

“I Remember You”

Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg’s sermon on the 2nd day of Rosh HaShanah, 5766 / 2005

I remember you.
How we stood at the foot of that mountain,
Covered with soot,
From all the fire and the smoky cloud.

I remember you,
We stood side by side...
Tryin' to hide,
Our eyes and our ears,
From the power of the Shofar blasts so loud.

I remember you,
It's been a while we've gone our separate ways.
You seem so foreign to me,
And I know that you think me strange.
But no matter how we live our life,
It comes a moment...

I Remember You, from the album *Leave a Little Bit Undone*, by Rabbi Joe Black

I have to tell you about the scandal of our congregation! The plaque downstairs indicates that the Star of Israel Congregation was founded on October 10, 1905. But what about on the Hebrew calendar?.....

So here’s the scandal: October 10, 1905, corresponds to the 11th of Tishrei, 5666. And the 11th of Tishrei is the day after Yom Kippur. Let me ask you: Can you think of any reason why anyone would found a synagogue on the day after Yom Kippur?

And now, the plot thickens.... In 1905, there were already two synagogues in Hoboken: Adas Emuno, which was Reform, and Moses Montefiore, which was Orthodox. Moses Montefiore was located at 76 Grand Street - just 3 blocks from here. Well, when the Star of Israel Congregation was founded in 1905, what was its original location, before this building was constructed? - 111 Grand Street. Less than a block away from the already existing Moses Montefiore Synagogue. So can you think of any reason why anyone would found a synagogue on the day after Yom Kippur, and open less than a block away from an already existing synagogue?

Ladies and gentlemen: let’s face it. Whereas we have no proof, and we have no information, it seems likely that this congregation was founded as a ‘break-away.’ Probably something happened during the High Holidays of 1905 at the Moses Montefiore Synagogue - we can only dream what it could have been! - but whatever it was, it prompted a group of people to say, “That does it. We’re leaving!” And thus was born - the Star of Israel Congregation!

That’s conjecture. But what I’m about to tell you is certain, and well-documented: In the 1920’s, there was a split **within** the Star of Israel Congregation, over religious and ideological issues. The left-wing faction broke away, and formed the Hoboken Jewish Center, which affiliated with the Conservative Movement, and bought a building at 830 Hudson Street, while the right-wing faction remained Orthodox in practice, and retained the Star of Israel name, and stayed right here. Then, in the mid-1940’s, the Star of Israel Congregation and the Hoboken Jewish Center, both having dwindled in population, merged together again, forming the United Synagogue of Hoboken.

You know that joke about the Jewish guy who was shipwrecked on a desert island and built two synagogues - the one he prayed in, and the one he wouldn’t set foot in to save his life!? Our synagogue is the living expression of that joke! At least once, probably twice in our history, the community split, and people formed a new synagogue! What a shameful history! Schisms! Factions! Disagreement! Didn’t the founders of our congregation read the High Holiday Machzor? Did they not notice the part of the Amidah where we say, *ve-yei’asu kulam agudah achat la’asot retzoncha be-levav shalem*? Let all people form ONE community, ONE association, ONE bundle, to do Your will whole-heartedly?! What a scandal! (The tongue-in-cheek portion of this sermon ends now.)

If you know something about Jewish history, you know that it is not such a scandal. This is not just about Hoboken. We Jews have been breaking away from each other ever since Abraham, our forefather, made the decision to secede from his father's idol-worshipping temple and to worship the One God, creator of heaven and earth. Jewish tradition has never been a monolith. Whatever that line means from the High Holiday Amidah - "let all form one bundle together" - it doesn't mean that we ought to abandon our differences. It doesn't mean that we need to stifle our disagreements. I'm fond of quoting my teacher, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, who has written that Jewish tradition tolerated far more dissent and disagreement than any other culture in the entire ancient world; in fact, more than any other society in WORLD HISTORY, until the advent of the United States. So we have the track record. We need not be scared of disagreement, so long as it is undertaken with respect, and with humility.

And THERE lies the challenge.

I began this sermon by singing a song by a Reform rabbi, Joe Black, that is based on a passage from the book of Exodus, chapter 19, that describes the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. "I remember you" - in fact, we all remember each other. We all shared a moment together. Some might say it was a moment in history. Others might say it was a mythic moment. But no matter - it was a moment. We can almost still hear the sound of the Shofar blasts. We can almost still see the smoke descending on the mountain. We can remember the fear that gripped us at the realization that God was about to communicate to us. What God actually SAID - we unfortunately have no consensus on that. We can't remember. Or we each remember it differently. We were all so terrified, covering our eyes and our ears, it's not surprising that we each got only a part of the message. But from that moment on, we have all shared a bond. Even though sometimes we may seem strange to each other - "When we look into each others' eyes, we remember how we stood together at the foot of that mountain so long ago.".....

One of the wisest ways to think about pluralism and difference that I have heard comes from the Lutheran Christian theologian, Krister Stendahl, the former president of Harvard Divinity School. He writes that dialogue between different religious groups has a pre-requisite, which he calls "sacred envy," or "holy envy." He means that for two groups to be able to engage in meaningful dialogue and cooperation, they each have to admit that they have some "sacred envy" for each other. They each have to admit that there is something in the other group that they admire, even something that they wish their own group had. If you can achieve this - if you have enough humility to admit that there's a way that another religious group achieves transcendent contact with the Divine - then you can truly cooperate with other groups. But if you have no "sacred envy" for another group, meaning you feel you really have nothing to learn from them, because they are simply wrong, and you are simply right, then partnership and dialogue are impossible. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg made much the same point when he said, "It really doesn't matter what movement you're part of - as long as you're a little ashamed of it."

