

Rosh Hashanah - 5767
Sermons (Day 1 & Day 2)

By: Rabbi Mark Mallach
Temple Beth Ahm · Springfield, NJ

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Day 1 Sermon

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L'Shana tova. Earlier this morning we read the Torah portion for this 2nd day of RH; it is the story called the Akeddah – the binding and near sacrifice of Yitzchak by his father, Avraham. It is a powerful story – a father ready to sacrifice what is dearest to him to prove his faith and to assure his future, the very future of the Jewish people!

Yet, I wonder what does this story have to do with RH? RH celebrates the birthday of the world, RH calls upon us to do Teshuvah – repentance, RH brings us together as families – what does RH have to do with a father ready to sacrifice his son to assure his future?

Could it be that we are still called upon to do the same, offer our children as sacrifices to protect our futures?

I want to share some words written by David Grossman, one of Israel's most prominent novelists and journalists. It is from the eulogy that he delivered for his son, Uri, who fell just a little over a year ago during the War in Lebanon against Hezbollah. His father wrote the following: "At twenty to three on Saturday night, they rang at our door. Over the intercom, they announced that they were the city officials...every thought that entered our minds began with a "no." ... No, there will be no more of that boy with the ironic grin and the crazy sense of humor. No more of that young man with wisdom beyond his years. No more warm smile...No more of the infinite gentleness of Uri ... No more strong hugs...No more. No more Uri.

Uri, my love, throughout all of your short life, we all learned from you... As your family, we will retreat into our pain, surrounded by our good friends, enveloped in the strong love that we feel from so many people... I only wish that we Israelis could give this amount of love and solidarity also in better times. This is, perhaps, our only common national aspiration...If only we could extricate ourselves from the violence and the enmity that has permeated our way of life."

David Grossman concludes: "On Saturday night, at twenty to three at night, they rang at our door. Over the intercom, they announced that they were the city officials, and I went to open the door, and I thought – that's it. Our lives are over. But five hours later, when Michal and I went into Ruti's room and woke her in order to break the news to her, Ruti, after the first cry, said, "But we will still go on living, right? ...And we hugged her and told her that yes, we'd still go on living... Uri our love, it was a great merit for us to live with you. Thank you for every moment that you were ours. Love – Abba, Ima, Yonatan, and Ruti."

In the interim, since Uri's death in battle, we know that Syria & Iran have re-armed the Hezbollah militia. We know that Hezbollah has become more entrenched in Lebanese politics. We know that the president of Iran has hosted a Holocaust Revisionist convention and continues to publicly call for the destruction of Israel. We also know that Iran will likely soon be capable of launching a nuclear attack. Thus, it would seem that Uri and his fellow comrades in arms and the Israeli civilians who were killed during the War in Lebanon may have died in vain; Israel is no more secure from the threat of Hezbollah and her bloodthirsty enemies now as she was then. One would think that all of this would leave Uri's father dismayed, disillusioned and depressed about the future.

Now I want to share with you is an amazing recent article from David Grossman. It is an open letter to the Prime Minister of Israel in which he states:

"Turn to the Palestinians, Mr. Olmert. Address them over the heads of Hamas. Speak to their deep grief and wounds, acknowledge their suffering...Just once, look at them, not through the sights of a gun and not from behind a closed roadblock. If you do, you will ...see an oppressed people, bereft of hope.

Certainly the Palestinians are to blame for the impasse. Certainly they played their part in the failure of the peace process. But take a look at them from a different perspective. See not only

the radicals in their midst. Take a look at the majority of this miserable people, whose fate is entangled with our own, whether we like it or not.

Go to the Palestinians, Mr. Olmert. Do not keep searching for reasons not to go. Talk to them! Make them an offer that their moderates can accept. Make them an offer that will force them to choose between accepting it or remaining hostages to fanatical Islam...What have you got to lose... For the sake of the soldiers who will have to fight the next war, is this not worth trying?"

Yes, it seems we still take our youth, our pride and our joy and our hope for the future and bind them like Avraham Avinu bound Yitzchak on the altars of our futures. How can any parent do so? How can any God demand such fidelity? How can any government choose to go to war, instead of pursuing options for peace?

I recently met with some of those potential Israeli soldiers who will have to fight, God forbid, the next war. In January, after the conclusion of our congregational trip to Israel, Genya & I extended our stay for a few extra days. During this time I was invited to speak to our nephew's High School class.

