

This Week's Shabbat Message from Rabbi Rick Rheins

## **Frightening Issues. Compelling Testimony. Lingering Questions**

Just hours after watching "America's Dad," Bill Cosby, being led in handcuffs to a jail cell, we were captivated by the Senate hearing that focused on charges of sexual violence and misconduct against another American leader. After all the pre-trial jostling and being peppered by talking points from those for and against, the we finally saw and heard from Judge Brett Kavanaugh and Doctor Christine Ford.

As I spoke on Yom Kippur, the crimes of sexual violence are a plague on our society and a source of national shame. The past year has forced us all to wake up to the brutal sexual assaults that far too many have endured for far too long. The pain and suffering of the victims lasts a lifetime. We simply cannot tolerate any action of sexual violence by one person against another. Period. In addition, we can no longer tolerate the kinds of attitudes and leering gestures and comments that cause other people to feel threatened and demeaned.

As we listened to the testimony of Judge Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford, there were some who had already made up their minds as to who was the victim and who the victimizer. Some saw yet another male who was accused of sexual crimes and abuse and were convinced that "yes, he's guilty. He's just another one of 'them.'" Others saw Dr. Ford as a willing conspirator or an unwitting tool of those who simply want to derail the nomination of a potential Supreme Court Justice who represents an ideology that they oppose. Like fans rooting for their respective teams, these predisposed advocates were locked in combat against one another. They knew what they wanted to know before they heard a word of testimony.

For the rest of us, we saw two smart and sincere people giving compelling testimony. I find it absolutely impossible to "root" for one or the other. I'm sad for both. I'm sad for all of us. I have no way of knowing exactly what happened at that high school party 30 plus years ago. I don't even believe that either Judge Kavanaugh or Dr. Ford has a clear recollection and "knowledge" of what exactly happened or didn't happen. They were young, underage drinking teenagers. And that is not a reason for exoneration. That does not excuse anything. It is simply a fact of our lingering questions and doubts.

Which brings us to this special Shabbat *Chol HaMoed Sukkot*, the Shabbat during Sukkot. All this week hundreds of Religious School students, Preschoolers, parents, teachers, staff, and congregants have spent time under our beautiful Temple Sinai Sukkah. In addition to fulfilling the mitzvot from the Torah to "dwell under the Sukkah" and to "lift up the Lulav and Etrog," we also had a spiritual connection with our ancestors. The special ancestral "guests" are called *Ushpizin*. The tradition is for us to imagine that joining us under the Sukkah are our Patriarchs and Matriarchs. And just as the Sukkah represents our traveling home that protected us through the wilderness, so too, we can imagine that with us on our personal journeys are our parents,

grandparents, *bubbes and zaydes*, teachers and mentors going back hundreds of generations. Imagine a world where we conducted ourselves as if the most important people in our lives were standing beside us. Imagine how we would temper our words, control our passions, check our egos and censor our evil impulses if only we believed that the people we cared most about were witnessing our every deed. Some might be repelled by the thought. "How awful it would be to have others spy on you and inhibit your actions." Well, too many have been using the dark and the hidden to get away with vicious crimes and in this 21<sup>st</sup> century a new reality has dawned: There are no more secret places where you can get away with hurting people. We are now empowered to stand up, speak up and shout down those who think they can get away with hurting others. The *Ushpizin*, the special guests, are each and every one of us. We are the witnesses. The Sukkah is an open home. Outsiders can look in. Strangers can enter. There are no secrets here. And that's a good thing.

The Senate hearing that aired the conflicting testimony of Judge Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford has left me numb. At the end, I have no way of unraveling the knot of their experiences. But we all can prevent future knots from forming. We can better teach our children and grandchildren how to treat each and every person they meet with respect, with sensitivity and with kindness. Teach them and role model appropriate behavior. Let us live our lives in a way that expresses that we are all *Ushpizin*.

On Friday night, the service is from 6:00-6:30pm and will feature our Consecration students! Well over a hundred will then gather under our Sukkah for a spaghetti dinner.

On Shabbat morning, the service begins at 9:00am.

The Sh'mini Atzeret-Simchat Torah service is on Sunday, September 30 at 6pm and is followed by dancing with the Torahs!

On Monday morning, October 1, the Sh'mini Atzeret-Simchat Torah service will begin at 10:00am and will include the Yizkor Memorial prayers. A free brunch will follow.

*Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sukkot Sameiach!*

**Rick**

Rabbi Rick Rheins