

Yearnings - The Teachings of Rabbi Irwin Kula - Sermon # 2
Delivered November 17, 2012 by Rabbi Araon Krupnick

Shabbat Shalom - We have been talking the past few weeks about truth. What started this conversation, you'll remember, was the lead up to the presidential elections. I know that many of our teens here don't watch TV (they watch on the internet). Smart choice, because you don't have to watch the commercials. That meant before the election you did not have to watch the attack ads. We all hate the attack ads, but at the same time we know they work. And the reason that they work, in part, is because they appeal to our most basic instinct to see things in black and white - right and wrong - truth and lies - good and bad. In black and white everything is pretty simple, and we try to keep our lives uncomplicated. But as Irwin Kula, our scholar in residence who will be coming here on December 6th points out that today's mantra- "Keep It Simple, Stupid" is pretty stupid itself. Most things that are meaningful and important are not all that simple. Jewish wisdom is not about black and white/ right and wrong. The Talmud, our greatest legal code leaves a full 75% of the arguments it raises unresolved. The purpose of Jewish education, of Talmudic education, is to be able to see both side of an issue - that kind of perspective gives you well informed opinions. But it's not easy to think that way. It's so much easier to have your own opinion than to have the courage to consider that you might not have the whole picture and the plain truth.

And yet, our tradition invites contradictions and debate; to struggle to find the truth. That's why we are called Yisrael. The word means "struggles with Gd". We are people who struggle to figure out what we believe in, and we realize that what we believe can change over time, sometimes it can change several times a day.

But what kind of religion, asks Rabbi Kula, can be based on change, and doubt and struggle. Isn't religion supposed to give you Truth and serenity and peace? Well, as Rabbi Kula explains it, peace and serenity come when we realize that we will never really find "the answer" and that it is in the quest for making sense of our lives that we find peace. To be a Jew means to be in a constant state of becoming. There is a reason that

Moses dies outside the Promised Land. He never arrives because, in a sense, neither do we.

I know that many of our 150 USY'ers here today are thinking already about their futures, about college. You may be asking yourselves, "What do I want to do with my life?" In fact some of the adults here today may be asking themselves the same question. Well, I want to answer that question with another question: What do Justin Welby, the New Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Parker - the world's most famous wine critic, and Moses have in common? It's not a joke. All of them thought they had their lives figured out; that they were in a good and comfortable place, until they got the jobs that made them famous. Justin Welby was an oil executive and only became a priest a short while ago. Robert Parker was an attorney who just liked wine until he quit his job and started a newsletter for his friends. Now if he gives a wine a 95 it's like having it chosen for Opera's Book Club! And Moses... Well Moses was a middle aged man, comfortable as a shepherd, living a simple and satisfying life when he stumbled on that burning bush. His exciting days in Egypt were long behind him. The voice of Gd was the last thing he wanted to hear! He made all kinds of excuses as to why he should not change course. He knew who he was, he knew his abilities, he knew his potential... And then Gd said, "No. I have other plans for you." And it was totally unexpected that he would make such a move at that time in his life; he had to open himself up to the unknown and start a journey not knowing where it would lead him.

Think about that story - it's the story of our people. None of our biblical heroes live lives that follow straight trajectories. They may have wanted to, but they didn't. And the reason they didn't was to teach you and me that our lives don't follow straight trajectories either, and the sooner we embrace that, the happier we will be. It's what Irwin Kula calls the "sacred messiness of life".

Moses has his doubts about Gd, and so Gd tells him Gd's secret name. Do you remember what it is? "Who will I say sent me," asks Moses? And Gd says "Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh", My name is "I will be who I will be". In other words, even Gd is in a perpetual state of becoming. And that, says Irwin, is what we mean when we say that WE were created in the image

of Gd. There is a reason that the word for life in Hebrew is "Chaim" - in the plural. We lead many lives over many years and life can and will take us in direction we did not anticipate. What if, says Rabbi Kula, "what if we understood that all decisions, even the sure things, are leaps into the unknown? What if we were galvanized, rather than paralyzed by uncertainty. It could be that our very denial about how unsure we really that causes us the most anxiety. We mistake ambivalence for weakness, indecisiveness for failing. We try to convince ourselves that the future should be ours to see and that there's a discernable and consistent cause and effect to our decisions and actions, but that's not always the case."

I want to let our teens in on a little secret - actually a big and important one: Sitting across the aisle from you today are lots and lots of grown-ups, myself included, who aren't really sure of exactly it is where we are at and where we are going. And to the many adults who still don't know exactly what you want "to be" when you "grow up", I want you to know that's part of the plan. It's in the journey that we find meaning; in the exploration, in the contradictions, in embracing the whole messiness that makes you you that peace can be found. The people I admire most in this world are in a continual state of becoming, always growing, exploring, challenging themselves. This is the fundamental message echoed on almost every page of Irwin Kula's wonderful book "Yearnings" and I hope you'll come out to hear him speak on December 6th. It is a free program that is open to the public...