

How Will We Re-Dedicate Ourselves?

Shabbat Hanukkah

December 4, 2021

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Temple Aliyah

I want to tell you the story of a bat mitzvah that took place last week.

Now, any bat mitzvah is special; but why talk about this particular one today?

Well, this was an adult. A woman who is decades older than 13.

Now, it's special when a child, at age twelve or thirteen, becomes a bat mitzvah.

But ... in many cases, it's part of the natural expectation within the family. The incentive, the prodding, the nudging may come from others, rather than from oneself.

On the other hand, when it's an adult, it all has to come from within. You don't have your parents nagging you. You don't have *anybody* urging you to study, except for yourself.

In this particular case, it took a lot more inner strength than usual, a lot more effort than you might expect.

The woman whose bat mitzvah I want to tell you about today is **Gabby Giffords**. She celebrated becoming an adult bat mitzvah exactly one week ago.

Gabby Giffords used to be a U.S. Representative from Arizona. But the other day, she wasn't giving a speech in Congress like she used to; she was chanting in



Hebrew from the Torah. And although she wrote a speech for the occasion, it was delivered by her rabbi.

Gabby Giffords first approached her rabbi, Rabbi Stephanie Aaron, in the early 2000s, when she was serving in the Arizona legislature. She wanted to know more about her Jewish roots. Her mother is a Christian Scientist, her father was Jewish. His father was a rabbi, descended from a long line of Lithuanian rabbis.

So Giffords began to study with Rabbi Aaron.

But then, life – and a near-fatal injury – got in the way.

In 2011, Giffords was shot in the head in an attack by a gunman at a constituent meet-and-greet outside a grocery store on the outskirts of Tucson.

According to a story in the Forward,¹ in the wake of that attack, Giffords had to learn to stand again -- in all kinds of ways. She continues, to this day, to struggle with her speech.

As the Forward put it, “Gabby was shot through the left side of her brain, ... resulting in paralysis on the right side of her body and aphasia, which limits her ability to express her thoughts.”

Giffords and Rabbi Aaron stayed in touch through the years, and the topic of becoming a bat mitzvah came up several times. Then, two years ago, Giffords recruited three friends to stand alongside her and become b’nai mitzvah. Their meetings moved online during the pandemic.

“Their hard work resulted in a bat mitzvah service filled with ‘cascading joy,’ as Aaron put it. Giffords and her friends prayed, chanted and shared the meaning of the experience with friends and family both in person and on Zoom.”

¹ [Gabby Giffords had her bat mitzvah, beautifully – The Forward](#) .

“Years ago, Aaron gave Giffords her Hebrew name, Gavriella” -- Hebrew for ‘God is my strength.’

According to Rabbi Aaron, she and her three friends “studied a lot of Jewish values. [They] studied justice and the pursuit of justice.”

“When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, they spoke of her work and its meaning, incorporating current events into the discussion whenever possible. They discussed the Torah portion of the week, and eventually studied their own.

“‘My Torah portion is from Genesis, from the story of Joseph,’ Giffords wrote. ‘If you know *Vayeshev* [last week’s Torah portion], you know it begins, “And he lived.” Any story that begins ‘and he lived’ is good with me. I lived. Everything afterwards is a gift.

“‘My portion is about Joseph’s dream. It’s complex. The dream gets Joseph in a lot of trouble. But Joseph is also brave, he speaks of his dreams whether they get him in trouble or not. I am guided by a dream—the belief that we can, if we keep working, live in a safer America without so much gun violence. My dream is important, even when it isn’t easy.’

“Giffords chanted her Torah portion along with Rabbi Aaron, who read Giffords’ bat mitzvah speech for her, but Giffords chanted prayers, sang along with the congregation and played ‘Amazing Grace’ on the French horn near the conclusion of the service.”

According to Rabbi Aaron, “‘Gabby really became a bat mitzvah. ... She was **all in** and **in joy** and I felt happy for her.’”

“Giffords wrote, ‘I am a person who is always looking for ways to grow, to keep moving and find new paths. I am proud and honored to become a bat mitzvah as an adult. It is never too late to explore faith, to learn the stories of the past and reflect on their meaning today.’

The reporter from the Forward asked Rabbi Aaron, “How does a rabbi make sense of a God who would allow such a senseless act to rob a gifted leader of her ability to speak, to serve?”

“‘It’s that ultimate question people ask. It’s not one of my questions,’ Aaron said.”

“‘Instead,’ she asked, ‘Where were you? Where were the other human beings? Where were all of us? How do we live in a country where there are more guns than humans? Where were all of us?’

“‘For Giffords, her Jewish studies have been an important source of strength.

“‘The story of the Jewish people is one of endurance, of bravery, of the will to keep going—and learning those stories has been a source of comfort and inspiration to me,’ she wrote. ‘I’ve had to keep going, to believe I could keep moving, in my own life. So many people who’ve been injured, or suffered a loss, struggle to keep moving. I have the stories of Ruth, Rachel, and Deborah, among others, to guide me.’”

I wanted to share this story with you because we are, as we all know, in the middle of Hanukkah right now. The word “Hanukkah” refers to the “re-dedication” of the Temple. I was always puzzled about that. Why not simply call it, “the dedication?” After all, the word Hanukkah can mean dedication as well as re-dedication. What difference does it make? Why emphasize that it was a re-dedication?

It makes a difference. When you have received a Jewish education as a youth, when you’ve been socialized to do this and to do that, and to refrain from this and refrain from that, it’s nonetheless an accomplishment to stand up and take your place as a Jewish adult.

But when you didn’t grow up with any of that, when you’ve grown up, as Gabby Giffords did, in a home in which she was exposed to Judaism but not educated enough to be able to claim it as her identity, not invited to embrace it as a 13 year old, and then you spend the next 38 years of your life without that, it means even more when you *re-claim* it, when you *re-dedicate* yourself to it.

Sometimes, a re-dedication is harder. Sometimes, it's sweeter.

There is a group of people in our congregation who are pursuing celebrating their adult bar/bat mitzvahs together at the end of the year. It's exciting. It is a reminder that it is never too late.

But what about the rest of us? We are celebrating Hanukkah. In what way are the rest of us, who may already have celebrated a bar or a bat mitzvah, but may not have done much studying of Torah, of Jewish history, of Judaism since then, ... in what way will we rededicate ourselves in the year ahead?

That's the invitation that Hanukkah provides. It's an invitation that we are inspired to think about because of Gabby Gifford's example.

Gabby Gifford's bat mitzvah was a big deal.

Our own rededication can be as well.

Let's spend the last few days of Hanukkah thinking about that.

Shabbat shalom, Hodesh Tov, and Hag Urim Sameach, Happy Hanukkah!