

A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

Reprinted from the December 2008 Adath Jeshurun Newsletter

Faithful to our Heritage, Worthy of our Future



On November 8, we concluded our celebration of our 150th Anniversary Year with a remarkable service featuring a full orchestra, an expanded choir, and the introduction of the new *Seder Avodah*. It was a glorious culmination of our celebration of our 150-year "Incredible Journey." Congregants related to me that they sat through the service enthralled, with tears of joy in their eyes!

The timing of this service could not have been more fortuitous. Two years after AJ was founded in 1858, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. It was Lincoln who preserved the Union through the days of civil war, a war fought largely over the institution of black slavery. It was Lincoln whose Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves. And on the Tuesday before our celebration, an African-American man was elected President of the United States, to take his place in the pantheon of American presidents along with the Great Emancipator. Who in 1858 would have dared imagine it?

Who would have imagined the revolution in the role of women? Who would have imagined the inclusiveness of American society, the expansion of equality to embrace all, regardless of color, ethnicity, national origin, sex or sexual preference, able or disabled?

We are not a perfect society. But we remain committed to the ideals of the founding leaders, the fundamental equality of all human beings, and are ever refining and implementing their vision to be inclusive of all. It is our recognition that inclusiveness is fundamental to a free society that is so uniquely characteristic of the United States. It is not tolerance that defines America; it is inclusiveness. It is a recognition that we are all real Americans. And we are all God's human children, equal in the eyes of our Creator, equal by law, and increasingly, equal in the minds and hearts of all our citizens.

Who could possibly have imagined how the Jewish world would have changed in these 150 years? In 1858, there were barely 150,000 Jews in the United States. In Palestine, as few as 1,500 or perhaps as many as 20,000. Europe was the undisputed center of the Jewish world with 5,200,000 souls. Indeed, outside of Europe there were no more than 800,000.

On the day after our celebration, November 9, we marked the seventieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, when rampaging mobs attacked the Jewish community in Germany and Austria. Synagogues were burned to the ground; Jewish businesses were ransacked; one hundred people were killed. World War II had not yet begun, but the War Against the Jews of Europe was well underway. A peaceful populace rooted in centuries of history, a vibrant culture, the center of world Jewry, was shattered like the plate glass windows of the Jewish-owned store fronts, smashed to smithereens. In 1858, who in this congregation, whose charter boldly states that it would be a synagogue for worship "according the German Ritual," whose prayer book was originally in Hebrew and German, whose rabbis preached in German, and whose Board minutes were written in German... who could have imagined what would happen in their native land just eighty years later?

And this anniversary year for AJ coincides with the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel. When AJ was founded, it was forty years before the Zionist movement began. Who could have imagined our people's return to sovereignty in our homeland? The existence of the Jewish State is the consummate

Jewish blessing of our age. It has redefined Judaism, and constantly reinvigorates the flagging spirit of Jews of any age and all religious preferences. Today, America and Israel are the dominant centers of Jewish life, and we are joined hip to hip.

This anniversary year has been a glorious time for us to pause on our incredible journey, and look back at the road we have travelled. With celebration, with wonder, and with pride. But it must also be a time for us to look forward and embrace the spirit of renewal. For we cannot stop here. Pleasant though this resting place may be, we must move on, embracing, and creating, an as yet unformed future.

The role of the synagogue has changed since AJ was established. It can no longer be only a place of Jewish assembly, prayer, and religious education. It is the center of community. More than ever, the modern synagogue will be successful only if it is seen as a place of faithful love, a place to which people can turn to find love, support, consolation, and acceptance. Now more than ever, people are in search of a community that is built on these values.

We live in a harsh, unforgiving world where these commodities are in short supply. The economic crisis has taken an incalculable toll on our sense of security. We have seen our wealth diminished; our investments, savings, homes and retirement funds decreasing in value. People are losing their jobs, and those who have them are working harder, longer, and, often, with decreasing rewards, both material and spiritual.

We are enmeshed in a culture whose values are so vacuous, and often so toxic, that it is harder to transmit the virtues of decency and civility, love of learning and passion for ideals to our children. We face the challenges of caring not only for children but for a growing population of aging parents. We are inevitably confronted by devastating illness, and the death of our most precious loved ones.

We come to the synagogue seeking community that can strengthen us to meet the crises of our daily lives. And this is the kind of synagogue community that we are challenged to become. We should never be a place where people are graded as Jews: not by the level of their observance nor by their learning; not by their longevity as members of the synagogue; not by their choice of spouse; not by race or gender or sexual orientation. The modern synagogue must be a "synagogue of faithful love" that seeks to improve the world. And we begin by improving the lives of our members by offering compassion, understanding and comfort.

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Faithful to our Heritage, Worthy of our Future (continued)

Our cornerstone, set in place in 1964, says "To help perfect the world under the Kingdom of the Almighty." This is our mission statement. This must be the foundation of our future.

Congregation Adath Jeshurun was founded on the fourth day of *Sukkot*. But there could not have been a better day for celebrating our anniversary than *Shabbat Lech Lecha*. It is the *Shabbat* when we read how God called Abraham to "Go Forth," promised that he and Sarah would be father and mother to a great nation, and challenged them "to be a blessing."

Our incredible journey, long as it seems, is a small segment of a larger incredible journey that began almost four thousand years ago with two people, Abraham and Sarah. They went forth. They began a new nation. They were a blessing. That remains our challenge today. To go forth, to continue the journey. To be a blessing.

The road has never been easy, and it will not be smooth, or clear, or convenient in the future. We must take to heart the words of the prophet Isaiah that appear in the *Haftarah* for *Shabbat Lech Lecha*: we must be among those who trust in the Lord. We must renew our strength as eagles grow new plumes. We must be able to run and not grow weary. We must march and not grow faint.

So let us gather strength. Heartened by the grandeur of our past, resplendent with our renewed eagle-like plumes, let us march together, to build a synagogue community faithful to our heritage, and worthy of our future.

May we never grow weary nor faint.



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