



Rosh Hashonah 5767 (2006) Sermon

**The Secret of Our Immortality –
Making A Spiritual Pledge**

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Consider these words, written in 1898 by Mark Twain, a non-Jew, believed by some to be anti-semitic:

[T]he Jews constitute but one per cent of the human race. . . Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. . . . The Egyptian, Babylonian, and Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and Roman followed, made a vast noise, and they are gone . . .

*The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting . . . no infirmities of age . . . no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. *What is the secret of his immortality?**

I. VALUING THE ANCIENT

Artifact collectors surely would agree that a 2000 year old piece, in outstanding condition, stronger today than the day it was discovered, deserves the highest appraisal imaginable.

We send our children to the finest schools to learn the classic works of Aristotle, Shakespeare and others, none of which inspired a spiritual community surviving 3 millennia.

We visit the breathtaking California Redwoods, 1200 years old. The Sequoia, which means ‘ever-lasting,’ evokes awe and wonder in anyone who stands beneath it. And only 3 years ago, Temple’s 150th anniversary generated enormous pride and grand celebration.



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And yet, our 3000 year old jewel spectacular in its artistry, bountiful in its wisdom, and breathtaking in its mysterious ability to survive so many lethal challenges, evokes so little interest.

Rather than diving into the priceless wisdom of our tradition, reveling in her artistic brilliance, basking in the moments of mystery, of truth, and of transcendence, we treat our Jewish tradition as if she is too old to be relevant.

Brilliant, gorgeous, filled with all the answers we could ever desire or irrelevant and outdated . . .

II. STORY

We search everywhere for answers, for solutions to life’s challenges. Here’s a story told in every spiritual community. . .

An ambitious youth, who dreams of discovering a priceless, but hidden treasure, receives a secret, never-seen-before map. The map shows directions to 3 destinations and then, to a spectacular, but nearly-impossible-to-find, final location.

With bags packed, our ‘seeker’ sets out, crossing seas, traversing continents. The first landmark gives directions to the second. The second to third. And in the end, this young dreamer, this searcher, arrives at the final destination.

The countless obstacles on this journey, have prepared our seeker to finally discover the longed-for treasure, sought by young and old alike. Having reached the ultimate destination, our youthful soul is ready to receive one of the world’s greatest jewels. What does she find? In a few moments I’ll share the end of this story.

Mark Twain’s question “What is the secret of our immortality?” invites each of us to ask: “Am I tapping into this profound secret? I yearn to be part of something that will live on, long after I’m gone. I crave a slice of eternity. Here in Memphis, can I stand beneath the Sequoias, look heaven-ward, and reach as high as I can



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reach, to touch the mystery above? What is the secret of our immortality?

I have boiled down the complex answer to this question to One word – yes just one word. The word is Israel. The reason we are here, the secret to our immortality, lies in one word – Israel. I’m not just talking about the Israel we find on the National Geographic map. I’m speaking of the Israel we find on the spiritual map. The Israel Jews have dreamed and written about for 1000’s of years.

Think back to our first encounter with Israel: Jacob, grandson to Abraham and Sarah, son to Rebecca and Isaac, twin brother to Esau, and father to our 12 tribes. Years after deceiving his brother Esau and his father Isaac, Jacob gets a new name. He wrestles with a being divine and human. And he acquires the name – Israel.

Israel, the Hebrew word, actually 2 words, Yisra & El, Israel, means, “one who struggles with God.” That’s who we are. We are G-d strugglers. Its written into our name. This, my friends, is the secret of our immortality.

Christianity is about personal salvation. Islam is about submission, that’s what the word Islam means, and Judaism, is about our struggle with God. We are supposed to struggle. It is part of our spiritual DNA. Our immortality grows directly out of our God-struggle.

III. Three Part God- Struggle

Let me clarify the nature of this struggle. It has 3 parts. Ours is a struggle for social justice; for *self*-transformation, and, finally, for our faith.

A. God-Struggle – for Social Justice

From the very beginning of our people, ethical activism, social justice has been essential to who we are. Even before Jacob acquired his name Israel, his grandpa Abraham taught us about God-struggle for the sake of humanity.

