

### **13<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Shabbat – 4/1/17**

*(Draft written by Rabbi Michael Schwab for speaking purposes only and recreated as a sermon after the fact from my original speaking notes)*

Shabbat Shalom. There are many reasons to cherish our Jewish tradition and to engage in its practices, customs and rituals. One important one, to me, is the desire to do God's will -- to fulfill the purpose of our creation. Put in more secular terms, this could be our desire to lead lives of purpose, to make the world a better place and to self-actualize -- fulfilling our greatest potential. Judaism, through its system of *mitzvot* (commandments) and through its many customs and practices, tries to bring this ultimate goal from a poetic concept to a lived principle.

In embracing Jewish tradition, therefore, one should, as a result, become more conscious of ethics and morals, become a better citizen of the world and live with an elevated sense of the spiritual, of God and of greater purpose. And in addition these ethics, principles and values are not only formed in consonance with the fad of the contemporary wisdom of the day. Nor are they formulated solely out of our own individual experiences, both of which are extremely limited in the face of human history. Rather Judaism's value system and pattern of practice have been developed over millennia, tested by time and millions of intelligent Jews and non-Jews, living in different contexts, bringing the wisdom of the ages to bear on our sacred tradition. Participating in Judaism, therefore links us to our past, to our families, and to each other, in a sophisticated and unique way that is powerful and

special. Just as brain functioning is often evaluated by the volume and quality of connections that can be made, so too our Judaism can be appreciated by how it connects us simultaneously to wisdom, culture, spirituality and each other in ways that are hard, if not impossible, to replace.

In many ways, this is the Judaism I learned over the years, this is the Judaism I practice and embrace. And this is the Judaism that I choose to teach and to help provide to others. And therefore today, a day which the congregation kindly chose to celebrate my thirteenth year is this wonderful congregation, with the Shabbat community in specific, I thought I might share a few personal stories about how my relationship with Judaism has formed and draw out some important lessons that I learned from these pivotal moments in my life. (Some of you may know some of the stories, so for those who may have heard any of them, I beg your indulgence).

The way it started for me, and the way it starts for many others, is through family. As many of you know my mother is the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. My father is the product of what might be called a mostly non-observant Conservative home, though his parents were very careful about making sure each of the four siblings attended Hebrew school, religiously, which included junior congregation on Shabbat. Therefore my dad grew up with Hebrew and Jewish prayer skills, though he never really kept kosher, followed the laws of Shabbat and

the holidays in a traditional way, or generally paid much attention to *halakha* qua *halakha*. They met at Camp Herzl, the one where Bob Dylan went ☺, on staff. My mom had been looking for a kosher camp that was away from home and a little different from the world she was a part of at the time, and my dad, a Wisconsin native, had found a job there as the business manager. (BTW, Erica and I met in USY and our relationship blossomed at Ramah in the Poconos – both plugs for Jewish camping ☺). When my parents got married, as many couples do, they had an idiosyncratic relationship with Judaism. The home was totally kosher – my mother wouldn't have it any other way. All the holidays would be celebrated and Shabbat dinner was a must. We would belong to an Orthodox synagogue. My father though was permitted to observe in his own way. He used electricity on Shabbat and holidays and drove in the car (admittedly though mostly to shul). Outside of the home, I am not sure how strict he was about kashrut when alone, and certainly we were permitted hot dairy as kids. We were also permitted to watch Saturday morning cartoons as this was a staple upon which my father was raised.

Yet that all changed when I was five or six (I think), before my youngest brother was born and before my middle brother even remembers. Ian and I were watching cartoons after waking up and my father came down stairs, said that he wanted to play with us in the backyard and gently turned off the television. And

while I am sure there were moments of questioning in some of the successive Shabbatot – from my narrative memory’s point of view, that was that, - we became Shomer Shabbat from that moment on. My father had seen the beauty of an observant life, had decided on the value of consistency in the home in regard to religious observance and thus became a full partner in shaping the observant Jewish environment in which I grew up.

Interestingly enough, with my dad now an equal partner in the Judaism of our family, our affiliations changed to a degree. No longer were we primary members of the orthodox shul, the compromise settled on a traditional conservative shul, not unlike this one. Though, the Beth El I grew up in was not egalitarian. I was enrolled in Solomon Schechter Day School, which in my area was called Kellman Academy, and as soon I was able I was going to Camp Ramah in the Poconos and attending Kadima and later USY events. I became a poster child for Conservative Judaism.

