

First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5780

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Congregation Or Hadash

Every Friday afternoon, as we embark in the adventure of bringing the spirit of Shabbat to our lives, our home is filled with the sounds of songs and melodies we choose to help us in this weekly endeavor.

More often than not, we invoke the beautiful voice of Israeli artist Etti Ankri, singing the lyrics of one of the greatest Jewish philosophers and poets of the middle ages, and for many, the greatest Hebrew poet of all time.

The name of this great poet was Yehuda Halevi. He was born over 900 years ago in the then Muslim controlled city of Toledo, in Spain, during the end of the period usually remembered as the Golden Age of Jewish culture in Spain.

The more you study the history of the period, the more you realize that the only thing Golden about the Golden Age was its name.

Christian forces were fighting Muslim ones in what the Spanish call the Reconquista; different Muslim sects were moving in and out of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, fighting the Christian army and other Muslim sects... and all of them were either oppressing or persecuting their Jewish populations.

The Jews kept moving back and forth between Muslim controlled areas and Christian controlled areas, following the different political moods.

The young Yehuda Halevi followed the other great poet of his generation, Moshe Ibn Ezra, to the south of Spain, where he studied under the great Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi. He was later on forced back to Toledo, where he built a successful career as a physician that provided him with a very good life, as expressed in his poems about love, wine, desire and friendship.

On the other hand, he saw the misfortune of his people, who suffered under the yoke of Christianity and Islam, and recorded this, too, in his religious poetry, and in particular, his verses on the land of Israel.

His most famous poem begins: **לבי במזרח ואנכי בסוף מערב**, My heart is in the East but I am at the end of the West, and ends with the Poet's declaration that he would gladly leave all his prosperity in Spain for a glimpse of the place where the Temple once stood.

The other tool he chose to fight the oppression of his brethren was the writing of his most famous philosophical work, titled appropriately, "The Book of Proof and Evidence in Support of the Despised Faith" which we all know by the name of "The Kuzari".

He wrote the book as a dialogue between a mythical king of the Khazars and a Rabbi. Who were the Khazars? There were a kingdom located in today's Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and parts of Russia.

According to legend, in the 8th or 9th century their king and his court converted to Judaism and made our faith the official tradition of the Kingdom.

When the stories about this place reached Spain in the 10th century, they sparked the imagination of Jews everywhere. For a wandering, defenseless Jew, whose entire existence depended on the benevolence of strangers and foreigners, the legend of the mighty Jewish kingdom nestled between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea served as both inspiration and promise.

The story's goes like this:

The King of the Khazars has a recurring dream in which an angel tells him the following message:

"Your intentions are pleasing to God, but your actions are not!"

The Khazar king, troubled by the dream, sets out on a spiritual quest to find the truth and the religion that possesses it.

He summons a philosopher first, next a wise Christian and then a wise Muslim, yet none of the three succeeds in convincing the monarch of the merits of their positions.

Unsatisfied with each of their answers, he reluctantly tries his luck with a Jewish sage.

The sage in Halevi's rendering of the story succeeds, of course, in revealing to the Khazar king the meaning of the dream, convinces the king regarding the merits of Judaism, and inspires him not only to convert, but also to turn his large empire into a Jewish kingdom. Not bad!

Now I want you to think for a second about the process Yehuda Halevi went through in writing the book. Every question the Kuzari asks allows Yehuda Halevi to explain and present our tradition in the best possible light.

This means that he only needs to have the king asking questions the Jewish sage can answer.

And yet, twice in the book, Yehuda Halevi has the Kuzari asking questions the Rabbi cannot answer. One is related to power. If and when the day comes and Jews find themselves effecting power, would they know how to use it? The answer of the sage: I don't know.

The second issue the King raises, and the one that inspired this sermon, was the following: You pray facing Jerusalem, you implore for rain in Israel, you dream about Israel, you talk constantly about Israel, how is that you don't go to live in Israel? To which the Rabbi answered: I don't know.