This past June, Shlomi, graduated from his high school in Haifa. By now, most of his classmates have already been inducted into ZAHAL – the Israeli military.

When I met with his senior class, I wanted to hear from them about their hopes and aspirations and their worries and fears as they face this significant transition in their young lives. Keep in mind these are students who experienced the barrage of missiles launched by Hezbollah during the War in Lebanon. And, this was a senior class for whom there was one student missing from graduation, a classmate who 3 years ago was murdered by a suicide bomber at the Haifa main bus station.

At first, the students were hesitant to open up. I began to talk about the recent war and mentioned how in the states we spent many hours glued to the news coverage, and how we

worried so much for our homeland. One young man quickly jumped on my use of the 3rd person plural and questioned how could we, not living in Israel, be so worried. My response: Ahnu Ahm Aḥad – We are one people.

Quickly they opened up and began to express their thoughts about the war and their pending military service. A repeated theme was the strong desire by most to be in a combat unit, and, as one student stated, “not to kill, but to defend our country.” In addition, they all shared a common concern, how their parents will worry about them everyday. They even posed to me a tough question, if I lived in Israel, how would I feel about my children going to the army?

This really put things in perspective. This past June, our Temple's High School seniors graduated. For most them, their concern at this time of year is whether or not should they drop or add a class! For Shlomi's classmates, their concerns, as they go through basic training, are: will the quiet from terrorist attacks hold? Or, when will they be called upon to face the horrors of combat?

Bring this home for a moment. The talk of reviving the military draft in the USA is a hot political issue. Will we, too, like Avraham Avinu, be called upon to bind our sons and daughters on the altar of protecting our shores from terrorism? Will we know the anguish of Israeli parents facing a modern day Akeddah in an attempt to assure a future for the State of Israel? When will their children know peace in the Middle East? When will all of us know such peace?

Yes, indeed, what will become of our homeland in this year of 5768? It is a significant year for the history of Israel because 5768 is Israel's 60th Birthday. If you were alive in 1948 when the Modern State of Israel was founded, would you have bet that she would be now celebrating 60 years of existence? Could you have imagined all of her achievements? Would you have thought that disparate communities from the ashes of Europe, and later Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia and the FSU would find new homes, new beginnings in a new Israel?

You should know that there are plans being made to celebrate here in America Israel's 60th Birthday. MetroWest is preparing programs and packets to help area congregations celebrate. Our member, Debbie Shai is looking for volunteers to help her coordinate our Temple's plans.

You should also know that there is a very meaningful way to celebrate this milestone, a way that will be most appreciated by our Israeli brothers and sisters. I suggest you do the following: Go to her, go to Israel and wish her and her people happy birthday in person. One such opportunity to do so will be our next Temple trip to Israel this coming August. Think about joining us, I promise you a lifetime of experiences.

Yes, in this year of 5768, may Rosh HaShanah bring to us, to Israel, to Ahm Yisrael, the Jewish people all over the world, a peaceful 60th birthday and a lasting peace.

[conclude with Ohseh Shalom]

ALUASA

Rosh Hashanah - 5767

Day 2 Sermon

By: Rabbi Mark Mallach

Shana Tova, welcome to 5768.

I want to share an email from a congregant to his rabbi:¹ Dear Rabbi, Why does the Jewish religion seem to obsess over insignificant details? How much matza do we have to eat? Which spoon do I use for milk and which for meat? It seems to me that this misses the bigger picture by focusing on minutiae. Is this nitpicking what we Jews are all about? I actually already sent you this question over a week ago and didn't receive a reply. Could it be that you have finally been asked a question that you can't answer?!" The rabbi responded in the following manner:

"I never claimed to have all the answers. But I did answer your question. The fact that you didn't receive it, is the answer to your question. I sent you a reply, but I wrote your email address leaving out the "dot" before the "com". I figured that you would still receive the email, it was only one little dot missing. Why be so nitpicky as to differentiate between "yahoom" and "yahoo.com"? It's ridiculous that you didn't get my email because of a missing dot!

No, it's not ridiculous. Because the dot is not just a dot. It represents something. With the dot, the message gets to the right destination; without it, the message is lost to oblivion.

For us as Jews, we have another term for those "dots," MITZVOT – the commandments; our method of sending a spiritual message to God. The Mitzvot have been the means to sustain us a unique people, they have been our lifeline to God.

