

## YOM KIPPUR DAY—THE TEACHERS, CAVALIER AND SLAY

We have come to the last of my sermons on the theme of lessons we can learn from those who have passed away in my 17 years here as a rabbi. On Rosh Hashana we heard from the doers and the lovers of life, last night from the givers. Today we will learn from the teachers, specifically those members who loved Judaism and loved to share their teachings with everyone they met. The middah or value is Talmud Torah, the learning and teaching of Torah.

But that is only half the sermon. The other half is part of a sermon I did over the summer with far fewer of you here. I called it “Cavalier and Slay.” The title does not refer to the Warriors slaying the Cavaliers, which happened right around that time, but as a play on the title of the book *Kavalier and Klay*, the outstanding novel about comic books, the Golem of Prague, and Judaism that made local author Michael Chabon famous and cemented his books as Jewish literature. Since that time he has been prolific and profound, so prolific, in fact, that he was given an honorary degree and invited to give the address at this year’s Rabbinical School Ordination at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. And what a speech it was, though not in the way the graduates expected. It was a speech that I found to be cavalier about Judaism and did much slaying of our religion, our land, our peoplehood, and our history. It was a speech that angered me and made me feel that I needed to respond to those who might read it. I will get back to that in a few moments.

But first, I want to tell you about a few of our incredible teachers here at TBA. I first want to mention Frank Weinberg, who is probably lesser known to some of you, but he was a Past President of the congregation as well as a davener and leader of all services, but especially the High Holidays. He loved liturgy and leading services, so much so that he knew the nusach, the special tune, for every holiday—the High Holidays, of course, but also the other festivals and minor holidays too. Unlike many others, it was never about him. If someone else wanted to lead, he was happy to give up the honor. He had worked as the lay Cantor at Temple Israel in Alameda, but we were lucky that he brought his skills to the bima here as well. While he loved and knew just about any tune, he was originally from Germany, and he left on the eve of World War II, riding out the war as part of the famed Jewish community of Shanghai. With his German origins, though, he loved the German march like tunes. Despite being a good Conservative Jew, he longed for the organ to accompany those tunes, which, of course, he never got. He was also very fond of the saying “God in her infinite wisdom,” but if you knew his wife, you could never be sure whether he was talking about Hashem or Irene.

The Weinbergs were in a chavurah with a much younger couple, the Sheidlowers, and unfortunately, Sarah Sheidlower left us all too young, when she passed away of cancer leaving her husband and two young boys behind. Sarah was a Jew through and through. She was born and raised in Brookly, but her family of origin was Turkish Sephardic, and if you had the privilege of visiting her home during a holiday, she would prepare all kinds of Sephardic dishes and explain different Sephardic rituals based on various fruits and vegetables. This one stands for sweetness, this one for strength, etc. I associate her with the High Holidays as well, because she would open up our Neilah service with her special version of El Nora Alilah, the awesome God. And while she didn’t have a Cantorial voice, when she led it it was as if the Gates of Repentance opened straight to the Heavens. I can still hear her voice when anyone else leads this particular song. She had profound respect for Judaism, as the following story involving me illustrates. As she neared her final days of life, many members of our congregation were taking care of her around the clock. I specifically remember Lisa Greenberg, Ailsa Steckel, and Frances Herb being there. For the last couple of weeks she was suffering a great deal and was moving in and out of consciousness, barely able to communicate and being quite ornery when she did. She was taking

a lot of it out on these good friends. I showed up, a day or two before she finally passed away, and all of a sudden, it was “Rabbi, so nice to see you.” It wasn’t me, but rather, what I symbolized for her. It was as if she wanted to pay her last respects to Judaism itself, which I represented to her at that moment. When she died I quoted Genesis Rabba, a passage written about Sarah Imeinu in the Torah, but that applied and still applies equally well to our precious Sarah.

As long as Sarah lived, a cloud of glory hovered over the entrance to her tent. After she died, the cloud disappeared. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open to wayfarers; at her death, such openness ceased. As long as Sarah lived, blessing was dispatched into the dough she baked at her death, such blessing ceased. As long as Sarah lived, a lamp was alight in her tent from one Sabbath eve to the next; at her death the light ceased.

