

Haazinu 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 9/23/17

A story from the Midrash: Once Rabbi Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. Impressed, he said to the man, "Will you come and be my guest?" "As you wish," said the man. Rabbi Yannai took him home and began to discuss the Bible, but it soon became clear that the man knew none of it. The Rabbi then spoke of Jewish legends, and again the man clearly knew little or nothing about that, either. After the meal, Rabbi Yannai asked the man to lead the Grace After Meals, to which the man replied, "Let the Rabbi lead it in his own home." I guess he was frustrated, angry or just in a bad mood, but Rabbi Yannai then said: "Will you repeat what I tell you?" The man answered, "Yes." Rabbi Yannai then said: "Say a dog has eaten Yannai's bread." OUCH! The guest then rose up and seized Rabbi Yannai by the coat demanding, "Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?" Stunned, Rabbi Yannai said, "What inheritance of yours do I have?" The man replied, "The children recite, '*Torah Tzevah Lanu Moshe, Morasha Kehillat Yaako*' - 'Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.' It does NOT say 'an inheritance to the congregation of Yannai!'"

In this week's Torah portion, Haazinu, Moshe makes it perfectly clear that Torah is for everyone and that it is to be taught in a way that others can clearly understand. We are tasked with the responsibility to ennoble others with learning; to meet them where they are at, and to lift them up so that they can rise higher in the world. Every student must be met where they are at, that really is the key to teaching Torah, in fact to education in general.

This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of Sesame Street. I heard an interview with the creator of Sesame Street, Joan Ganz Cooney. She was a young mother back in the 1960's when she became interested in educational TV for kids. She was watching Saturday morning cartoons with the children, where cartoon characters get run over by trucks, or slammed into walls and then just get up again, characters pulling tricks and hitting one another, and she was appalled with what her children were seeing. At the same time she noticed that her kids were paying close attention to the ads as well and singing the jingles they heard and had learned by heart. Their favorites were apparently beer commercials. You know, "Schaeffer is the one beer to have when you're having more than one..." So she thought, "If they can memorize this tripe, they can certainly learn to count and learn the alphabet in the same way." In time she was able to convince the Carnegie Foundation to give her a research grant which led to a 50 page paper she presented to them. They decided to fund what became the Children's Television workshop. But the show's mission was not so much to entertain as it was to meet kids where they were at and start the educational process there. She saw that kids from more affluent neighborhoods were getting a head start on reading simply by growing up surrounded by books, but kids in the inner-city did not have the same exposure to pre-school learning. So Sesame Street was designed to give these kids from underprivileged areas the help they needed. That's why the stage was made to look like an inner-city neighborhood, with front steps, small neighborhood stores and trashcans right out on the street. It was also deliberately a mixed race cast so that all the kids who watched could see someone who looked like them. (In fact, because it was a multi-racial cast in the 1960's, Sesame Street was initially banned from broadcast in the state of Mississippi!) But most importantly, the show met kids where they were at and drew them in. It made them want to learn. It was

empowering - and that is its enduring legacy. In time other countries adopted the same philosophy of TV education for kids and the phenomenon spread world-wide. Wow!

Many consider that the role of Jewish education is to make sure that the traditions of our ancestors are passed on to the next generation. We want to assure that future generations are equipped to practice Judaism the way we did, the way our grandparents did. And that is partly true, but it's not the complete picture. We do want to maintain the ancient traditions. But, more importantly, we want them to be meaningful to the next generation. We want the ways of our people to shape their lives in ways that are unique to them. We don't want them to simply mimic what was done in the past. We want them to embrace a vibrant faith that speaks to them, that touches their hearts, and most importantly, shapes the way that they both look at, and interact with the world. That is the true goal of Jewish education. A vibrant faith is one that brings meaning and joy to the lives of its adherents in a way that they would not have known had they not made this faith part of their lives. And the Judaism of the future will, in some ways be different than my own, just as mine differs from that of my great-grandparents in Russia and Poland.

That's what we are dedicated to here at Beth El - to fostering a living, dynamic, vibrant and evolving faith. In the future it will not be exactly like the Judaism we inherited because each generation lives in a new and different world. But Jewish faith will always shape the world of dedicated Jewish people, just as our faith shapes our world today.