These institutions plus the beauty and power of Shabbat that my parents gifted to me, I believe, are most responsible for my deep attachment to Judaism – they bore out the wisdom that more than the Jews kept Shabbat, Shabbat kept the Jews. My dad was a City Manager and felt it was important to live in the community he served, so we walked three miles to shul each Shabbat, as long as the weather, or our wake-up time, permitted. And when we didn’t go to shul we

had what we called “Schwab Services”. That meant davening at 10:30 am in the living room in pajamas, led by my father. I learned how to daven Shacharit and Musaf from my father in this way. And we always studied the parsha with his trusty Chumash with Rashi, the blue bound linear translation version if anyone knows it. Our home was a mecca (*lehvdil* 😊) for me and my brothers’ friends on Shabbat. Whether it was when we returned from shul or whether it was after Schwab services (to which any and all were invited) there was always a big causal lunch and an afternoon of games. If it was nice, it was Schwab football or basketball, if it was not, we played was Risk, Monopoly, Life, held a Stratego tournament or played some more advanced games, like Axis and Allies or Fortress America. My dad also kept all of his old childhood games so I am one of the few of my generation who knows how to play Sink the Bismarck and Africa Corps. Each Friday night we would have a wonderful dinner, sometimes just our nuclear family, sometimes with friends, and then after dinner, at least in the early days, my dad would play a game with us. Later, he and my mom would go to sleep and my brothers and I would stay up as late as we wanted playing and talking – there was no bed time on Shabbat. I attribute that sacred time, post dinner on Friday nights, as one of the main reasons we grew up so close and are so close to this day.

Perhaps I have whitewashed my memory, or perhaps it was because the power of screens was not as strong back then, but I have few memories of ever

resenting our Shabbat observances. I recall some times when certain friends did things with each other (like go to a football game or go bowling) on a Saturday when I could not go and definitely some Spring Shabbatot that I was counting down the time when Shabbat was over so I could either watch a movie or go out with friends. However I truly loved Shabbat – it was a time of family, love, comfort and friends – a time of significance but without any pressure. And it was a time I knew that I never had an outside obligation or homework. It was a safe and precious day.

Things changed a bit in the summer between eighth and ninth grade. Oblivious to the costs of Jewish education, I had always assumed I would go from Schechter to our community Jewish High School located across the bridge in a Philadelphia suburb. It was called Akiba. I knew it was a long commute on the bus each day but I hadn't even considered the idea of going to public school. At visitor's day at Ramah that summer, my parents asked me to take a walk, in a gentle voice my dad treated me like an adult and explained that we could not afford Jewish High School unless neither me nor my brothers went to Ramah, we changed our already pretty modest lifestyle and took out some hefty loans. My mom cried. I was numb. I lived in a small Christian town, not unlike Winnetka, though not as upscale. It was two square miles and there were almost no Jews in this small Protestant town. Over my time at Schechter I had mostly lost touch with

any of my neighborhood friends and so knew practically no one at the public school. I admit I was really nervous. I did, however, put on a brave face, told them I understood and it would be fine and proceeded to enjoy the rest of my summer.

Turned out I was right, in fact. It was fine. Though impossible to predict, and though different in many ways for my brothers, for me the irony was that being in a school with almost no Jews (as opposed to a **public** school with **lots** of Jews, many of whom have tenuous relationships to Judaism) was that I became even more associated with my Jewish identity than I had been. I was the resident Jew in my school community and it was clear I was different.

My favorite story to tell about that takes place freshman year in the back of a study hall. This one I know I have told some of you. Coming from Solomon Schechter and knowing no one, I was delighted to find myself in the back of the study hall hanging out with the captain of the freshman basketball team, Gerrit Kemps, and some of my new teammates. I had made the team and this symbolized to me that I had been accepted into the group. To my further delight, Gerrit said to me, “Hey Schwab, you should hang out with us some time?” I said, “Sure”. He said, “how about Friday night”. (Inward groan). I said, “I can’t really do it because it is our Sabbath and the family has a big dinner together”. He said, “No problem” (Great!). “We will just call you later and tell you where we are” (another inward groan). “Sorry Gerrit”, I said, “but on our Sabbath we don’t answer the

phone”. “Fine,” he said, “so just call us”. (Oy! ☺) “I am sorry, I know its weird but I can’t – we don’t use the phone at all”. “Schwab”, he said, “then just pick a time, we will tell you where we will be and you can meet us”. “Thanks” I replied sheepishly, “but I also don’t use a car on the Sabbath so I can’t meet you out”. At this point he simply looked at me and said, “Schwab, are you Amish?!” ☺ . . .

