

Shavuot Yizkor 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/1/17

Our congregation and community are still basking in the glow of our Hazzan's Installation Concert. It was truly one of the highlights of my tenure here at Beth El. Hazzan Pomerantz-Boro was radiant, she sang and spoke so beautifully. Her colleagues were wondrously entertaining: The "Divas on the Bima" chose terrific songs, "The Clergy Boys" were hysterical, and the ceremony where the Cantors Assembly Holocaust Torah was passed from one past president of the CA to the other, all while young women from our shul sang, brought tears to my eyes. But, perhaps the most moving moment of the evening need not have happened at all. I suspect that if you had asked some people before this event, "Do you think it would be a good idea - appropriate even, to have the concert close with a performance by a Special Needs choir?" I suspect many would have said, "No, this was not a fundraiser for people with special needs. The logistics would be tough." I am sure some would have said, "Let's just have a concert for "them." But not our Hazzan. When she titled this concert "Kol Kol" - "Every Voice," she meant EVERY VOICE. And she was relentless in making that happen. And you know what? It was the most meaningful moment of the whole evening; it left a lasting impression of who our Hazzan is and what she and our shul stand for. She, and we, are about hearing EVERY VOICE, and as a result we heard a beautiful choir sing from their hearts in voices that went straight in to our own. Our Hazzan reminded us all that in the heart of every person there is a beautiful soul, and it does not matter what person looks like, that soul still sings.

We need people like our Hazzan to remind us of that. Unfortunately, people sometimes have a hard time getting past what a person looks like. Sometimes, without even thinking, we judge individuals when they don't look the way we think they are supposed to look, or act the way we think they are supposed to act. And so when people look or act differently than we expect, we might tend to look away, or we look on with rachmanus, with sympathy, because we have a picture in our own minds of what a person is supposed to look like. But this is profoundly un-Jewish and it needs to be uprooted from our Jewish souls. Part of our historical mission as Jews was to correct this way of thinking. When we Jews first came along the ideal was the Greek ideal, that the perfect body, the sharpest mind, the beautiful, the rich, the powerful were the most beloved of the gods. But, we Jews inverted that. Our People said, "No, it is the poor, the oppressed, the beleaguered, the slave, the lost, the lonely and abandoned - THEY are the ones that Gd loves, too. The widow, the orphan, the infirmed, the disabled - they are the ones that Gd loves and they are the ones that we are supposed to love. Those who others might fail to embrace - who live in the shadows or on the margin-they are the very ones who need our love." That's our mission as Jews. We can never allow ourselves, even for a minute, to think that it is only those who have no problems and no disabilities that are worthy of love and our fullest, heartfelt attention. We can never be a People that thinks that being perfect is the only way to be perfect. This is not us, and certainly not who we are supposed to be. When our kids who are different feel judged by their peers, and I hear it from teens especially, it is not that hard to imagine that their peers might have learned that at home.

We are celebrating Shavuot today. Who exactly stood at Sinai? There were over two million people. Do you think they all looked alike? Do you think that they were all equally abled? Of course not. But they were all images of Gd, worthy of Torah, of Revelation and of Gd's love. Moses stuttered, and before him Jacob limped and Isaac was blind. These are our heroes. Were their descendants not worthy of Torah? Of course they were and so are we, all of us, for we are their descendants. So when we see someone who looks or acts differently than others, our response is, "This is how Gd made them," and we embrace them. We embrace them for the sublimity of soul that lies within. That's the Jewish way. We transcend the surface and embrace the soul within. And this concert was a powerful and poignant reminder of this very Jewish priority.

Moreover, I truly believe that the more we are able to focus on the inner workings of an individual, the more we push ourselves to see the soul, the stronger our sensitivity to ALL souls becomes. This enables us to see the souls of our own loved ones with greater depth as well. And so, when they are gone, when their physical presence is no more, we are still able to sense their souls, to feel the essence of who they were and who they remain in our lives. It is this "soul sensitivity" that allows us to transcend death itself and feel in our hearts the presence of loved ones lost.

That's what Yizkor is about: It's a reminder that the soul is eternal, and that by looking past the surface we can form relationships that will stay with us forever. It is about remembering the dead, but, it is also about cultivating a deeper appreciation of the living. Yizkor gives us insight into what matters most. Yizkor is our way of reminding ourselves throughout the year that the essence of an individual is ALWAYS hidden from the view of a casual observer. The essence of an individual can only be discovered with love and caring and sharing. And once that level of awareness, of relationship is attained, not even death can end it. When we can train ourselves to see the soul, then no soul can ever truly be taken from our lives. And so as while we pray for loved ones past, and we feel their souls entwined with ours, we also pray for the strength to see the beautiful souls of all those who deserve a closer look.