'Sacred envy' is, in fact, my standard for what other Jewish groups I can engage in dialogue with. I am simply **overflowing** with 'sacred envy' for the other Jewish denominations. And if THEY can admit that they have sacred envy for ME - then we can talk. If they CAN'T, though, we can still be friends, but friends from a distance.

Let me tell you what I'm insanely jealous of - sacredly jealous of - in Reform Judaism. To the prophets of old, what God most wants from human beings is the pursuit of justice. There is no American Jewish movement that has pursued justice more, or better, than the Reform Movement.

Just look, for example, at the greatest ethical challenge to face the United States in the 20th century - the Civil Rights Movement. You can count the number of Orthodox rabbis who spoke out about the civil rights movement during the 1950's or 1960's on one hand. The Conservative movement - did a little better. Abraham Joshua Heschel, and a few dozen others. And then you see the dozens and dozens of Reform rabbis, huge numbers of Reform teenagers and young adults, who were freedom riders, who were activists, who traveled to the South, who risked their lives, in an effort to make 'a more perfect union.' Do you know where the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was drafted? In the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, in Washington, DC. Because the religious group most closely associated with the struggle for civil rights for all Americans at that time was Judaism, specifically Reform Judaism. And yes - I am envious. In, hopefully, a very sacred kind of way, as imitation is the sincerest form of 'sacred envy.' You can look at the Reform movement's response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Each of the movements has done a very valiant job of providing assistance, but it's the Reform Movement that has had the contacts on the ground to provide the most effective relief response. And that surprised no one.

You know, it feels good to get that off my chest. So let me tell you about my sacred envy for Orthodoxy. My aunt and uncle belong to a small Orthodox synagogue in Connecticut. It's less than half the size of this synagogue. On the High Holidays, they probably have about 150 people coming to services. You know how many people they have coming on an average Shabbat morning? About 150. The SAME 150. You know how many of them keep kosher? Maybe 140.

You know how many of them are conversant in Hebrew, who can study Torah in Hebrew, who can tell you in an instant who Moses Maimonides was, what books he wrote, and who probably have a set of his *Mishneh Torah* on the bookshelf at home? Probably about 130.

By and large, they are people who live their entire lives according to a substantially Jewish rhythm. They are thirsty to learn and study more, and to seek out the very best Jewish educational opportunities for their children. It is no surprise that very large percentages of the kids growing up in their community grow up with Judaism as an absolutely indispensable part of their identity. It's not even a QUESTION. Of COURSE they will pass that identity on to their children. In their community, living an actively engaged and knowledgeable Jewish life is normative. And - truth be told - when I visit my aunt and uncle, I have some envy, because I wish the Conservative Movement could generate that kind of knowledge and commitment.

Let me assure you that my sacred envy for Orthodoxy and for Reform is not enough for me to stop being a Conservative Jew, or a Conservative rabbi. I know I am exactly where I belong. And I know that just as I have articulated my sacred envy for my Orthodox and Reform brothers and sisters, I know many of them could articulate sacred envy for where **I** stand.

A friend who is a Reform rabbi has told me of his frustration that many Reform Jews see their Reform affiliation as an excuse to do very little to affirm their Jewish identity. Their motto could be: "We don't have to - we're reform." He has a very real fear that many of his congregants are simply not doing enough to pass a meaningful Jewish identity on to the next generation. He admires how Conservative congregations tend to have a core group who make serious commitments to observing Shabbat - to keeping kosher - to learning Hebrew - to celebrating Jewish holidays, including the less prominent ones - and to engaging in Jewish study on a serious level. (This is, of course, also true of many Reform congregations, but my friend sees much to admire about the level of knowledge and commitment that he sees at the core of Conservative communities.)

And I have a friend who is an Orthodox rabbi. He is growing tired of being part of a world where everyone's looking over their right shoulder, trying to placate the people who are a notch more right-wing than they are. How nice it would be, he says, to be part of a world where no one's banning books that express "heretical" ideas, where the outside world, and secular ideas and secular education, are not automatically perceived as a threat, and where individuals are afforded more latitude to make autonomous decisions, in a non-judgmental atmosphere. I know of other Jewish men and women who affiliate with Orthodox congregations because they want to be part of a serious observant Jewish community, but they are DEEPLY envious - sacredly envious - of how, in most of the Conservative movement today, equality of opportunity for men and women, in every sphere of life, is simply an assumption, and the Torah, and the texts of Jewish tradition, are truly presented as the birthright of every Jew, not just the birthright of male Jews.

I am a passionate advocate for Conservative Judaism. And ESPECIALLY in Israel, where a religious establishment and a secular intelligentsia collaborate to make Jewish religion seem monumentally unappealing to the vast majority of Israelis. Israel desperately needs a 'middle way,' a centrist path, and the Conservative Movement can provide it.

But ultimately, no matter how much I am an advocate for the Conservative Movement, it's clear to me that Judaism ought to be characterized by a multiplicity of voices. You all know that choral music is dear to my heart. It only works when you take a number of different-sounding voices, and assign them a number of different vocal parts to sing. We could say that, at its best, the beauty of choral music is created through structured diversity -- as is the beauty of the Torah and of Jewish tradition.