

And a Child Shall Lead Us

Rabbi Howard Morrison – Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779/2018

As you may recall from my High Holy Day message in the *Kesher*, I was touched and moved by the documentary movie on *Mr. Rogers* which came out this past Summer. For decades, he stood out as a spiritual and moral guardian for children. Little did I realize until I saw the film how influenced I was as a child while sitting in front of the screen watching his show.

Rosh Hashanah is about the centrality of the child. Just consider our Torah and Haftarah readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah: The birth and early years of Isaac, his interaction with his half-brother Yishmael, his being bound by his father on the mountain; the birth and early years of the prophet Samuel; the grieving mother Rachel weeping over her children who have been exiled to Babylonia, refusing to be comforted. All the readings focus on the centrality of the child.

Did you know that the Ark containing our Torahs facing East mirrors the portable Ark which was housed in the ancient portable Mishkan and in later years the Holy Temple in Jerusalem? In ancient times, however, there was a distinctive feature, which is missing today. The Torah commands about the previous institutions of worship that two Keruvim-Cherubs hovered over both sides of the holy Ark. What were these Cherubs?

According to Rashi and other classical commentators, these winged creatures had the faces of babies. That's right! When our ancestors faced the Ark, they faced children and remembered the religious mandate to focus on their wellbeing.

In the pages of our Torah, the two Cherubs face each other. However, in a restatement found in the book of Chronicles, the Cherubs face away from each other. Which is it? According to the Midrash, when the Jewish people are faithful to God's will, those little children face each other. When the Jewish people are not faithful to God's will, then the little children face away from each other. You see - Children are smart. They can sense when their adult role models are sincere and consistent or not. Do we see our best selves when we look at the centrality of our children? Can we imagine their faces and their positions when we face the Ark today?

As we usher in the new year of 5779, I gaze at many Holocaust survivors and their families. Do the math - Today's survivors were the young children I speak about today when they were liberated in 1945. Many of them grew up never knowing their parents, siblings, or other relatives. The story is told of Rabbi Herschel Shachter, then a U.S. Army chaplain when he was part of the liberation of Buchwald in 1945. After seeing piles and piles of corpses, as he continues to walk around, he hears a voice from one of the piles. He hears the voice of a child, who would be the youngest survivor of Buchenwald. After saving the child, Rabbi Shachter asks the young boy, "How old are you?" The boy responds, "I am older than you." How so," asks Rabbi Shachter. The boy explains, "You can laugh and cry as a normal person. I don't remember ever laughing, and I am beyond tears. So, I am older than you."

Who was this youngest survivor of Buchenwald? His name - Israel Meir Lau - who one day would become the chief Rabbi of the State of Israel.

There are many stories about the last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto. One centers around the youngest child of the family, a boy named Moshe. After reciting the Ma Nishtana, as the youngest child does, Moshe then adds one more question to his father. "Who will be here to ask and answer the questions next year? Abba - Will you be alive next Pesach? Will I be alive next Pesach to ask them again?"

The father answers Moshe by saying, "I don't know if you or I will be alive next Pesach, but children, children of Israel will be alive on this earth next year, and all the years after that, to recite Ma Nishtanah."

Our shul, Beth Emeth, has intuitively engrained these stories into our shul's very spiritual and physical fiber. The Samuel Edelstein Children's Garden is all about honoring the lives of the children of the Holocaust who did not have a chance. If you have not yet dedicated a paving stone to honor the life of a child, or some other feature in the garden, I kindly ask, "what are you waiting for?"

Our Haftarah scroll and its mantle are dedicated to the memory of the 1.5 million children who did not have a chance. Member families have dedicated particular haftarot of choice to commemorate any meaningful occasion in their lives, with their names inscribed on to the parchment of their respective haftarah. There are many haftarot still remaining. The scroll itself and its mantle are all about the children of the Shoah, likened to the Cherubs who once hovered over the Ark. I kindly ask, "What are you waiting for?"

How many of us bless our children and/or grandchildren at the Shabbat and Yom Tov table? I actually did not grow up with this practice, but I have observed it as a parent every week. These words prompted me to look deeply into the eyes, hearts, and souls of my children at least once a week. To those who have never done it, I suggest to you, "Try it, you'll like it." It makes sense that we bless our daughters to grow in the footsteps of our founding matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. However, we do not invoke the names of the three founding patriarchs when blessing our sons. Rather, we use the names of Ephraim and Menashe, Jacob's grandsons, Why so? On one hand, the patriarchs did not always treat their families well: Abraham mistreated Hagar; Isaac shared sibling rivalry with Ishmael; Jacob shared sibling rivalry with Esau. Jacob favored particular children over other. In addition, Ephraim and Menashe were the only two males in the book of Genesis who spent their entire lives in the Diaspora and who, according to tradition, maintained their heritage. If they could do so, we can too.

For those of us who may not have biological children or grandchildren to bless, I offer to you that there are many ways today to feel responsible for the children of our heritage. The child of your future could be a nephew or niece, an adopted child, a surrogate who has carried a child, an orphan in the community, or any person you choose to consider as your particular child of the people Israel.

As we focus on the centrality of the child today, what are you doing to best ensure your child's commitment to Judaism? Does he or she have a distinctive pathway amongst the many lanes of the Jewish highway? Have you considered making a contribution to the Jewish tuition assistance fund which has been set up through The Center for Jewish Education to help ensure affordable Jewish education?

This year will mark my first full year as an empty nester. My younger son, Yonah, begins his third year in the IDF. He defines his Jewishness by the uniform he wears, a love for his people, his land, his Hebrew language and his Jewish culture He is doing his Jewishness his way. My older son, Elie, was hired this past May, a year after receiving his degree in meteorology, to be the chief (and only) meteorologist of Alpena, Michigan. There, among a handful of Jews, Elie wears his kippah at all times even while on the air giving the nightly forecast. He is doing his Jewishness his way. May each of our children be educated and directed seriously so that they can all find their distinctive pathway to living Jewishly their way.

May the Cherubs always face each other. May we celebrate God's will in a meaningful way. May we, as the children of God and as the children of Israel face each other with love, care, and compassion.

I wish us all Shanah Tovah U'Metukah - May we all be inscribed and sealed for a sweet, healthy, peaceful, and purposeful new year!