God is prepared to destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Innocent and guilty alike are about to perish at God’s bidding. Standing in the Israeli Negev, the beautiful Israeli desert, overlooking the Dead Sea, Abraham says no. Abraham, the



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first Jew, teaches that to be a Jew is to stand up for the innocent. “Could it be that the Sovereign of the Universe would condemn the righteous with the guilty? God forbid that the world be governed by such an arbitrary force.” Abraham cries out to God. Here, Abraham teaches that a *religious* life compels us to fight for social justice. Protecting those whose voices will not be heard is our religious obligation!

Martin Luther King once said that “Our lives begin to end, the day we become silent, about things that matter.” And Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain writes: “A nation cannot worship itself and survive . . . The destiny of nations lies . . . in moral responsibility: the responsibility for sustaining a society that honors the image of God with rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike.”

In Rabbi Wax’ time we carried this torch high. Today at Temple, we do so much wonderful work. Mitzvah Day, Wells Station and countless more. The efforts we make are beautiful and holy.

But, here and beyond, there is so much more to do. As Reform Jews, our ear for the prophetic call has been drowned out by a culture of acquisition that is nearly impossible to silence. We have forgotten that the work of tikkun olam is a religious imperative, as well as the most inspiring and uplifting way to spend our time. There is so much work to do. Whether it’s the environment or hunger, education, health care and so on, our Jewish immortality depends on making the struggle for justice a sacred and constant religious practice.

B. God-Struggle – Self-transformation

As for God-struggle number 2, the wrestling moves inward. We move from healing the world beyond to Healing the world within. This is the struggle for self-transformation.

The rabbis teach that in 70 CE, 2000 years ago, the Romans destroyed our Temple and eliminated our Sovereignty over Israel not because the Roman army was too powerful or because of Roman hatred for Jews. The Temple fell, our sovereignty over Israel ended, because of the way we treated, or rather, mistreated each other, because of baseless hatred between Jews. On this subject the rabbis teach a most



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inspired idea. Our suffering is the result of our own deeds.

The rabbis are not speaking here of individual illness, God forbid, but about societies that suffer. You might not like this notion. But think long and hard before dismissing it. With this wisdom, we are no longer *objects* in someone else’s story, but *subjects* in our own narrative. *We* determine the outcome of our lives. The future of Israel is now in *our* hands.

Like Jacob-Israel 1000’s of years ago, we too are terribly flawed. So often we treat our siblings without the love, compassion and honesty that we want to offer. There’s so much work to do and according to the rabbis, our work begins at home, and it begins now on Rosh Hashanah. Today is the time to reflect on our deeds for this past year and to seek forgiveness from our loved ones. Struggling with our conscience, accounting for our misdeeds and seeking forgiveness, this is the business of our High Holy Days. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our secret depends on the work we call teshuva, repentance.

And it really is a secret. Last year I taught a class at Memphis Theological Seminary. I explained that Jews are ineligible to receive God’s forgiveness unless and until we also seek *human forgiveness*. “You mean you ask your family and others for forgiveness? You don’t just ask God?”

Even though this is an ancient Jewish insight, these seminary colleagues at MTS found this idea totally foreign. This struggle for self-transformation is ingredient no. 2, in the secret of our immortality.

C. God-Struggle 3 -- Faith

And finally, we move to the most fundamental aspect of our God struggle. Of course, this too was Jacob’s struggle. The struggle to become Israel is a struggle of faith. The Jew named Israel does *not* possess clarity and certainty about God. She or he doesn’t have all the answers. Israel is the Jew who actively and regularly wrestles.

So many of us are Jacob, ready to become Israel, ready to knock on the door of immortality, that until now has been sealed shut. For Jews faith is not blind



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acceptance or submissive acquiescence.

Rabbi David Aaron makes a shocking statement in his book *The Eternal Light*. There he writes: “I don’t believe in God. What I believe in, I call God.”

