

# **Erev Rosh Hashanah 2012/5773**

## **Bucket List Values**

Rabbi Micah Becker-Klein

*Gut yontif* and shanah tovah. It is good to see all of you tonight in the synagogue and to welcome in another year. To sing, meditate, dance, eat, and pray our way into 5773.

Today, I want to talk about Jewish values. I hope to do this in two ways; one is to speak about a few figures in Jewish life who can serve as an inspiration. The second is to look at simple ways we can live out and engage in a deeper Jewish experience through our values.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, of blessed memory, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, lived a long life. He was born in 1881 in Lithuania, and moved to this country where he eventually went to school at Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. When he passed in 1983, he was 103 years old. In 1922, he founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, known as the SAJ synagogue, designed as a new kind of synagogue that would embrace all kinds of Jews and embrace the totality of the Jewish experience.

Rabbi Kaplan created the first movement within American Judaism that was formed entirely in the United States of America. He did not set out to form a new movement of Judaism; he did want to reconstruct all of American Jewish life. He posited that Jews live in 2 civilizations—one American and one Jewish. Today, Reconstructionists have expanded this notion to include multiple civilizations in which we share. **Kaplan believed that Judaism could survive in America only if it came to embrace arts, music, social life, customs, literature, and customs, along with the meaningful ritual practices.** Kaplan **rejected the notion of the Jews as a chosen people**, reflected today in the way in which we pray and interpret prayers, and **did not consider belief in a supernatural God a critical element in Judaism.** That was part of an individual's choice and experience. **God, for Kaplan, is the power that makes for salvation.** It is this phrase that is the basis for much of the Reconstructionist conversation on what God is. It put the responsibility to bring godly actions into the world into our hands. In that way, Kaplan questioned the philosophy of an anthropomorphic God. If we think of God within us, or as the power that makes for salvation, that is very different from a hand splitting an ocean. As a metaphor it may work, but metaphors are limited by language and culture. The following joke may help shed some light on the limits to this approach to God.

I'll keep it in our ethnic milieu: A protective dog owner who could be from a Jewish background is watching her dog playing at the beach, when a huge wave comes and takes him out to sea. She pleads, "Please God, save my dog. I beg of

you, bring him back.” And a big wave comes and washes the dog back onto the shore, good as new.

She looks up at heaven and says, “He had a collar.”

Kaplan’s vision was not only applied in theory, he also helped bring about a whole new way of being Jewish. He believed that when we lived and acted with positive values, folkways or Jewish practice, together with American culture, the best possible true community would result. Part of that was action and part was thinking. By helping to create what is now known as the Jewish Community Centers of America, a place where Jews could learn, engage socially, and physically, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan helped bring the synagogue from merely a place to pray to a place where prayer is but one aspect of what we do. While not everyone did it, he imagined the “shul with a pool” as the ideal synagogue. It was his vision of blending and balancing Jewish and American ideals and folkways that he thought the Jewish future would be ensured. We in this community have been close too that vision.

Kaplan was an outspoken supporter of Jewish social engagement and of education. He felt that Hebrew language was a vital part of Jewish life and expression, and he felt equally strong about creating link to Israel through spiritual Zionism.

In this country, we have been blessed by our values and actions being the investment in our future. I'd like to introduce a few more figures whose Judaism deeply informed their actions as Americans.

Louis Marshall was born in Syracuse, NY in 1856 and became one of the most influential Jewish communal leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, serving as president to Temple Emau-El and the Jewish Theological Seminary; he also was head of the American Jewish Committee at that time. Marshall fought hard against anti-Semitism, against the restrictive immigration policies of the 1920s and 30s, and helped to coordinate the legal defense against Leo Frank, who was wrongfully accused of murder.

Marshall's greatest accomplishment however was in fighting against Henry Ford's anti-Semitic writings to the point of getting Ford to issue a written apology. Marshall's engagement in Jewish life and in American civic life is a powerful example of how Jewish values can help shape our lives.

Vivian Gornik is a writer and reporter who came to be known in the 1970s. She was born in 1935 in the Bronx to immigrant parents, in a situation not too different from my mother's; Gornik's father working in the garment industry and her mother as an office clerk. She began writing for the *Village Voice* in the 1970s, and was a regular contributor to the *Nation* and the *New York Times*. A pioneering feminist, her articles gave voice to the burgeoning women's movement. Her Jewish identity remained as a thread in her writings, essays, and

memoirs. She often compared the marginality experienced both by Jews and women. In her work, Gornik spoke her truth and let her voice be heard, even when it shook, and she never forgot her family's journey to this country, to this land with rights and opportunities.

As Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, whose story is not so different, "Do you know the difference between a bookkeeper in NY's garment district and a U.S. Supreme court justice? One generation."