My dear friends, last year, while on a Federation mission to Israel, the great teacher and thinker, Abraham Infeld, reminded me while speaking to our group of this particular fact. And in that moment, I began to write this sermon in my head.

Not many people were surprised by our announcement of our intention of making Alyiah. Some have questioned the timing of our decision.

The answer to that question of timing was a simple realization: I was running out of answers to the questions the Kuzari presented the rabbi.

I pray facing Jerusalem, I dream of Jerusalem, I teach about it, I visit as often as possible, why I don't move there?

And the lack of answers provoked in me a physical sensation, a stomach ache that brought me back to the way I felt the first day I entered the Epstein School back in 2000, on our first visit to Atlanta while we were still living in Chile.

A feeling that every day we weren't sending our girls to that school, we were robbing our daughters of the Jewish educational environment we had always dreamed and aspired to provide them.

Israel in general, and Jerusalem in particular, is that place we have always had in our minds, the place we have dreamed about, the place where we, as Jews living in this very blessed generation, feel more at home than in any other place in the world.

This decision has absolutely nothing to do with how we feel about Atlanta, nor does it speak in any way about our feelings for this amazing Congregation we have created together.

We are not running from anything; we are running toward something: The realization of our dreams.

And if I have to pinpoint a moment in which it became clear in my mind that the time was now, I'd have to say that it was that moment I was brought back to that particular book, the kuzari.

Which brings me to something I want to share with you. You all know that we are Argentinians. But unless you're Latino, you don't really know how people in Latin America feel about the people from my country. So here goes a little story.

A man sits on a plane next to an Argentinian. As the flight begins, he politely introduces himself and asks the Argentinian about himself.

The Argentinian answers that he is an author, and proceeds to speak about the last book he has written for two hours nonstop.

At which point he says: But enough about me, what do you think of my book?

Friends, I have told you about my book. The one that reminded me of my unfulfilled dreams.

I want to invite you, now, to think about yours. And about your dreams. About those things you really crave to do in life, but you have been pushing aside because you are too busy, because you have things you have to do before you can really focus on them.

אַחַת שְׂאֵלְתִי מֵאֵת-יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ. "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I yearn," reads psalm 27, the one we include in our services from the beginning of Elul until the end of Sukkot. The psalmist then gives his answer. What's yours?

We live our lives as if we can keep pushing those dreams that are so precious to us until the right time comes, but that right time may never come.

What are you planning to do this year to get closer to that thing your soul really desires?

I invite you to live every day of this year asking yourself the following question: Does this thing I'm about to do, whatever that thing is, supports the life I'm trying to create?

In the year 1140, at the then advanced age of 65, Yehuda Halevi finally decided to leave everything behind and begin his long-postponed life dream of traveling to the land of Israel.

He left us poems and writings describing his journey. In every community he stopped he was received as royalty, and in every place, they begged him to stay.

He finally reached Egypt just before Rosh Hashanah of 1140 and stayed in between Alexandria and Fustat for 8 months. On May 8, 1141 he boarded a ship in Alexandria to begin the last leg of his long-awaited journey. The winds were not favorable, so they had to wait for almost a week.

On May 14, 907 years to the day before the declaration of the modern State of Israel Yehuda Halevi wrote a poem praising the western wind that had finally showed up and was taking him to the place he had yearned to see all his life.

It was the last thing ever heard from him. In a letter written in July of that same year by a friend of his, it is mentioned in passing, that he has learned that Yehuda Halevi died.

We don't know the circumstances; we don't know if he got to see the place where the Temple one stood. We don't even know if he ever reached the land of his dreams.

I read somewhere that the idea that we only live once, it's wrong. We only die once; we live every single day.

So this is my prayer for this 5780:

May every single day be filled with meaning. May every single day bring you closer to the realization of your most precious dreams.

May we keep growing as individuals and as a community in the holy task of bringing us all closer to the realization of our most meaningful dreams.

May our words and our actions be ones that support the vision of the community, the country, the world we're trying to create.

L'Shanah tovah tikatevu v'tichatemu. May we all be inscribed for a good year.