

Transforming “Acts of Duty” into “Songs of Joy”



For more than a dozen years, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and titular head of the Conservative Movement in Judaism, has written weekly *Torah* commentaries that have been circulated by mail, fax and email, and are available on the web at <http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/archives/index.shtml>.

As many of you know, Dr. Schorsch has announced that he will retire next summer, upon the completion of twenty years as Chancellor. With the end of the *Torah* Reading Cycle on *Simchat Torah*, Dr. Schorsch wrote his last weekly *Torah* commentary. Others will now continue.

I was struck by the message of this last installment. Coming in the midst of *Sukkot*, Dr. Schorsch cites a story in the *Talmud* of four rabbis who were on board a ship during *Sukkot*, and only one of them, Raban Gamliel, had a *lulav* and *etrog*, which he had purchased at the exorbitant price of 1,000 silver coins. Each of the other rabbis used their colleague's dearly purchased set to perform the blessing and fulfill the *mitzvah* of *lulav*.

But why did Raban Gamliel spend so much for the *lulav* and *etrog* if he could have fulfilled the *mitzvah* by borrowing someone else's, at no cost to himself? The story teaches us, says Rabbi Schorsch, that “we can fulfill this *mitzvah* of *lulav* at no cost, but imbued with the right attitude, we are prone to dismiss a high price as immaterial. Love alone can transform for us acts of duty into songs of joy.” In other words, to have one's own *lulav*, even if purchased at a high price, assuming one can afford it, was an act of love for God and the *mitzvot*.

Dr. Schorsch continues and draws a lesson for us from the story. “The deep-seated reason so many contemporary Jews find the ritual score of Judaism joyless is not lack of knowledge but the absence of love. To be sure, knowledge helps, but bereft of love, observance can never lift us out of our existential loneliness. Soulless piety afflicts the knowledgeable as well as the uninitiated. At times it even assaults those who have mastered the intricacies of the religious life. Not for naught are we instructed each day by the recitation of the *Shema Yisrael* first and foremost to love God with all of our being, because only that emotion can enable us to render a regimen of ritual and morality into a narrative of unalloyed holiness.”

In my sermon on the second day of *Rosh HaShanah*, I offered a similar message:

When we take the Torah from the Ark each High Holy Days morning, I recite a prayer that reads, “Grant that this generation, through love of the Torah and the spread of its knowledge, may bear witness that we are worthy as individuals and as a Congregation, to be the heirs of those centuries of ancestors who lived and loved the teachings of thy Law.”

We are the heirs of our ancestors, who lived God's law as they understood it. Not only did they live it, not only did they practice it, they loved it. They were passionate about it. They found spirituality in it. They were ready to die to preserve it, to give up their very lives rather than betray it. Our goal as a synagogue is to transmit Judaism in such a way that it leads us to love it. Our goal is to love God, to feel God's presence.

We need to love God and Judaism more— to open our hearts to the Torah and to be passionate about its observance. In this way, we will be worthy of the Torah heritage that is ours, and that we are charged to transmit to our descendants as our ancestors transmitted it to us.

Dr. Schorsch's passion and love for Judaism and God have been the hallmarks of his commentaries week after week. I will miss his erudite messages because of the unique way he has blended knowledge and love. He is an example to us all.

This month, you will receive from the synagogue a beautiful CD with the music of our Friday night *Kabbalat Shabbat* Service presented by Hazzan Glantz. It is a beautiful CD, and a project of love by the Hazzan. You will soon hear more about how this loving and lovely recording will be used by us to make our services more loving and joyous.

Incidentally, the texts of all four of my High Holy Day Sermons are available on the AJ website, www.adathjeshurun.info. May this year be one in which, to paraphrase Rabbi Schorsch, we will work harder at “transforming acts of religious duty into songs of spiritual joy.”

CONGREGATION
ADATH JESHURUN



7763 Old York Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027
215.635.6611
www.adathjeshurun.info