The date was October 24th, 1917, the place, St. Petersburg, Russia, and Vladimir, formerly known as Velvel, a bureaucrat in the Russian Provisional Government, was rushing to get to his office. He cuts through a side-street where he sees a man standing in a doorway, wearing talit & tefillin and calling out to

¹ From Irv Hammer
09/18/07: Rabbi Mark Mallach

everyone who passed: “A tzainter, a tzainter, we need a tzainter;” meaning a tenth Jew was needed to complete the morning minyan.

Vladimir tried to pass on the far side of the narrow street, but a hand grabbed his arm and a voice said, “Bistoo a Yid? – Are you a Jew?” Without waiting for a response, the man pulled him into the shul, all the while Vladimir is protesting, I’ll be late for work, this is not for me, find someone else, let me go! The man quickly said, “Shaa, it will only take 10 minutes, you’ll just be a few minutes late.

Over an hour later, Vladimir arrives to the White Palace, the Russian Provisional Government’s headquarters; chaos permeated the area, the October Revolution had begun. The Bolsheviks had already captured the White Palace, and all those who had made it to work on time that morning were now dead.

Did the mitzvah of becoming the tzainter – the tenth for the minyan, literally save Vladimir’s life? Maybe? Maybe not? But it certainly changed his spiritual life; from that day on, Vladimir only answered to the name of Velvel.

One mitzvah — 1 piece of minutia – 1 dot; so what? Well, in our day and age, we face a problem, a growing problem. We are no longer willing to connect to the dots. We are no longer willing to feel obligated to fulfill the Mitzvot, the very concept of being *mitzaveh* -- commanded, is becoming meaningless in our lifetime.

Dr. Arnold Eisen, the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary...has identified this diminished sense of connectedness to the mitzvot as being the primary challenge to our Movement today.

At our recent Rabbinical Assembly convention, Dr. Eisen threw down the gauntlet and challenged us to speak on the High Holidays on the concept of Mitzvah. The Chancellor stressed to us that “changed circumstances require changes ...in the movement’s strategies. He urged us to build “tight communities” in which meaningful Jewish practice is part of the broader rhythms of life.

Instead of preaching about what everyone is obliged to do; a religion that speaks only in the sanctuary might as well say nothing, we need to create the strong bonds of community that make obligation to one another and to God much more appealing to a contemporary person."² Far from being just a "faith" or a "religion," Judaism offers a way of living life that brings a sacred perspective to bear on all human activities.

Seen in this light, how we provide for each other is indeed a Jewish matter. That we are, each of us, made in God's image – B`tzelim Elohim, and that all people are deserving of God's love and of ours as well. And, it is a two-way street, God also wants our love. How do we show our love to God? What does it truly mean to love someone?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a Reform Rabbi from Massachusetts, reflecting back when his wife Karen was pregnant with their second child, explains what it means to love: As pregnant women sometimes do, Karen woke him up in the middle of the night with a craving for a Hershey's chocolate bar. As Rabbi Kushner tells the story, "Karen had been schlepping this baby around in her belly, and I was getting off easy, so I figured it was the least I could do. So, I put my on Levi's and a sweatshirt, and ran out to the car to find it covered by snow.

I cleaned it off, started the car, and then had this horrifying realization—I had no idea where I was going to find a store open in the middle of the night. So, I drove up Route 20 and remembered the Holiday Inn had a candy machine.

I can still picture the night clerk watching me run in, pump quarters into the candy machine, grab a handful of candy bars, run back to the car, and drive off into the blizzard.

² By Ben Harris Published: 05/01/2007
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I got home and gave my wife the candy bars. As I lay back down in bed, the realization of what I had done dawned upon me. I, Lawrence Kushner, who normally has a very well-developed ego, did not have an ego that night. Instead, I was a servant of Karen ego. I did not stay in a warm bed. I drove around looking for candy bars. And, here's the crazy part. Doing what the love of my life wanted me to, made me happier than doing what I wanted. It was more fulfilling. It was transforming. By letting go of myself and serving someone whom I love, I reached a state of humility and an otherwise unattainable fulfillment."

In Hebrew, such *service* is called Avodat Ha-Shem – serving the Lord by observing the mitzvot out of love. Thus, a religious Jew is called "observant." Perhaps we need to open our eyes, to observe the way in which we can take better care of each other. When we look out for those whom we love, then our observance is something beautiful to behold.

Yes, indeed, it is correct to say that for most of us, we no longer feel a sense of obligation to fulfill the Mitzvot because an Authority commands us to do so. Yet, I sense that there is a hunger amongst you for a sense of a greater connectedness to the community. And, the chancellor is right; we need to build communities that lead to loving bonds between one another, which will also strengthen the bond between God and us.

