently, there have been anti-Semitic statements in our local community including some that were written by young people shared on social media. As parents and educators, we have already begun to address this challenge in discussions at this synagogue, in the public schools and in discussions at home.

What I like most about the story of the Baal Shem Tov is that in that one small community, the anti-Semitism came to an end because there was dialogue and understanding and eventually mutual respect. That is what our world needs today – people who can help others understand how important it is for different groups to have dialogue, understanding and mutual respect. We Jews have been the most successful and the most welcome in communities when there was mutual dialogue, understanding and mutual respect like we have in this local community.

Our people have great stories to tell and the holidays can be a time when we share our stories with our friends and family. As we look back to the stories of the past, I know that there are many stories that challenge us as my story of the Baal Shem Tov did tonight. But I also know that we have stories that can inspire and bring us close and give us faith and hope for a better future. We should recall the stories of the past as we try to write our stories of the future.

As we begin the new year tonight, let's all commit to doing our part in our community and in our family and in any other social group we choose, to do our best to bring people together to learn from one another, to share stories and to create a way for everyone to be together. That is a story worth telling.