Perhaps the greatest teacher I have had in my 17 years here at Temple Beth Abraham was our Gabbai, David Galant. Another Holocaust survivor, whose story of survival involved hiding, fighting with the partisans, and being selected by Dr. Mengele himself to live at Auschwitz. He was also a part of one of the groups that put God on trial at Auschwitz, and there was even a movie made about one of these groups on PBS a few years ago. David was the consummate teacher. It took him a decade or so to return to Judaism because his belief in God was understandably shaken when he lost most of his family in the Holocaust. But when he returned he came with his whole being. Always humble, he would teach us at Torah study, or on Saturday morning, and especially at minyan, with little nuggets from the Torah, usually based on Rashi, who was French like David. He became a fierce proponent of egalitarianism of all kinds—after all, Hitler made no distinctions between men and women, or Cohanim and Israelites, or rich and poor, so he opposed any distinctions of these kinds in Jewish practice. He would always end his mini drashot with the words “that’s enough for now,” which I wish I could say to you now, but unlike David, I have much more to say to you tonight.

Finally, I have to mention my own father, Herbert Bloom, who while he certainly didn’t know as much Torah as the aforementioned people, was really my ultimate teacher. I would need much more time to talk about all the things he taught me, but I do want to share just two stories. The first, which I remember like it was yesterday even though I was not quite even 5 years old, just entering Kindergarten. Before the first day of school he put a bunch of blocks on the floor and told me to build the tallest tower I could. Not being a lego or erector set kind of kid, I built it one block at a time and it quickly collapsed. He then showed me how to build it with multiple blocks on the bottom to give it a strong foundation, and with that foundation it would go much higher. So it is with my education, he told me. You have to start now with a strong foundation so you can go higher and higher in your life. This is true Judaically speaking as well, and that is one of the main reasons we place so much emphasis on our schools and teens here. The other lesson was about living life according to Maimonides’ Golden Mean. He didn’t put it like that, but that’s what it was. He was moderate in most things, but especially in work/life balance. He had a busy career as a divorce lawyer, but he never let that get in the way of life. He always made time to attend our little league games, gymnastics meets, or to drive us to BBYO events. He took my Mom out on a date every Saturday night for 60 years without fail. He also made time for himself, playing a round of golf each and every Wednesday with his buddies at the Green Hills Country Club. That is a model I try to follow, which means I say no to more communal events and nighttime meetings than your average rabbi, but the only way I can

effectively serve a congregation of nearly 500 families is to have a modicum of balance in my own life.

Thank you Frank, Sarah, David, and Dad, for the valuable lessons about Judaism, religiosity, and life that you taught me while you walked this earth.

I will now return to the teaching of the author/teacher Michael Chabon and the speech he gave to the future rabbis being ordained at Hebrew Union College that, as I mentioned, caused an extremely strong reaction from many people, but especially me. I suppose part of the reason it upset me so much was that it came from such an eloquent source and that I know so many American Jews feel the same way he does. I am hesitant to do this, though, for a few reasons. First, in order to respond to it, I need to share excerpts with you, and they are long. Secondly, Michael Chabon is one of the greatest writers of this generation so anything I say in response necessarily pales in comparison in terms of eloquence. And finally, it may feel as if I am attacking a person, and that would be lashon hara. So I want to make it clear that I am not attacking him personally. From everything I hear and read he is a good man, a famously loving husband, and a good father. What I am responding to and, I suppose, attacking, are not him as a person but his words in that speech which are a matter of public record. Again, I feel that his words “slandered” the Jewish religion, Jewish customs, the Jewish land, and the Jewish people, and I feel it requires a response, even, with all humility, from someone like me.

He begins by talking about the many distinctions Judaism makes.

