

Mikketz 2013

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick on November 30, 2013

I hope that all of you had an enjoyable "Thanksgivaka." A lot has been made of the fact that Thanksgiving and the first night of Hanukah come out on the same night, and so I thought I would take advantage of this rare occurrence to introduce a new Sermon Series entitled "When and What to Assimilate." Most of the time when we Jews hear the word "assimilate" it has negative connotations, but I don't think that's always the case. Jews have always learned from the world around us, and we have contributed a great deal to it. The proximity of holidays reminds us of the benefit of the mixing of ideas. We are not talking here about Hanukah and Christmas. The truth is that these two holidays have nothing in common other than the time of year. Hanukah is the holiday when the Jewish People rededicated itself to Jewish Law and traditional observance, while Christmas celebrates the birth of a man who did away with Jewish law. Those are two holidays where assimilation of ideas doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

But Hanukah and Thanksgiving are a different story. The pilgrims assimilated the ideas of our ancient ancestors: they saw the Atlantic Ocean as the Desert, and America as the Promised Land, the new Israel. The Pilgrims started a new harvest festival here in the United States to celebrate nature's bounty just as our ancestors did when they entered the Promised Land. Ancient sources tell us that Hanukah is 8 days long because the Maccabees were celebrating Sukkot - our harvest festival. Just as soon as they could purify the Temple and offer the appropriate sacrifices they gave thanks for the new land and its produce. Here the assimilation of ideas works rather nicely - and it was great to have a school-wide Religious School "Thanksgivakah" celebration this week where our kids could write prayers based on the miracles in their lives; prayers that they could then read around their Thanksgiving tables.

I believe that the challenge of Judaism - in every age - is learning the art of assimilating wisely. We have too much to offer the world to be tucked away in isolated pockets with no access to the outside world. For instance, our Jewish sense of social justice and equality propelled the Civil Rights forward in our country. I was watching a program on the assassination of President Kennedy and it referenced Martin Luther King J. Most people don't realize that Martin Luther King spoke to the Rabbis of the Conservative Movement the week before he was assassinated and thanked my predecessors for carrying the cause along with him. That's probably why he referenced Jews first in his "I Have a Dream Speech" when he spoke of people living in harmony. But it's not just our sense of social justice that is vital to the world: Jewish creativity in the arts and in culture have helped to make the world a more beautiful place, and our impact in the realm of science has saved countless lives. Jews, a small sliver of the world's population, have accounted for more than 20% of all Nobel Prizes awarded. Jews who lived cloistered lives did not, and do not have that influence.

And at the same time, assimilating ideas from the non-Jewish world around us has helped Judaism grow as well. Two thousand years ago, our Passover seder was modeled on the Greek symposia - and it is still used today. One thousand years after that Maimonides groundbreaking works of Jewish philosophy were based on Aristotle and the Greeks. And a thousand years after that the Women's Suffrage Movement motivated Jewish leaders to press for more equal rights for women in Jewish life which enabled our bat mitzvah to read from the Torah today.

But we also know that assimilation is leading to stagnant and even negative growth of our People. Fewer Jews are maintaining Jewish law, fewer are marrying Jewish people, and raising Jewish kids - less Jewish people describe themselves as "religious". Sometimes assimilation is a threat. We need to assimilate wisely.

Our Torah portion, of course offers some interesting insight into the topic. Joseph comes down to Egypt, and his success is marked, in large measure, by his assimilation. He is given an Egyptian name - Tzfnat Panaya, and an Egyptian wife, Osnat. In fact, he is so assimilated, dressing speaking, and even as the Torah tells us- eating like an Egyptian - that his own brothers do not recognize him. He seems to be totally absorbed by the culture around him. But only to a point. Finally, in next week's Torah portion, he reveals his identity to his brothers because he cannot stand being separated from them. He has been a Jew on the inside all along. When he sees his brothers something inside of him clicks - he lights up, and his Jewish soul is drawn close to theirs.

This, of course will not be the last time such an episode happens in Egypt. Several hundred years later, the same thing will happen to Moses. He too will grow up surrounded by Egyptian royalty, and he too will adopt the Egyptian ways. But what happens to him is much like what happens to Joseph: He goes outside among his people and something inside of him clicks: He is one of them and he jumps to their defense. He feels, just as Joseph does, the need for Jewish community, and it is that sense of community that defines him as a Jew. And what each of them spends the rest of their lives finding out is that the very people who they thought did not take their Judaism quite seriously enough, had a great deal to offer - that those they thought did not understand the importance of what faith was all about, actually became their teachers. Joseph's brothers teach him the meaning of "all for one and one for all" - and when he learns that from them he is moved to tears. And Moses eventually comes to see that all the People are empowered by Gd and that all of them are holy - that in spite of his first impressions of them - they all have something to offer in Gd's plan, from the greatest of princes to the most lowly water carriers.

And the same is true for us today. When have you assimilated too far? When you feel that you have nothing to offer the cause of the Jewish People. The world needs all kind of Jews - observant of Jewish law and not; Jews who can read Hebrew and Jews who cannot; Jews who are moved by sitting in synagogue, and Jews who live their spirituality in other ways; Jews who are politically active and not- Gay/Straight, Black/White, Judaism is a broad spectrum of belief and practice. We need to understand, and to get our children to understand, that each of us - each of them, has something precious to contribute to move Judaism forward - that we are an evolving civilization made up of "religious Jews". And if your Judaism shapes and informs your life, if your religion shapes your self-concept - you are "religious" and you have something important to contribute to our growth as a People. Each of us has something precious to contribute. And that means always walking the delicate balance between being of the world and yet standing apart from it as well. And it starts with pushing deeper to understand just what our Judaism means to each of us and the way it shapes our lives - and the way it can help to shape the lives of others when we live our values and commitment...