

President's Speech

Yom Kippur Morning
10 Tishri 5767

By Joanne Klapper
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I'd like to begin by thanking all of you who gave me your moral support and critical input for this, my first Yom Kippur Presidents address.

To my family - my husband, children, sister, brother-in-law and nephews - who suggested I ask someone - anyone- who was not me to give this speech, and that we should begin a new tradition for my 2 years as President ---- the "Anyone but the President's" Yom Kippur Address

To Rob Densen, who, after reminding me that I'm an unusually uninteresting speaker, strongly suggested I, say Shana Tovah, and sit back down.

To Betsy Mark, who repeatedly urged that I have my husband, son or daughter write this speech, and finally advised: "Do us all a favor, keep it short."

To my Daughter, who, when I complained that the speech might be too long, said...."Please.....read fast."

And finally, to my Son, who, on erev Rosh Hashanna, asked if I agreed that boring a large group of people on Yom Kippur is a sin.

I love you all, and, in keeping with the spirit of the day----there's no need to ask. I forgive you.

Growing up in Levittown Pennsylvania with my 2 sisters, my very wonderful parents had, what then seemed to us, a particularly annoying habit of pointing out everyone of any importance who was Jewish. It was never, "Lauren Bacall is a wonderful actress." It was "Lauren Bacall is a wonderful actress and she's Jewish", or "Who developed the polio vaccine? Why, Jonas Salk, and he's Jewish". Modigliani, Houdini, Kissinger, Edward G. Robinson, Judy Holliday, Katherine Graham....all Jews.

Now, Levittown was a suburb with a small Jewish population. Few of our school friends were Jewish and my sisters and I felt quite happy and well integrated into the broader community. Unlike our parents, who grew up in religiously segregated communities, we hadn't really had any direct experience with Anti-Semitism. So this concept of pride and overarching connection to the broader Jewish community didn't really make sense to us. It seemed old fashioned, and, even divisive, and certainly, something I would never do with my own children.

Fast forward twenty years or so, and sure enough, by the age of 10, my kids, thanks to their mother, knew every prominent Jew on the face of the earth. Whatever I failed to communicate in my very subtle and totally non-annoying way, Adam Sandler has taught them in his “Chanukah Songs”.

They knew that Jon Stewart is really Jon Stewart Leibowitz, that Natalie Portman was born in Israel, that Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg are the current 2 of a long line of Jewish Supreme Court justices. And they know about Marx and Freud, Mahler and Einstein, and that 21% of all Nobel Prize winners have been Jews, even though we represent only 1/4 of 1% of the world’s population.

So, the question is....why had I become my parents when it came to this most annoying of Jewish habits?

I suspect it’s this: I believe there’s a reason we’re all here today, a reason we belong to this synagogue. Whether we’re here twice a year for the holidays, or every Friday night, whether we consider ourselves spiritual, religious, or cultural Jews, whether we like or dislike the very concept of organized religion, by choosing to join this synagogue, any synagogue, we’re making a statement: we’re saying that being a Jew matters.

For me, it matters because of our 3,000 year old legacy of values. When the Rabbi asks us during our children’s B’nai Mitzvah to hand the torah from Grandparent, to parent to child, we’re passing a culture, a wisdom, a set of values that have been shaped and refined by generations. It matters because our tradition looks at the world as a project that we can and must repair, not one where sin and evil are necessarily part of the hardwiring. It matters because as Jews we’re taught to question and delve and study, and to place the highest value on good acts over mere beliefs. It matters because despite bigotry, hatred and persecution, Jews have not only survived, but have continued to contribute to the world so meaningfully.

This is what my parents were saying to me and my sisters through their constant recitation of the accomplishments of other Jews. And I believe this is what the Rabbi means when he reminds us that our greatest legacy to our children is not material wealth, but a legacy of values. Both are saying that Jewish traditions and values are our special heritage, and that, as the current recipients of that heritage, each of us share a profound responsibility. And in that responsibility, we have a connection with all Jews - that our history, our culture, our sensibilities, not to mention our DNA, have made us a family.

You don’t have to like every member of your family, but they’re yours, they’re yours to take pride in, to get annoyed with, to mourn with, to share joy with. Those of us who were members on September 11th remember how many of us turned to the synagogue- as our family - to mourn that most communal of all losses.

The members of this synagogue are part of our family - our extended family-- as are the Jews across America, in Israel, in Europe, and throughout the world. It is our

responsibility to take care of our family. We cannot, and should not, expect others to do this for us.

The members of our synagogue family, for the most part, are not faced with the issues of hunger and survival faced by Jews in other parts of the world. Here, in our Temple home, our challenge is to build a Jewish family that is strong, educated and committed.

I would hope, as we care for our children and parents, brothers and sisters, that we all support and nurture this part of our family, too.

You should have received a booklet at Rosh Hashana, and, again, on your seats today, where we sought to thank everyone who has made this past year so successful.

Over 200 of our congregants gave time to the Temple this past year - to both large and small projects.

We also thanked all those who gave to last years' New Year Appeal, funds which enabled us to provide a wide range of programs and services.

Our 3rd Friday night guest lecture series, Life long Jewish learning, the Film series, TNT, our youth group, the annual high school college trip, Family Connections, the Interfaith Connections program -- all are made possible by your financial and volunteer support.

Feel free to call any of us on the Board to get involved. Believe me, there's always something to do. And please, when you're asked, by letter or phone, to participate in our New Year Appeal, make a contribution that feels right for you.

You belong here for a reason. You're a part of our Jewish family. The fact that it happens to be a particularly wonderful Jewish family is just icing on the cake.

Shana Tovah. Have an easy fast, and a very sweet New Year.