

KOL NIDREI SERMON

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Yes, I live and work in Rockville, but I have long considered myself a proud Washingtonian. One of my fondest childhood memories is coming to D.C. as a very young kid, staying at a little motel in the Virginia side of the river and seeing the major sites of our nation's Capital for the first time. I was awestruck – and at a certain level remain so even today – by the sheer grandeur and beauty which Washington projects. For years, I cherished as a memento the little green card signed by our then-New Jersey Senator, H. Alexander Smith – that card admitting our family to the Gallery in the Senate chamber to hear first-hand whatever the proceedings were on that July afternoon in the 1950's.

So – with that personal backdrop, it should come as no surprise that each month, like many of you, I eagerly anticipate the arrival of Washingtonian magazine in my mailbox. It usually provides an intriguing profile of a major Washington figure, an exposé of whatever the compelling issue du jour may be, updates on culture, food, real estate and of course, that perennial list of “What's Best” in our fair city. I do not expect to see articles of specific Jewish content in Washingtonian – and yet, to my surprise, that is exactly what I encountered while reading the January 2013 issue.

In a “First Person” piece by Washingtonian National Editor, Harry Jaffe, entitled “Day of Rest: One Day a Week I Observe My Own Kind of Sabbath and Step Away from All Devices”, he writes: “A daughter needed advice – and money. An editor sent a story idea. A DC Council member requested that I attend a ribbon-cutting. I neither read the emails nor responded for a day. They landed in my in-box on my own personal Sabbath.”

And Harry Jaffe continues: “For one day – from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, I turn off my computers and iPad. In a small way, I have begun to enforce a respite from the barrage of information and the chaos it infuses in my life. Where’s my laptop? Who needs me? Who doesn’t? I email – therefore I am. On the seventh day, I rest from the digital deluge.

Call it Sabbath lite.”

Harry Jaffe then reminisces about the Shabbat of his childhood – which while not particularly observant in most ways, nevertheless included a weekly family Friday night dinner, where everyone sang 3 blessings in Hebrew: for the lighting of the candles, the sipping of the wine and the cutting of the bread.

That was it for Shabbat – the rest of Saturday focused on “errands, pick-up football, shopping and movies.”

Fast forward to 2013: Harry Jaffe has re-discovered the power and attraction of Shabbat – not in a classic legalistic sense, but as a critically-needed antidote to the relentless pressures of our Washington life-style.

He notes: “It’s time to start embracing an entire day of calm and reflection. A clearing of the mind. A break-in-the-action from sundown to sundown. My wife, Louise, teaches sixth-graders – she’s also up for a day of rest . . .

I’ve already begun to feel the benefits . . . I read. I hike. I play the flute. I phone friends, my brother, my sister . . . The sense of peace stays with me through the week.”

And Harry Jaffe concludes: “Checking email, filing stories – yes, even sending money can wait.”

Friends, the concept of Shabbat is one of the genius-strokes of Judaism. It has the potential to be profoundly transformative – enabling us to step back from the pace of our week – and experience, as Harry Jaffe did, a dramatically different use of time.

So, let me be candid: Do I wish that Harry Jaffe had mentioned somewhere in his article that he has also found a Synagogue, where he “drops-in” on Shabbat, even occasionally –

where he shares in some of the other aspects of Shabbat: study, prayer, and the sociability of the community at the Kiddush. Perhaps, being part of a Synagogue will become the next “Shabbat step” for him in what is clearly a significant and ongoing growth process . . . I hope so and he is certainly welcome here at B’nai Israel.

I look around our Synagogue and Jewish community and can tell you that the rapidity and degree of change are unprecedented. We are in major transition, as every analyst of the contemporary Jewish scene will attest. Are we “tribal Jews” or “covenantal Jews,” the dichotomy suggested by my colleague and friend, Rabbi Sid Schwartz in his new book, Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future? Perhaps the answer is the one posited by Dr. Ron Wolfson of the American Jewish University in arguing that institutions like Synagogues will only be successful, attractive and effective to the extent that we engage our ever-more diverse constituencies in fostering meaningful, enduring relationships... the key word being “relationships.”

In spite of at least some evidence to the contrary, on the whole, I remain optimistic, as I look to our future. We are evolving – differently to be sure – but evolving. B’nai Israel remains exceptionally vigorous on most fronts – but like almost every Synagogue, we are grappling with how to find that elusive balance between our commitment to “tradition” and the need to respond to the realities of the cyber-age.

I am convinced that for us as Jews in 2013, part of the answer, as Harry Jaffe discovered, is in a gravitation, an openness towards Shabbat . . . probably not for most of us as a replica of the Shabbat of earlier generations – but Shabbat as a resource for re- invigoration – physical, emotional, spiritual – for uplift – for rest – for peace – for joy – for immersion in core Jewish values – and for connection to community.

In the open society, every one of us is a Jew-by-choice. I ask you in the year ahead to say “yes” to Shabbat. The reward will be not only yours – but all of ours together.