

Kol Nidre Sermon Final

One of the oldest and best-known tales of the High Holiday season is the story of a young Jewish boy, orphaned as a child and adopted into a warm-hearted gentile family. The boy knew himself to be Jewish, although he did not know exactly what that meant. He lived a simple life as a shepherd, going out each day with his flock, playing his flute all along.

One fall day, sitting at the side of the road, he noticed person after person traveling to the nearby city of Berdichev. One by one they passed, until the boy's curiosity got the best of him and he asked the travelers where they were going.

"We are on our way to Berdichev to spend the High Holidays with the great tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev."

"High Holidays?" the boy asked. "What are they?"

The men laughed, "Silly boy. The Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur! The whole world is being judged; you should not be here with the sheep, you belong in the synagogue!"

The words struck a chord in the boy. Not knowing what to do, but knowing he had to do something, the boy took his flute and followed the crowd into the synagogue. Never in his life had he experienced such a thing. The sound of the Hazzan's voice, the townsfolk engaged in prayer. At that

moment the boy knew, more than anything else, what he did not know. He could not read Hebrew, and he could not recite a single prayer. More than anything in the world he wanted to join in, but he lacked the tools to do so. All through Rosh Hashanah, and then through Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur, he sat, seeking a way into this holy community. The time for the Neilah prayers arrived, the tension in the room mounted, and he understood the sanctity of the waning hour. One by one, worshippers gathered at the ark, silent. So sacred was the moment, everyone could feel it, all were steeped in deepest prayer and supplication.

With tears in his eyes and unable to contain himself a moment longer, the boy took out his flute and began to play. A joyous flurry of searing notes. All the worshippers froze and stared, “How dare this child create such an outburst? How dare he desecrate our sacred day!” With every darting eye turned against the boy, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak ran off the bimah toward the terrified child and embraced him. “This boy,” announced the Rebbe, “has saved us all! All day long, I saw that our prayers had not ascended to the heavens, and with the gates of Neilah closing, our names were not yet inscribed in the Book of Life. Only by way of this boy’s pure heart and the pure prayer of his flute, more true than any prayer offered by any of us today, have the gates of heaven opened. We owe this boy our gratitude. May each one of us, in this sacred hour, learn to pray as he does.”

The heartfelt sentiment of a boy, who knows nothing of his tradition, but who yearns to pray to God, to participate in the tradition of his People on Yom Kippur, but can only express this by playing the flute, the only offering

he knows to make is, to say the very least, very moving. The Tzadik, the rebbe, praises the boy's actions despite the explicit prohibition against playing the flute on Yom Kippur! "This boy," announced the Rebbe, "has saved us all!" What is the moral of the story, what does it teach? I believe that it teaches that, above all, what really matters is what is in our hearts. God desires a pure heart and pure prayer even more than the conventional prayers of those who know how to pray, but who do so without true *kavannah*, that is, intention. The boy's *Kavannah* or intention was more desirable than prescribed acts of prayer! If we conclude from the story that intention/*kavannah* is the primary goal of Tefila-- What is the value of Jewish knowledge and skills according to the story? What is the benefit then, of years of Jewish education, learning Hebrew, Siddur, High Holiday prayer, Bible, Talmud or anything else? If all God wants, if all that is necessary to serve God is a pure heart, why don't we just teach our kids to play the flute or even the kazoo and have them come in here on Yom Kippur and they can all go up to the Aron hakodesh and play? I am half joking, but I really am asking, what is the goal of Jewish education, the attainment of Jewish knowledge? In another rendition of this story, the rabbi is so moved by the boy that he dedicates himself to teaching the boy to read Hebrew, pray and learn Torah. The rebbe loves the boy's *kavannah*, but he also commits himself to educating the boy in order to bestow upon him his birthright and ownership of his Jewish tradition.

I want to speak about Jewish engagement and education this evening in our time and intend to try to answer the question today, what is the goal of

Jewish education, that is amassing Jewish knowledge and skills. How should we, at Kehilat Nitzan, envision and actualize Jewish engagement and education for young people today as a Masorti community? We know that young people today are less interested in traditional or static forms of Judaism, but look to it for meaning and purpose in the very complicated and troubled world that they and we live in. They seek answers, inspiration, spirituality and to be moved by their Jewish experience. I am speaking mainly of teens, 20 somethings and onward but it won't be long before our 8 and 10 year olds join those ranks. How does learning Hebrew, mastering Mishnah or memorising facts help? Shouldn't our objective be to help them find this meaning and purpose? Perhaps we don't need the yiddish, Hebrew and Mishnah?

My stance is that we absolutely should teach these core skills and subjects in that they reflect who we are as a People. And yet learning these skills and text is not **the true objective** of Jewish learning. The end goal is not the acquisition of language skills or the accumulation of Jewish knowledge, rather, Jewish knowledge and skills **are tools** for gaining ownership to one's Judaism. Ownership is one goal but there is one that is even higher than ownership! That is what one does with that ownership. That higher purpose of ownership of one's Judaism is *Hitchadshut*, renewal in every generation - that is to interpret the Torah for our time, to connect with God, our tradition and our People in meaningful ways that draw creativity from the well of Jewish literacy and give every Jew an opportunity to take part in a very ancient, yet contemporary conversation!

