

Most of us are vaguely familiar with Nuclear Fission. It's what we mean when we talk about nuclear energy. It breaks apart Uranium particles releasing huge amounts of energy in the process... and we know that the science can be applied to either of two processes: the positive application is the production of heat to generate electricity. Or, at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum of good and evil, it can be directed toward the destruction of cities on a massive scale. One creates and one destroys. And, everyone is vaguely familiar with the dangers these reactors and weapons pose and we are aware of the challenges created from the poisonous byproducts of this process and still, we know how greatly preferable it is to using carbon-based sources of energy.

Nuclear *Fusion*, on the other hand, is the complete opposite process. As opposed to “splitting the atom” this is “joining them together – or fusing the atom.” The process takes simple sea-water, binds the hydrogen molecules together and, in mashing them up, heat is created leading to the same outcome. But, without any of the limitations of fossil fuels nor the dangers of fission. The challenge is that it requires an environment with temperatures of 150,000,000° C in order to slam them together and start the chain reaction. While this sounds miraculous, and it certainly is, it is also very familiar to us – it is precisely what is happening at this very moment, 93,000,000 miles over our heads. It is the same chemical process at work on the Sun and the project I want to explore with you today is called ITER – or, the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor. It is nothing less than humanity creating a scale model of the Sun right here on earth.

The equipment necessary to accomplish this feat was originally conceived by an uneducated red army conscript named Oleg Lavrentiev in 1949. He imagined a spaceship shaped machine that he called the Tokamak. And, while there are competing models to achieve fusion in development today, the Tokamak is still the leading design.

What this means is that, while we sit here, it is now about 2:30am outside Provence, France, where an international team of physicists, engineers and dreamers are sleeping soundly. But, in just a couple of hours, they will begin their day – working to build an artificial star. They are now about 30 years into the project and estimates are that it will take another 20 years or so to realize their goal – they know it works, they know they can do it – they simply need the resolve and support to make it happen.

In the 1980's Russian Physicist, Evgeny Ilikov facilitated this element of governmental support with the creation of an historic partnership between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev at the Geneva Accords. Since that time, politicians have come and gone. Administrations have risen and fallen; The Soviet Union has collapsed and other international partners have joined the effort. Governments have swung to the left and back to the right. All the while, scientists in the South of France have remained focused on the work of their project. The countries now involved include China, the European Union, India, Japan, Korea, Russia and the United States. The continuity of funding is always a concern and convincing the politicians that this is good for humanity is never assured but still...they build.

Get this, the time span between Lavrentiev's first presentation of the idea until full operation is expected to be about 100 years. The first engineers to work on the project as young dreamers in the field 30 years ago are now getting ready to retire and one was quoted saying he feels 'like a builder in the middle of a project to build a cathedral...' He wasn't there to see the

foundation stone laid and he accepts the fact that he won't live to see it completed. Yet, he knows that the contributions he makes during the length of his 30-year career will be essential to the success of the effort.

One day last year, the Director General of the project, Bernard Bigot, was walking the site; overseeing the construction progress. At one point, he stopped to chat with a team of blue collar construction workers on the building site and asked them if they knew what they were building. They knew it was some sort of machine but they really had no better understanding than that. He explained to them, in terms they understood, that they were creating the future of energy for Humanity. He told them that this technology was going to save the planet and that their grandchildren would proudly brag that their grandfathers had helped build the first fusion reactor. When he revealed the ultimate goals to these laborers and included them as essential in the collective effort, he gave them a great sense of purpose. The builders expressed extreme gratitude that day for being shown what significance their manual labor had.

Do you remember the story of Choni, the Circlemaker?¹ One day he saw an old man planting a carob tree whose fruit he would never live to enjoy. The old man's explanation – that it was planted for the benefit of his grandchildren – makes me think about the Director General's explanation as a **gift** to the workers. They would never live long enough to see it, but he provided them a priceless spiritual boost when they were made to feel a part of the solution, and not just helplessly a part of the problem. Like carrying the Olympic Torch for a distance, they were a part of something arching beyond themselves.

