

Va Yeshev 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/24/16

Of all the heroes of the Torah, the one whose life perhaps most parallels our own is Joseph, the focus of our portion this week (and indeed all the remaining parshiot in the Book of Genesis). And what makes Joseph's life so closely aligned with our own is that he not only lives, but thrives spiritually in the Diaspora. His adult life is spent in Egypt, not in Israel. And yet, somehow, he is able to keep the fire of Jewish life burning even after he has left Israel to live in the predominantly non-Jewish world. I think that the Torah puts so much emphasis on Joseph's Diaspora life, his life outside of Israel, because the Torah knew that more Jews would end up living amongst non-Jews outside of Israel than would live in Eretz Yisrael surrounded mostly by Jews. Like Joseph, we indeed live in two worlds, one Jewish, one non-Jewish. He has an Egyptian name and a Hebrew name. We too have an English name and a Jewish name, and we too live in both worlds. In essence, he is us, and we are him.

And I am thinking about this reality especially now when 17 members of our Confirmation Class are in Israel on their Confirmation Trip. They are spending this Shabbat in Jerusalem. For them the distance between their Jewish world and their non-Jewish world is, at least for this weekend, very, very small. They are immersed in one of the most spiritual Shabbatot of their lives, in the Jewish country and in the holiest of Jewish cities. Their worlds - their Jewish and non-Jewish worlds - have come together.

Alas, of course it won't last forever. Yes, they still have another week, but soon they'll be back in America, a place where we Jews are clearly a minority and Jewish life is not reflected at every turn as it is in Israel. And so it is natural that over time the fervor they have for their spiritual lives will begin to dim. It almost has to do so.

As I think of our students' adventure, I also think of their return and I know that we have a number of their parents here today. Together we wonder what we can do to make this spiritual adventure of a lifetime a catalyst for future spiritual growth. Today I'd like to make a few suggestions, not just for them but for all of us who take our Jewish lives to heart even as we live in a predominantly non-Jewish world.

My first suggestion is to embrace the fact that we Jews do in fact live in two worlds at once. That delicate balancing act defines us. Let's revel in that fact. Here's one simple way to more closely align our two worlds: I suspect that you, as well as many of our Confirmation kids have iPhones. (I have been informed this works for Android phones, too). Not now, but after Shabbos, I want you to go to your phone, open "Settings" and simply click on "Calendar." Then click on the line that says "Alternate Calendars." When you do this you'll find that out of all the various calendars in the whole world, Apple gives you only three extras to choose from: "Chinese," "Islamic," and "Hebrew." That's right. There are 1.35 billion Chinese, 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, and a little less than 16 million Jews but our calendar is one of only three included! You change the Alternate Calendar from "None" to "Hebrew" and you will have both the English and Hebrew date (in English letters) on your phone every time you look at it. Every Jewish person, especially our kids, needs to do this. Imagine if you can remind your kids, "Hey, today is Rosh Chodesh!" Think of how much better we'll all know the Hebrew/Jewish calendar if we all take this simple step. Our calendars define us.

My next suggestion is to plan to invite other families over for Shabbos dinner and build community around the shared experience the kids just had. It doesn't have to be your closest friends; rather see it as a chance to make new ones. The kids are seeing first-hand how to make Shabbos special and we can help them to do that here at home. And who knows, if they get accustomed to having new people at their Shabbos table they might not find Hillel so intimidating when they get there.

I, of course, also think it would be great to come to shul together as a family, and please do, but I also understand that it is the Judaism you practice in your home that makes the biggest difference week in and week out. Shabbos candles, Kiddush, Motzi, Havdallah each week can be practiced more religiously now while the iron is still hot for them. Do it.

My next suggestion also involves your phone. I'd like to suggest that you listen to podcasts of Jewish and Israeli content. Most of our cars have Bluetooth technology which means that we can listen to podcasts while we drive. If you have a half hour commute keep a Jewish history, philosophy, Torah, or Israeli culture or politics podcast on your phone and play it in the car. And if you like it, tell your kids about what you've learned. It's easy and informative and beats Christmas music and ads, that's for sure!

Finally, I'd like to suggest something a student told me she did years after I took her on the first Confirmation Trip 22 years ago. She said that when she got home from her Israel trip she did not put the siddur she had used every day on a shelf. She put it on the nightstand next to her bed and she read the Shema every night before she went to sleep. She told me this years later when she was still doing the same thing in college. She said that she also turned to her siddur when she was worried or anxious because singing a few prayers always made her feel better. I like that idea. Maybe you'll want to share it.

You know, the holiday of Chanukah always comes out during the time we read the stories of Joseph. And it is a great reminder that, like Joseph, we too live in two worlds. And it reminds us too, that just as the Chanukah oil kept burning, he too kept the fire of Jewish life burning in his life as well. But perhaps the most profound message comes not from Joseph himself. Above all else, Joseph was a dreamer. And we need to dream as well. And that's what we need to be, too. For the kids coming home - indeed for all of us - we need to dream of how to make Jewish life meaningful, powerful, fresh and new. We need to think about how to refresh our spiritual lives in creative ways that transcend the routine and same old same old. And it could be ritually, it could be through tzedakah work, it could be through learning, but now is the time to dream. How can you make sure that ours is a living faith that grows over time, bringing new meaning and insight into an ancient way of life? Each of us has a proverbial candle to light on the menorah of Jewish life, and as leaders and guides for our children each of us must remember that we are each the Shammash, helping to kindle the fire in others by making sure it burns brightly within us.