As for Judaism itself, the whole thing’s a giant interlocking system of distinctions and divisions and the means—through prayer and ritual, narrative and commentary—of drawing them. The whole story begins with three mighty acts of division: day from night, heaven from earth, sea from land. After that it’s all boundaries and bright lines, from the bookended candle-lightings of Shabbat to a woman’s monthly *mikveh*, from circumcision to the bar mitzvah ceremony, from the Four Questions to the *bedikat chametz*, from the shearing of a bride’s hair to the intricate string-webs of an *eruv*.

He’s right. I personally find those things to be beautiful. He finds them to be insular, ghetto-like, and abhorrent. He says:

I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers. I am for mongrels and hybrids and creoles, for syncretism and confluence, for jazz and Afrobeat and Thai surf music...I am for ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity, muddle, complexity, diversity, creative balagan. Monocultural places—one language, one religion, one haplotype—make me profoundly uncomfortable whether they’re found inside or beyond the ghetto walls.

He then describes just how personal the pain of Jewish distinctiveness is to him.

Despite my instinctive mistrust of wall-building and boundary-patrolling, I went and married a Jew. We had four Jewish children, and enrolled them in temple preschools. We made hamantaschen and latkes, lit candles, ransomed afikomens. When they each turned 13 I sent my children reeling around an uproarious room, staggered by the astonishing heaviness of a Torah.

So now, today...were you to ask me if I hope my children marry-in, I would say, yes. I want them to marry into the tribe that prizes learning, inquiry, skepticism, openness to new ideas. I want my children to marry into the tribe that enshrines equality before the law, and freedom of conscience, and human rights. I want them to marry into the tribe that sees nations and borders as antiquated canards and ethnicity as a construct prone, like all constructs, to endless reconfiguration... There will be plenty of potential partners for my children to choose among; a fair number of those potential partners are even likely to be Jews.

On the day that the last Jewish couple dies, after watching their children marry Hindus, Lutherans, atheists, Sunnis, Buddhists—the fault for that extinction will lie squarely with Judaism itself, and not because Judaism failed to enforce its teachings against intermarriage but because it was necessary ever to have such teachings in the first place.

Rabbis used to warn us about the “dangers” of intermarriage. Thankfully, we have moved to a more open and tolerant mindset, welcoming interfaith couples into our midst and understanding that it is simply part of what it means to live in an open society. But this is different. This is a speech actively against Jews marrying other Jews. It’s against Jewish continuity, because he doesn’t seem to want Judaism as we know it to continue. Is the only vestige of Judaism he appreciates is its openness to questioning? That’s certainly an important part of Judaism, but it is not the whole pie. And, sadly, this philosophy led this recipient of an honorary degree from a rabbinical school to stop his own religious observance almost completely.

I stopped lighting candles. I didn’t bother with the *bedikat chametz*. When the next High Holidays rolled around, I stayed home. On Yom Kippur I fasted, maybe because I wanted to show myself, or my ancestors, or the God I don’t believe in, that my non-participation was not a matter of indolence or physical weakness. Or maybe I just did it *aftselakhis*—out of spite. Over the years that followed, my retreat from religious practice only deepened, and since we put the last of the b’nai mitzvah behind us, it has become near-total.

On the other hand, the job of an artist and a social commentator is to challenge us, to make us think, to disturb our complacency and make us articulate our own thoughts. He takes this function very seriously and excels at it like few others Jewish writers in this generation, much like the late Philip Roth before him. And in a way, he has given us an opportunity—to articulate our own thoughts, to fall in love all over again with Jewish ritual, Jewish life, and the Jewish people. I am about to give you my visions of Judaism, but over the next days and weeks and months I want each of you to think about yours—what is it about Judaism that you value, that you appreciate, that you find meaningful, that you want to pass on the next generation.

While his critique is stinging and eloquent and, because he is the one doing the writing, quite beautiful in its own way, it is not new. This kind of criticism goes back centuries and has been argued by Jews and non-Jews alike. It goes back at least as far as some of the Biblical prophets. It has been laid out by Greek and Roman philosophers, Christian polemicists, medieval thinkers like Spinoza, more modern thinkers like Arnold Toynbee, Karl Marx and Lennon, not Vladimir, but John, as in the song “Imagine.” You know, “imagine no religion too.” I always change the station when that song comes on. Implicit with all these criticisms is the idea that it’s our spiritually poor, primitive forebears who just didn’t seem to understand anything about anything. It’s really a wonder such a pitiful people could have survived for so long.

