

## Message to Confirmation Class of 2019

Something historic and momentous occurred earlier this week in the world of religion. It has nothing to do with the Jews, but is worth mentioning nevertheless. Pope Francis announced a change to the Lord's Prayer. According to the Gospels, when Jesus' disciples asked him how they should pray, he taught them this prayer. When I was in elementary school, which was a public school, we recited the Lord's Prayer every day.

It was announced that the words in the famous English translation "lead us not into temptation" are being changed instead to, "Do not let us fall into temptation". In making the change, the Pontiff explained the change was being made because the original language implies that God leads people to sin. Without delving further into the theological reasons behind the change, I want to share with you a story about a different time when a different Pope was asked to change the Lord's prayer.

It just so happens that a number of years ago Colonel Sanders approached one of the Pope's predecessors and asked him to change the last words of the Lord's Prayer.

In a private meeting in the Vatican he told the Pope that if the Church would change the concluding line from "give us this day our daily bread" to --- "give us this day our daily chicken", --- he would donate \$10 million to Catholic charities. As you can imagine, the Pope contained his outrage and politely declined the offer. Col. Sanders was persistent though, and two weeks later came back and said he would give \$50 million if the Pope made the change. But again, he was rebuffed and turned away. Finally, a month later, the Colonel came back and tells the Pope this is his final offer --- \$100 million.

And so, at a meeting of the Cardinals, similar to the one that took place earlier this week, the Pope announced to his ecclesiastical board, "I have some good news and some bad news to share with you. The good news is that we have received a very generous donation of \$100 million from Colonel Sanders. The bad news is that we just lost the Wonder Bread account."

I share this story with you – for one – because it's funny, and I want you to know how important it is to have a sense of humor, to laugh and not take ourselves too seriously. But on a more serious note, the joke, as well as the news story, (which by the way, is true), raises an important, profound issue: the question of how religion grapples with change.

In many respects, it is the challenge that faced Tevye, and which we discussed when our confirmation class saw *Fiddler on the Roof*, in the original Yiddish, based on Shalom Aleichem's short stories. Tevye sees a world around him that is changing before his very eyes. Modernity is knocking at his door. He encounters anti-Semitism as a pogrom takes place while celebrating his daughter's wedding, shattering their complacency and the joy of the moment. And he faces the

challenge of assimilation as he sees his daughters tempted by the lure of the world outside the insular, sheltered environment of the shtetl.

The challenges faced by Tevye and threats to his way of life, which are the subject of Shalom Aleichem's writings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries over one hundred years ago are the same challenges we face today.

This past year we have seen unprecedented attacks on Jewish houses of worship here in America, with people gunned down at Sabbath services. And more difficult to see are the subtle and less obvious threats presented by an open culture and society where it is easy to blend in and abandon our unique identity and to abdicate the beautiful heritage known as Judaism.

Hard as it may be to believe, even though the world has changed since the Yiddish culture that we saw in the play has disappeared, many of the same challenges remain.

We studied sources which show how our sages encourage us to treat others with kindness, how God wants us to act with compassion, to be considerate of the feelings of other people. The bottom line of much of what we studied is that we should not just be concerned with ourselves and our own lives. We are all part of something greater than any one of us. As Jews, that means not just our contemporaries, but of those who came before us. This concern for others is what motivated Abraham to speak out on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though he did not know them, he felt an obligation to do what he could to save them, even if it meant having the courage to stand up to the Creator of the Universe and to challenge God.

In addition to being a way of life, in many respects, Judaism is a sophisticated religion and philosophy that embraces contradictions. Justice and mercy are not always compatible, and can lead to conflicting conclusions.

We grappled with some of those issues when we studied the famous story from the Talmud about what to do when two people are in the desert with only one bottle of water. Although you do not sacrifice your life for your friend's if you have the container, we also learned that you cannot take the life of another person if ordered to do so, even if it means risking your own life.

I mentioned to the children in the class when I came back from my meeting in Jerusalem with Israel's Prime Minister about a meeting I had with a true Jewish hero, Natan Scharansky. I told them of his courage in standing up and facing the Soviet regime, and how his determination ultimately helped lead to the fall of the Iron Curtain. When I had breakfast with Scharansky a couple weeks ago, he said that the greatest threat to the Jewish people today is apathy.

I like to use the occasion of my annual message to our confirmation class to leave the class with a charge. I implore you -- do not be apathetic.

Do not ignore the suffering of your neighbor. Do not neglect the obligation to help the stranger. Do not be indifferent to injustice or suffering. Coupled with our universalistic obligations to all of humanity, I urge you not to overlook the importance of continuing to learn more about Jewish teachings. Do not stop exploring your heritage. Do not hesitate to speak out on behalf of Israel and your fellow Jews. Do not succumb to apathy. To frame it in the positive – Continue to live your lives as Jews and to observe and practice the mitzvot.

We live at the place where there is tension between the polarity of universalism and particularism – our obligations to the world, and to our people and our past. I try to teach and advocate for both.

When Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel received an award from UJA in 1975 he told the story from the Talmud of the man and the container of water in the desert. He says he was always troubled and disturbed by the answer given in the Talmud by the great Rabbi Akiba.

After many years of reflection upon the passage, he came to understand its meaning. He said that, “the survivor upon merging from the desert will no longer be alone. He will be responsible for his friend as well.” He went on to say, “A Jew who is not Jewish, who refuses his responsibilities, betrays more than his own person, he betrays the history and the past of another.”

So to the confirmation class of 5779, I encourage you to carry with you the precious heritage you have learned about – it is not someone else’s. It is not your parents’. It is yours.

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