Preceding both of these important Jewish women was Henrietta Szold, who founded the Hadassah the Women's Zionist Organization of America. Henrietta Szold lived her values out in a way that serves as an example to all of us.

She also believed strongly in her equal rights of women in civic and religious life, and at a time when women were not yet counted in prayers, or working as rabbis. However, when in 1916 she was in mourning, Henrietta insisted on reciting *kaddish yatom*, the Mourners Kaddish, for her mother. While it was the practice of "hiring" men to say *kaddish* on behalf of a woman, it was this kind of self confidence and positive attitude that helped lead Henrietta Szold to forge ahead with women's rights.

She wrote that she did not believe that the elimination of women from Jewish duties were intended, but misunderstood. Henrietta laid down a foundation of fighting for the rights of the less fortunate and for the needy in Israel. The

Hadassah hospital in Israel today stands in testament to her legacy serving all people and forging new medical breakthroughs to help cure disease for everyone. While today the circumstances of economy may have changed greatly in Israel and the United States, there are **two values** that we still learn from her legacy. **First is to fight and stand up for those who are less fortunate in our time, and second is to stand for your right to express yourself.**

These values were guideposts to help create a positive path to living a meaningful Jewish life in America. These values included civic engagement as well as religious engagement. This is part of the vision for how we engage in Israel dialogue. A dialogue that has room at the table for many voices. It helped me think about how Jewish values shape and inform our lives.

So the question to be asked today is what are your Jewish values? If you could put them to actions, what would they look like?

One of the pieces I read this past year in the Jewish weekly newspaper, *The Forward*, was a Jewish bucket list. Now a list like this can only get you so far— it is not a recipe for life. However, when I reflected upon the idea of this list, I thought it could be a great starting point for a values based conversation here in our sanctuary and during your meals at home with family and friends over these next few weeks of High Holy Days and fall festivals.

Here is the list that I came up with, strongly influenced by any number of other lists out there:

1. Watch the movie *The Exodus*. It stars Paul Newman whose father was Jewish, and a relative of my family. Or watch *The Frisco Kid* with Gene Wilder and Harrison Ford, sorry, no relation to me there.
2. Find a non-profit cause to stand up for. It could be human rights, a peace organization; it could be animals of our world, or for the environment. As a commandment, these positive acts are some of the ways that we make the world a better place. Caring for the poor, the outcast and downtrodden is a central part of our Jewish heritage.
3. Explain Judaism to a non-Jew. It will help you understand yourself better.
4. Come to a class or Torah study.
5. Listen to Jewish music- Israeli, Klezmer, cantorial, reggae, rock, acoustic. Find something new.
6. Visit the Jewish Museum in Philadelphia. It is a national treasure and it is in our backyard. We are planning a trip there for the congregation later this year. Please join us for a tour if you can't get there on your own.

7. Eat at a kosher restaurant. While you are in Philadelphia, try lunch at Burger dot org, a one-year old Israeli owned, kosher restaurant that features grass-fed organic beef and lamb, pasture-raised chicken, and a number of vegetarian and Israeli specialties. Eating at a kosher restaurant is a great way to try something unusual and support a cottage industry—our cottage industry. One that speaks our values.

8. Explain Reconstructionist Judaism to a friend who is not a member of our congregation or another recon congregation. Hopefully some of the words today will help provide you with a deeper appreciation.

9. Visit Israel. I will say more about that later.

10. Read a Jewish newspaper—*The Forward*, the weekly US Jewish paper, *Moment* magazine, or *Haaretz*, one of the daily Israeli papers. These are just a few of what is available.

11. Write a letter to our Governor Markel and our Lieutenant Governor Denn. Thank them for their hard work. They are both Jewish and they both grew up in this congregation. That is unprecedented, regardless of your political persuasion. **For the first time in American history, there is a Jewish governor and lieutenant governor.** And I'll be darned, **they are both from a Reconstructionist upbringing.** Clearly, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's vision of a

well-engaged Jewish community that embraces the best of Jewish life and American life, has come to life in some manner at Temple Beth El.

12. Read a Jewish book, fiction or non-fiction. *Unorthodox*, *Everything is Illuminated*, *The Red Tent*, *The Exodus*. Better yet, check out the National Jewish Book Club suggested list of Jewish books.

13. Interview a Holocaust survivor. It is now or never. Connect to someone who was touched directly by this tragic time and survived. See what you can learn.