¹ Talmud, Ta'anit 23b.

It makes me think of one of my favorite moments in our morning services led by b'nai mitzvah. We remove the sefer torah from the ark and I stand the Bar Mitzvah in front of the congregation. I share a few thoughts about passing the Torah into his arms and I point out his parents and grandparents to the left and that their great grandparents and great-greats are all standing in a symbolic line as far as we can imagine. Sometimes, for a touch of drama, I'll indicate that, if even one generation of our ancestors had said, "this isn't valuable enough for us." Then the whole tradition would have been lost forever. The student is the newest link in an unbroken *Sharsheret Hakabbalah* – a chain of transmission. And, I then turn their attention to the right – to the as-yet-unborn generations of our people and I remind the student that they become essential in fulfilling the duty of passing Torah to those who come after them if we Jews have any hope of surviving. Nobody wants to become the one who dropped the proverbial ball.

In emphasizing these points, I have a pedagogic goal in mind. It is for the students (but also everyone else present) to place themselves in the meta-narrative of our people and to show them how, at the very same time, they are precious in their individuality but also at least as precious in their role as a worker bee in a much larger project that transcends any one of us.

The construction team at ITER has been shown that they are essential worker bees in a transcendent project. If they were to walk away, another set of hands would make itself available to complete the tasks that they would have done that day but, in feeling valuable, the construction workers relish the opportunity to contribute their labor. They *want* to be a part of saving the earth from humanity's short-sighted use of fossil fuels.

Consider for a moment all the religious undertones to their effort: The scientific community calls Nuclear Fusion the "*Holy Grail of Energy*". The workers think of themselves

as building a “cathedral” and the documentary about the project is called “Let there be Light”.² There is a purpose to everything they do; it is explicit; it is shared and it is meaningful and therefore it’s inspiring.

It remains one of my goals to try to help Sinai members see how they are a part of a very similar project – the saving of the Jewish People. There are lots of ways our story could come to an abrupt end through assimilation, apathy or anti-religionist efforts. But, and this is important, there are also sundry paths forward in which we succeed in delivering another generation of committed, progressive Jews who understand how precious they are.

When the tabernacle is completed in the wilderness of Sinai, near the end of the Book of Exodus, we are told, “And it came to pass that the tabernacle was ‘one’”³ Commenting on this curious expression, Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (d. 1854) observes:

“In the building of the tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his work was extraordinary. Afterwards, once they saw how their several contributions to the “service” of the tabernacle were integrated – all the boards, the sockets, the curtains and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each one of them had depended on the other. Then they understood how what all they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had

² <https://www.iter.org/newsline/-/2728>

³ Exo. 36:13.

worked on the tabernacle. They had only later merely joined in completing its master building plan, so that “it came to pass that the tabernacle was one” (Exod. 36:13).

The rabbi concludes by teaching,

“Moreover, the one who made the Holy Ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had only made the courtyard tent pegs.”⁴

What better metaphor for a congregation like Temple Sinai. Let’s use the new Chapel project as a foil to understand. We identified a need, developed a plan and then looked for individuals who could lend their support. There are so many who have made this possible: donors, committee members, community support and more. And, all of them understand that they are essential in building a strong future for the families of Temple Sinai.

Each member, then, becomes crucial – not just in their individual talents, gifts and participation – but as a small cog in the timeless machine of Judaism. And this goes way beyond a modest capital project like this summer’s construction. It is the essence of everything we do. The more committed members we have, the more we can accomplish. Our giftshop is run by members, our annual Smokin’ BBQ is run by members. The leadership of the congregation are all members and the school is overseen by members. The participatory roles in these services honor members and are arranged by members. Practically every single function of this congregation of 330 families is made possible by its members. And, here’s the really salient point: each role is valuable and every member, I hope, knows that what they do contributes to an effort bigger than our individual or even our local experience. It is amazing what we do with all this heartfelt participation. We are keeping alive, vibrant and relevant, something that was

⁴ Aharon Greenberg, ed., *Iturei Torah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1976), III.275.

meaningful to your grandparents and their grandparents and *their* grandparents. And, we're working to preserve something that we hope will be meaningful to our grandchildren and their grandchildren and *their* grandchildren.