And if we follow philosophy of confluence and syncretism to its logical conclusion, how will we be able to syncretize or appreciate any Jewish cultures, and I use that term deliberately in the plural, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, Ethiopian, Moroccan, etc, not to mention the cultures or religions that the “last Jews” he mentions will marry into, Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, etc., or cultures like the the Bedouin or Druze or the cultures I learned about in Anthropology like the Ik or the Arapesh, or the hybrids he mentions like creole, Afrobeat, or surfer Thai? But I often wonder when I hear these criticisms, and again, Michael Chabon speaks for a whole lot of people who feel the same way he does, is this really what they mean, or is it just *our* culture,

**our** tribe, **our** way of life that so many Jews can't seem to admire and respect like we admire and respect others' cultures and tribes?

Because I personally find Judaism's distinctions not abhorrent, but beautiful and meaningful. I don't put up with a 24 hour/7 days a week job so I can "slay" Judaism. I do it because I love and believe in our unique way of life and the distinctions we draw.

I believe that Judaism's symbols and rituals sanctify and elevate our lives.

I believe that following the distinctive Jewish path enables a person to live with sanity, spirituality, and morality.

I believe that the Jewish calendar makes sense and gives us sacred purpose.

I believe in the way the Shabbat candlesticks and the twisted Havdalah candle help us separate the holy Shabbat from the rest of the week's profaneness.

I believe in the sound of the shofar and its call for us to repent and return and make ourselves better people and the world into a better place.

I believe in fasting on Yom Kippur because it reminds us that there are too many in our world who are truly hungry.

I believe in building temporary dwelling places on Sukkot to remind us of the fragility of life and that there people in desperate need of shelter.

I believe in the messages of the Chanukah story--of miracle, religious freedom, and that some things are worth fighting for.

I believe in dressing up in costume on Purim and eating strange, triangular pastries shaped like the enemy's ear to remind us that no matter how much some have wanted to destroy us, they couldn't, and I celebrate that idea in all its inherent silliness and paradox.

I believe bechol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo, I see myself as having been personally redeemed from Egypt, and in eating Matzoh and Maror and Charoset to remember that we were once slaves and that we, nor anyone else, should ever be enslaved again.

I believe in celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, because I believe it is worth celebrating that, in our generation, we can be a free people in the historical land of Zion, and I don't know what the final borders will be and I don't know how we will get a peace process restarted, but I do know that there needs to be a place where Jews can go when no one else in the world will take us in.

I believe in staying up all night studying Torah on Shavuot because I believe our Torah is worth studying all night long.

I believe in fasting on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, remembering that two separate Temples were said to have been destroyed on that day, the edict of the Spanish Inquisition was issued, and the Warsaw Ghetto was liquidated, among other tragedies, because I feel deeply, deeply connected to my ancestors who went through such suffering.

I believe in the power of prayer—lehipalel, to judge oneself, and Hodu l'Adonai, expressing gratitude to Hashem our God.

I believe in the power of the Kaddish and the shiva and the shloshim and in shoveling dirt on graves, because I have seen these rituals bring forth the mechayei hametim, restoring life to the dead. And I don't mean in some future messianic vision, but in enabling people to get back up again and go on with their lives again when they didn't think it was possible after their loved one died.

I believe also in the Kiddush and in drinking its sacred wine, considered the symbol of joy in Judaism, because I believe Judaism is worth celebrating with joy.

These are just a few of the gifts Judaism has given us and the world, and I believe that they do not make us primitive or spiritually poor, but, on the contrary, that they make us more spiritual, more moral, and, most importantly, that they make our world a far richer and better place.

I believe in the tribe of Israel, the prayers of Israel, the customs of Israel, the land of Israel, and the people Israel: Matot Yisrael, Tefilot Yisrael, Minhagei Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael, Am Yisrael Chai! Am Yisrael Chai!