A Masorti model cherishes our primary sources (Bible, Talmud, Halacha, Kabbalah), but is bold in its eternal devotion, and mission to be creative, to innovate *chidushim*; to draw out new interpretations. This is a requirement, that is a *derisha*---(in Hebrew), the essence of the word *midrash* as in “the Bet Midrash” --house of Study or literally - “the house of required searching” --that is the true meaning of the word *doresh*. The Torah is compared to an *Etz Hayim*, a living tree; it lives on because it is always growing and flourishing with new and creative insights.

What might be a model we can turn to for a shared Jewish learning experience that sees peer learning and teacher-student learning as mutual and reciprocal acts? Creativity and *Chidushim* (new interpretations) as end goals? One that allows for intergenerational conversations based in Jewish primary texts? I believe that model is the Bet Midrash, a concept that can be adapted to all of our youth and educational endeavors.

The contemporary Yeshiva or Bet Midrash offers two important aspects that can be applied to any Jewish engagement effort. They are: *Chevrutah* and *Torah Lishmah*. Chevruta is basically built on a personal relationship with another student based on study and conversations, through text study. *Torah Lishmah* is study for its own sake, that is, study whose only goal is to study---no grades, no marks, no certificates, no diplomas. This is a learning model that is not only textually based but more importantly relationally based. Remember the end goal is not the attainment of the knowledge but the goal is the process, the relationships and the creativity that adds to the

wellspring of ongoing Jewish insights in every generation. And speaking of “in every generation”....

The rabbis tell stories of our forefathers, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who studied in the Bet Midrash of their ancestors Shem and Eber. Who were these guys Shem and Eber? Noah's son and a great-great-great-grandson! Notice that the name Eber comes from the same root as Ivri (Hebrew).

One well known midrash relates to the Akedah/binding of Isaac, which we read on Rosh Hashanah. At the end of the story, the Torah tells us that Abraham returned to his servants-וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נַעֲרָיו. The rabbis ask appropriately what happened to Isaac, why did Abraham return by himself?

1. Midrash Aggadah on Genesis 22 states

כיון ששב אברהם אל נעריו אל המקום אשר הניחם, ולא ראו יצחק, היו סבורים ששחטו, אמרו לו יצחק היכן הוא, אמר להם לבית עבר רבו הולכתיו ללמוד תורה, לכך נאמר וישב אברהם, כלומר לבדו ולא הזכיר יצחק;

When Abraham returned to Ishmael and Eliezer and they saw that he was alone, they reckoned that he had sacrificed him (Isaac!) on the altar! They asked Avraham, “where is Yitzhak?” [he is not with you] To the Bet Midrash of Eber his rabbi--he has gone there to learn Torah! That is the reason our Torah states that Abraham returned from the Akeida (the binding of Isaac) by himself.

After the near-death experience of the Akedah, Yitzchak runs off to where?
to the Bet Midrash, of course!

Another story relates to our foremother Rebecca (yes! - Rebecca went to the Bet Midrash-at least once): Rebecca was extremely uncomfortable during her pregnancy and went to inquire of God why she was suffering so. According to the Midrash, whenever she would pass a house of Torah study, Jacob would struggle to come out; whenever she would pass a house of idolatry, Esau would agitate to come out (be born). Thinking that she was carrying one baby who was displaying conflicting propensities, Rebecca sought enlightenment at the yeshiva of Shem and Eber. There she received the prophecy that twins were fighting in her womb and would continue to fight all their lives.

Placing rabbinic yeshiva learning in the biblical context is an anachronism. Meaning, forefathers and mothers did not know of such a model created more than 1500 years later. Yet, for the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, the house of study was so central to what being Jewish meant to them -- and its values -- that they projected this reality upon their forefathers and foremothers.

Shem and Eber were the son and great-great-great-grandson of Noah and they were studying with Abraham, Rebeccah, Isaac and Jacob? The message for us here is that this was a place of intergenerational learning and conversation. Learning Torah with our elders can be done with them

personally while they are alive, but also through their writings, their midrashim after they have left this world. What a beautiful tradition that we learn to converse with one another on a daily basis about the deep purpose and meaning of our lives and connection to the divine! Can you imagine studying Torah with your children and grandchildren? What conversations might arise?

I am not suggesting that Kehilat Nitzan become a Yeshiva or Kollel, but I am suggesting that we embrace the concept of the Bet Midrash as a model as we expand our youth activities and education.

What might we do? One thing that Merav, my beloved partner, and I have always wanted to do is to start a weekly Beth Midrash for teens who want to take part in the National / International Bible Contest, חידון התנ"ך.

Participants gain access to their biblical tradition and actually come to own it through a process of בקיאות proficiency in the entire Bible! Even more so, they merit to make lifelong relationships based in Torah learning and discussions.