Among the blessings at Temple Beth El over the past year has been a gradual deepening of the connection to the Reconstructionist movement. The Reconstructionist movement is a progressive movement in Judaism. While we dance and respect our traditions, we still wrestle with many parts and reconstruct those rituals and aspects that are not a part of our current way of life. As a Reconstructionist congregation, we are open to many aspects of being Jewish and prayers is not the most important part. Of course we always want to see you at our services, but you will notice that our prayers services also have a variety of ways in which to access prayer. Some of which is traditional, but not of it is. And that is OK. The way in which Judaism has evolved is by adapting to the culture and customs of the world around them. So if you experience a morning with some meditation or some yoga that uses the terminology and outline of a Shabbat service, it is OK. We accept that there are many ways that we can engage in building community, being Jewish, and a sense of holiness through that. And if

we choose to call that holy experience Godly, that is OK, and if we don't, that is also OK. Reconstructionist Judaism has always emphasized the power of gathering as a community.

That is what we mean when we talk about the community has a role to play in Reconstructionist Judaism. We are a participatory congregation. We are not a hierarchical community. If you want to try to lift the Torah, read from the Torah. If you want to be active in our school, we welcome you. If you want to help bring a new topic to our discussions or adult study, it is welcomed.

We were blessed this year to send **9 children to Camp JRF!** This overnight camp is the Reconstructionist movement's own camp, now 10 years old. We have helped build and support the camp by being a part of the movement. The power of Jewish camp is amazing, and the power of our camp, the one that lives and breathes our values, is truly an amazing place. The camp is not just a place that provides for our children, it is also a place that also provides international connections, and to Israel. Leadership skills, self-confidence, Jewish identity, and strong connections to the wider Jewish world are just some of the effects of Jewish overnight camp. It is the place where Jewish values can get lived out from day to day and the openness, welcoming spirit, warmth, and depth that the Reconstructionist movement has at camp is another powerful thing. What we know about a strong Jewish future has not changed much since Rabbi Kaplan first wrote about it in 1922. If we engage our community, adults and children in meaningful activities not just in a classroom, but to make it part of everyday lives,

and informally, like at overnight camp and retreats, then the identity is made even stronger. Cameron Ogden, an eighth grader who went for the first time this summer said, “It was the best time. It was just awesome.”

While we cannot all go to Camp JRF, it is a part of us, as we are a part of the Jewish world. Jewish community is not just this local congregation or even this state. It is bigger than that. We include our movement, but also the Jewish of North America. Our community here in Newark has also had an impact outside—to the Reconstructionist world and to the wider world. At our bn’nai mitzvah class, each of our students is asked to research an Israeli non-profit organization that does mitzvah work. The students create a poster about the organization that is displayed during the week of their b’nai mitzvah. This is one way that we help connect our children to the Jewish community of the world.

We hope that the work will inspire the students to learn more about the organization and about Israel. And when they visit Israel, and we hope that everyone has the opportunity to visit and to spend time in Israel, hopefully spend some time at the organization.

Tikkun olam, the repair of the world is so important to us as a value. It supercedes so much else. When we work at helping make our world better, we help bring more light into the world. And today, when we mark the majesty of the world, we become more and more aware each passing day of our responsibility to

help heal our world, to help heal our environment, and to know that when we work together, the work of tikkun olam, repair of our world, is work of pleasure.

But that leads me to travel and Jewish travel. Now I don't want you to think that I believe everyone's vacation should be a Jewish tour. I don't. However, I will say a few things. First and foremost is visit to Israel. It does not matter what your political view is. Israel is the place the only country, where Jewish values get lived out day by day. It is the place where we wrestle with how to live out those values in a civic society. It is not always easy or clean, but then again, neither is life.

**This summer of 2013** my family and I along are **planning a trip to Israel.**

We are opening this trip to the congregation as **an active trip open to families and members who want to join the adventure.** Initial details will be following soon. The trip will be on that includes activity, learning, social action, and fantastic food. We are leaving at the end of July and returning in mid August. We will spend **10 days exploring some of the well known places and finding some special gems that are less known.** Learn about Israel, meet people who live their lives with Hebrew as their language and are blessed with a diversity of Jewish ethnicities, geological wonders and world culture. More information on the trip will be available soon.

For me, I believe that it is important that our Jewish community continues to engage with the community around us. It is very easy in our society to stay in our homes or to put our heads down. **True community takes effort as well as the openness to bringing in new members.**

So Rosh Hashanah is a time when we consider how we have lived out our *middot*, our attributes. Another year passes behind and another one opens before us. What lies beyond is possibility. We write much of the script in our actions, which lead us on our journey. Maybe the 13 items in the bucket list speak to you, but I imagine that you can come up with your own Jewish bucket list for this year that is as good or better than mine.

Mordecai Kaplan, Henrietta Szold, Louis Marshall, are just some of those who helped pave a great way for us. Let us now pave a new way together as we enter the new year. 5773.

I pray that this year, we are mindful of our journeys. That we **keep our values before us** and know that **we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us**. So too do we lay the foundations for the future here. May we take the journey together and find ourselves closer on the process.

Shanah tovah.

Happy New Year.