Friends, this is an orthodox rabbi living in the Old City of Jerusalem. This is not an atheist or agnostic. This is a faithful Jew. Rather than being an object of our belief, Rabbi Aaron and many others explain that God is the experience of honesty and openness with a loved one, that we cannot translate into words, that impossible to capture feeling, upon the birth of a child, or upon seeing a sunset over the horizon.

God is in the countless questions we ask about evil, about good, about injustice. After all, our Talmud teaches that even Moses asks God why bad people succeed and good people suffer. And if Moses can ask the question, so can we. It is an authentic, necessary Jewish question. God resides in that question.

I witnessed a beautiful example of Jewish struggle this past June on our Temple trip to Israel. There’s a young man of 65, a Temple member. Many of you know him. Before this summer he had everything. A loving wife, 2 devoted children, 4 grandchildren, and a wonderful business – all the BBQ-ribs one could ever want.

He had everything except one thing. He had never become a Bar Mitzvah. For years he yearned to have a Bar Mitzvah, to study and to learn. Of course sharing his Bar Mitzvah in Jerusalem, with his grand-son Zach, made the experience all the more priceless.

But at 65 years old, to believe that there are prayers to learn, history to reflect on, and even more, there is the priceless opportunity to stand before the Torah, to look into her scroll and to touch her ancient wisdom -- now that’s a sacred struggle.

Speak with Don and you’ll know that his thoughts about God are not all neat and tidy. This is complicated stuff. Its not meant to be neat and tidy. But as Jews we don’t put off our sacred work until after we feel clear. We begin the God-struggle, in order to bring clarity. Real understanding comes only after we have struggled. Simply put, Jewish immortality depends on Jews choosing the path of spiritual wrestling.



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Be clear, however, I’m not suggesting we begin this struggle out of obligation or guilt. I’m suggesting we study Torah because it can bring healing to every aspect of our lives. I say without qualification -- be selfish in your choices. If you do, you’ll choose Jewishly. Because, as Abraham Joshua Heschel says, Judaism is an answer to the ultimate questions of life.

Let me give a few examples of what I mean. More than anything, I need and we all need time, meaningful, sacred time. Here’s a guarantee: Learning Torah and living a richer Jewish life, can guarantee every one of us – more sacred time. Guaranteed! As Rabbi Steve Leder told us last year, You want 7 weeks more vacation every year – its yours. There are at least 49 weeks, 49 shabbeses, waiting to be claimed. Waiting for vacationers.

Example no. 2: I need, we all need, to overcome our devastating culture of consumption. No guarantees here, but a richer Jewish life can help us discover that greater wholeness only means slightly different choices. Choices that cost less and generate more.

And finally, depression, loneliness, loss of purpose . . . who amongst us doesn’t confront these feelings? Deepen your Jewish study, stay at it for a while, And again, ‘guaranteed,’ it will spread light in your life.

Rabbi Greenstein has said many times: the purpose of being Jewish is to become more human. I agree. And of course there are many sacred paths to becoming a wonderful human being. But we do possess one path. And so our goal is not limited, in my opinion, to becoming more human. Our goal is also to become more Jewish.

Remember our traveler, searching for the world’s greatest treasure? She arrives at the final destination. She sits down, opens the treasure chest and reads the note resting inside. Here’s what it says: “Go home. That is where you’ll find the treasure for which you are searching. Go home.”

Discuss the Spiritual Pledge Card



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I want to close with one final thought. For generations our Reform mantra has been. “Deed over Creed!!!” I agree with this mantra. But, I think that our “Deed over Creed” mantra, has become something of a Creed. Oftentimes, we say more than we do.

Here’s what “Deed over Creed” should mean: every day, or at the least, every week, we perform a sacred deed, a mitzvah: the mitzvah of tikkun olam – healing the world, or the mitzvah of creating sacred time, or the mitzvah of nurturing our sense of gratitude, blessing and hope for the future.

Let’s reclaim our mantra and our deeds. Let’s challenge ourselves to take on a new mitzvah! Make a pledge!

L’shana tova -- May 5767 be a sweet and healthy year and may we all be inscribed in the book of life.