And, I fear we're failing. Within our membership, we have plenty of diversity when it comes to the ways we relate to our traditions. The Four sons of the Passover Seder are a good comparison. There are those who really get it and who are using and contributing to the congregation at its highest potential – the Wise Child. There are those who are here and don't wish to be bothered with any greater depth of relationship – the Simple Child. There are those who are rather overwhelmed by the nature of a congregation and just show up with they are told to – the Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask, and finally, there are the ones who use the programs of the congregation, get what they think they need and then abandon us for other priorities – dare I say, the Wicked Child?

I lay awake at night perseverating on every call or email we get telling us that a family, particularly a long-time member of the Sinai community, is resigning from the Temple. Each time we lose one, I feel that I've somehow failed to determine and then provide whatever would have made those individuals feel like Judaism was valuable enough. I have failed to show them that, like the man in the story with Choni, a carob tree was planted for them in their own childhood and now, we need them to support today's children in *their* Jewish Growth. I have failed to reverse the thinking: Temple Sinai is not about what you get from us, it is about what we get from you.

If you're listening carefully, you might have caught a bit of hypocrisy between my sermon of today and that of last week's. Last week I delivered the exact opposite message – I encouraged you to be selfish in your growth. Today, I'm saying push away the consumer side of

yourself that asks, “what’s in it for me?” The apparent contradiction reminds me of the story of the rabbi with his students. One asks him a question and he provides an answer. The next week, a different student asks the very same question, but the rabbi provides the diametrically opposite response. The other students all challenge him pointing out the change from one week to the next and the rabbi laughs easily saying, “look how much I’ve grown in just one week!” Last week, I spoke about personal growth and tonight I am telling you to put your selfish needs aside and apply yourself to the shared goal of growth for the Jewish people. The good news is that, in focusing on the latter, you’ll accomplish the former.

If you think about every single one of the organizations you’re a part of, you can see the individuals who’ve really chosen to make it their cause. The Parent-Teacher organization at your child’s school was run by parents who were deeply committed, and you thought to yourself: I’m really glad they’re willing to put in so much for the children. Your neighborhood might have someone who loves block parties and is the one that always plans the end-of-summer bar-b-que that you enjoy so much, and you appreciate that *they* do it for *everyone*. Or the neighbor that you know who volunteers at the soup kitchen with his church and you’re really glad he does so because that really needs to be done by somebody. What do *you* do? What is your cause? Raising your children is not enough – you are more complex than that and besides, if you really want to raise good children, they need to see you making an impact with your resources. This is true whether your children are among the youngest or if your children already have children.

It’s surprisingly easy to live selfishly and to convince ourselves that we’re doing the best we can. There are always sports practices and work deadlines to prevent us from doing what our heart tells us is important. There are always goals that have been put in front of us that, in 40

years will seem misguided. But, I promise you, you will not regret acting altruistically in 40 years.

We are watching this question asked in different ways all around ourselves: to what extent are the structures of our lives collective projects vs. winner take all. To what degree are we a member of something cooperative vs. every soul for herself? There is a cost to choosing the self-serving answer: the cost is that you have to admit to yourself that you do not embrace the teachings that meant so much to your ancestors. Your grandparents and great-great-grandparents studied the texts that said, “care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger in your midst for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” And, “do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.”⁵ Or, “what is hateful to you, do not do to another.”⁶ And they also wrestled with the best way to express those values in a world that can be tough.

Rest assured, as I pull our focus from the individual’s growth back to the Jewish Community’s growth, I will continue that vector tomorrow morning as I tackle my concerns about our growth as a Nation.

Think Big this evening – you don’t have to Build Yourself a Star like the team at ITER in France, but, as we spend a few minutes in reflection, I ask you two questions: what *do* you hope will transcend your own short life remaining available for your great grandchildren and what do you need to do *today* to ensure that it happens?

⁵ Lev. 19:16

⁶ Pirke Avot