Merav studied for years for the National Bible Contest in Canada and went on to be one of the winners of the International Bible Contest, Chidon Hatanach, held in Israel on Yom Haatzmaut each year. That fluency in the sources gives her a vehicle to create beautiful Hebrew poetry based on Jewish sources and piyut (a type of liturgical poetry) through the ownership she gained during that process led to great innovation and creativity. You

will hear an example of Merav's poetry based on the Jewish primary texts in just a few minutes!

Merav belongs to a generation of young Jewish people, who are now fully adults, but are disappearing from communal "Synagogue" life-- I am talking about Millennials. For our purposes, young people born between 1980 and 2000. A recent study found that Jewish Millennials by far have the highest interest in their Judaism, in spirituality and in religious faith as compared to the older generations, yet they are the least likely to become involved in a religious organisation! They don't just want to inherit their faith; they want to own it. It could be argued that choice is perhaps the most sacred value for Millennials, the cornerstone of their character and pursuits. Young Jews may or may not have the tools, Hebrew skills, textual background etc., but they are interested in creating their own religious forms, rather than following those of their elders. They are less interested in the external aesthetics and rules and more interested in a genuinely spiritual religious experience, even if that includes setting aside Jewish external norms, such as halacha. Given that young Jews are more interested in their Judaism and Jewish spirituality, but less interested in sitting in the pews and saying "amen", how do we engage young people, offer educational opportunities and draw them into the last place they want to go, ***the Synagogue***? The answer for me is very simple: We don't! ...we really don't try to engage them! Rather, (pregnant pause) Let them engage us!

Millennials, we know, are less interested in institutions and are, therefore, more likely to create their own Jewish experiences outside of institutional structures. So what do we do? We just have to get out of their way! We create space for them to do their Judaism within our walls. This kind of collaboration offers a place to create and speaks to their hearts. We can offer support and, most importantly, our openness and curiosity to what they have to teach us. I believe that we can learn a lot from Jewish Millennials. One of the ways that we, at Kehilat Nitzan, are creating space for younger people is by inviting an independent “minyan”, a group of young Melbourne spiritualists/musicians to come lead their service here on Friday nights once a month. We are super excited about this partnership! They are extraordinary and bring a level of spirit to Jewish prayer that I have rarely if ever experienced. In order for this to succeed, we all need to come with an open mind and heart, what is sometimes called beginner's mind, looking at everything with curiosity and wonder, as if it's brand new.

Let us look curiously through the lens of a beginner's mind as I read to you some of the principles that guide Nava Tehila Melbourne:

Holiness, Spirituality and יהוה (The Divine) are experienced in many ways (music, group singing and movement is how we connect, cultivate and experience the sacred).

We are committed to reimagining the Jewish experience.

קהילה (Kehila) i.e. Community is a core human need we seek to respond to.

We are an artist-driven community that co-creates our shared experiences.

Sounds good? Come experience Nava Tehila, beginning with a kick-off event, not this but next Saturday night, October 19, for Havdalah at 8pm in the Sukkah, followed by our first Kabbalat Shabbat service Nov. 1 at 6pm with a festive kiddush. Flyers are at the back with all of the dates, so please take a copy and put it on your refrigerator with a magnet! I urge you all to come and be uplifted and inspired by their innovative music and prayer!

Young people are seeking something more spiritual. They want to feel something when they pray, they want to be moved by the music and have their spirit soar. Most importantly they have to be leading it! It was a little boy who taught the congregation what true prayer looks and sounds like; let's let young people show us what our prayer could look like in the future!

As I have said, first we must make space within our Kehilla for young people to do their thing! But does our congregation, its rabbi, have anything to offer them? Millennials are no longer children-but like the boy in the story, they do seek to gain greater ownership of their tradition. In order to have ownership, they must gain total access to our textual tradition. They also need someone to learn with! They will need a Bet Midrash!

Looking forward, we must focus on our heirs, the next generations, they are our future and the future of places like KN. We need to make a space for them to create, lead and discover their own Jewish spirituality. We need to learn from them and they from us. We need a new model for Jewish engagement and informal learning, an adaptation of an old model, I am suggesting the Beth Midrash as a concept, to encourage and cultivate

Jewish literacy, siddur literacy, Hebrew literacy, and cultural literacy within a model that gives young people their heritage in Jacob . As we will read soon at the very end of the Torah Devarim 33:4

תּוֹרָה צִוְּה־לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מוֹרְשָׁה קְהֵלֶת יַעֲקֹב:

When Moses charged us with the Teaching - the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.

I would now like to invite Merav to read a poem she wrote, that was read during our very moving and innovative *Selihot* service a few weeks ago.

Merav reads ממעמקים while Moshe and I hum a tune.

From the Depths	ממעמקים
From the depths I called to you, My daughter forming in me, From the depths my voice resonated within You, to the sound of my heartbeat.	ממעמקים קראתי אליך, בתי המתהווה בתוכי, ממעמקים קולי הדדה בקרבך, לרקע פעימות לבי.