If I ask you to dig deep down into your souls and decide which Mitzvot you personally hold as a value to keep, what would they be? And, next, take the Mitzvot that you hold dear, whatever they might be, and then think of how you can bring them alive through your children, through your grandchildren, how you can transfer these values and their importance to the ones that you love. What is it that you want to teach the next generation of Jews that will assure future generations?

Indeed, what are we teaching our children? Are we teaching a brand of Judaism that will assure a strong positive Jewish identity? Or, are we teaching a brand of Judaism that has become so watered down and diluted that it leaves the future of our very existence in doubt?

This is a vital question that stands before us as a community. It is also a contentious issue because every society, every community is supported by a set of rules and standards: Mitzvot. Yes, rules; they shape and define our lives. If we want to part of such a society, then we buy into and accept its rules. I'm sure you can think of many examples. Anyone here a golfer? No one would dare violate golf course rules, if you did, you would never be allowed to play that course again.

When I was in HS, I played for my school's football team; I was a 2-way starter. One year, Yom Kippur fell on Thursday. In order to make it on time for Kol Nidrei, I had to miss Wednesday's practice. My football coach had a cardinal rule, *if you do not practice – Thou shall not play*. And, since my coach didn't believe me about it being Yom Kippur, I was the only Jew on the team, my father had to come to school to pick me up right in front of the coach and the entire team! In that Friday's game, I sat out the whole game. Those were the team rules and I had agreed to play by them, but without compromising my faith and beliefs. Most important, my parents made sure that I knew that family and Jewish tradition was paramount, no matter how important Friday's game was. Such are the rules of life.

The folk saying, "it takes a village to raise a child," resonates with truth and a challenge. The challenge is to create the village, to create the community within to raise that child. We need to decide if that community is to be one that will remain committed to doing the work that will build such a village. Will it be a community that chooses the harder path, strewn with rules, but filled with the promise of forming tighter, everlasting bonds?

Yes, indeed, what are we teaching our children? Again, I ask you, are there mitzvot that are important to you? So important that you have made them part of your life, part of the very fabric of what defines you as a person?

Not long ago, a woman came to see me, and from her accent I knew that she was from the FSU. With tears in her eyes she told me that her mother had died just a week ago. Through her sobs she told me that as she stood at the graveside and the rabbi asked the mourners to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, she could not do so, not a word, it was all so distant, so foreign to the way she was raised, without knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish tradition. Now, she just had this feeling that she was supposed to say the Mourner's Kaddish. She asked me, could I help her learn it? Something, some little spark, what we call the *pinle a Yid*, was kept aglow in her soul and now she has taken on the mitzvah of saying Mourner's Kaddish, daily, for her mother. I don't think her daily recitation of the MOURNER'S KADDISH is out of a sense of obligation to the commandments, she does not feel commanded. Yet, the love and respect for her mother's memory, and the search for her own Jewish identity, motivates her to say a prayer whose words until recently had no meaning in her life.

The crux of the Chancellor's challenge to me as your rabbi is not to stand here and tell you that you must observe X, Y & Z. "No-one can command you what to observe in your personal Jewish life."³ But rather, my role is to encourage you to work with me to create a community that will bind us together as a tighter, more cohesive, more caring, more supportive community.

It is now Rosh HaShanah, the head of the year and a new beginning. We need Rosh HaShanah to lead us also to a new beginning of whom we are as a community. In order to do so, we must begin to assess our priorities and take on at least one mitzvah that will serve as the cornerstone to building our

³ *ibid*
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village, one mitzvah that will assure that we can build a tighter community. And, that one Mitzvah is found in the first paragraph of the Shema: *V'sheenantam l'vahnehcha –teach them to your children.*”

We all have to be educators, if we have children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren or even if we don't, we can still be role models, we can still teach those around us. To be a community, we need to be a community of teachers. Whatever mitzvot you find important to you, whatever mitzvot you currently observe, I now ask you to focus on this one - *V'sheenantam l'vahnehcha* – the rest will flow from it. And, to inspire you to do so and to inspire others, I have this year's Shana Tova gift for you; it will be available by the exits from the sanctuary.

This Rosh HaShanah, 5768, may God give us all the strength to be teachers. The button reads as follows: *V'sheenantam l'vahnehcha* - “Teach Them To Your Children” (Deut. 6:7) I'M A TEACHER, ARE YOU?

ALUASA.