Bright red, I replied, “I guess you could say that on Friday nights I am”. To his credit, and to many of the other student’s credit, there were times numerous times when my various friendship groups agreed to just hang out at a friend’s house near mine on Friday nights and when I was done with dinner I would just walk over. And it was in this way I navigated my high school social life.

Another friend always referred to my strange absences for holidays, or the unfamiliar customs I observed which I was constantly asked to describe, as my made up “Buddhist rituals” – she just couldn’t find a category to put these things in so she picked the most exotic one she knew. But the amazing thing was that instead of ostracizing me, for most, these differences engendered greater respect for me. My fellow students admired, on their own level, my subtle but strong commitment. Plus it didn’t hurt that every time one of my friends came over my mom fed them snacks and invited them to dinner. Eventually, Friday nights *at my house* became a bit of a thing – non Jewish friends came over for Shabbat dinner, entranced by the rituals, respectfully curious as we said the *Birkat Hamazon* in



Hebrew. Or sometimes they just came after dinner, knowing there would be left-over dessert and that my parents would chat and then leave us alone to just hang out in the living room as late as we wanted.

However I did not discover the full measure of the impact of my Jewish living on my friends until senior year. I was close with a guy named Sam Robinson: he was smart, was the quarterback of the football team and was a truly nice guy. He also had a car. One day towards the end of senior year, he was driving me home after practice – we both did Spring Track – and as he pulled up to my house, he surprised me by saying the following: “It is almost the end of our senior year and who knows when we go our separate ways whether we will actually keep in touch, so I figured I should say this now in case I don’t get to in the future. I just wanted to tell you how much I respect you for keeping your religious traditions. They are special. I didn’t go grow up with much religion in my house, just occasionally going to church. I wish I had what you had. Just some advice, I know it seemed like maybe you were different because of it but don’t let that discourage you. It is not different in a bad way. When you go off to college, keep following your traditions. You won’t regret it.” With that he stuck out his hand, we shook. I thanked him and told him that he was always welcome for Shabbat dinner and that, of course, we would keep in touch.

He was wiser than I in all aspects: he understood the value of my religious heritage, perhaps even better than I did at the time, and he also knew that we wouldn't keep in touch. For whatever reason sometimes validation from the outside is especially powerful – my parents, rabbis, youth leaders, etc. were all proud that I remained *shomer mitzvot* (observant and traditional) during my high school days, even not in the presence of my parents. But it was Sam Robinson who really helped me see that the way I was living my life, had almost objective value that even someone outside our community could appreciate.

I took this inspiration with me into college and into all of my Jewish activities. I was, on the one hand, a normal college kid on the weekends, going to parties, etc. On the other, on Friday nights, I almost always engaged in these activities *after* going to Hillel or Chabad, where I davened and ate Shabbat dinner. And I always only went “out” where I could walk and where I didn't have to spend any money. My religious observance kept me on Jewish time – more than I kept the Shabbat even (I admit I didn't get up very often on Saturday morning to go to shul), the Shabbat kept me. It was through Shabbat, I met so many of the other Jewish students, and through Hillel that I met the Rabbi there with whom I developed a close relationship. One thing nurtured the next, I staffed Ramah, USY on Wheels, USY Poland Pilgrimage – each Jewish experience teaching me so much about myself and the power of Judaism and Jewish community. So that by

the time I graduated I not only knew that I always wanted to personally remain committed to my Judaism, I also knew that I wanted to serve in a capacity that allowed me to help others engage in this beautiful tradition. I knew that I wanted to have the privilege of helping other Jews to discover the deep meaning of their heritage or to engage even more fully in the blessing of being Jewish.

Here, at Beth El, I believe that I have found my home. I believe that I have found the place where I can teach, where I can enhance life-cycle events, where I can create community, spread a love for Israel: the place, people and religion. And it is for that blessing and for welcoming me in, that I say thank you today. It has been an honor to serve to date and it will continue to be an honor to serve this community for both me and my family.

Shabbat Shalom!