

MIKETZ 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/12/2015

Sometimes there are no words in English that exactly match up with those of other languages. Take the word "mensch" for instance. We all know what the word means but there is not short, pithy, English expression that can serve as an exact translation. Well, in Talmudic literature, one such Aramaic phrase is "P'sheeta." Literally it means "simple." But it really means something much closer to, "That's so simple and straight forward, so obvious, that there really was no reason to explain it."

And so, on one level, the short message I am about to give is "P'Sheeta", so obvious that it really doesn't need to be said. And yet it does. For when a candidate for president of the United States advocates a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on," we Jews have special reason to be concerned, and we need to talk about it. It's "P'sheeta" that few if any of us (or anyone we know) agrees, and if you, or they do, it's all the more reason that we need to talk about it. And I understand the need to screen immigrants carefully; I understand our national concerns for the safety of our citizens. But really, this challenge is of special concern to Jews, not simply because we are Americans but because it helps us all to clarify who the Jewish People are; where we came from and the responsibilities that are the mantle we carry given our own unique history.

This is an educational opportunity for our children, and one that we must share with them. We can't simply rely on their social studies teachers in elementary or high school, hoping that they will educate our kids about our Jewish history. It's our history and we have to teach it. It is our moral responsibility to do so. Our kids don't remember and there are few eyewitnesses to remind them, but it was a mere 75 years ago that our People were banned from certain countries, and where they were permitted, were stripped of their right to religious observance. It was just over 75 years ago that our houses of worship came under attack. And even though I did not witness it myself, I hold dear the memories of our People's fear and loss. That's why it was so important to me that we have a Holocaust memorial right outside this Sanctuary. It is a reminder not simply to remember, but to teach the next generation. Seared in my mind are images of masses of Jewish people fleeing for their lives only to be rejected at international borders. Etched in my soul are images of righteous gentiles who acted courageously, who stood up to bigotry, and advocated on our behalf. I believe all Jews owe a debt of gratitude to those of other faiths who courageously protected our People from danger. It may be "P'sheeta," so obviously wrong that it doesn't even bear discussion, but do we really want to live in a country where our Muslim community is subject to wholesale maltreatment, especially in response to the atrocities of a tiny few?

Like it or not, we Jews have always played the part of the "canary in a coal mine." Most kids today would not recognize that metaphor - but they should. It's an allusion to caged canaries (birds) that miners would carry down into the mine tunnels with them. If dangerous gases such as carbon monoxide collected in the mine, the gases would kill the canary before killing the miners, thus providing a warning to exit the tunnels immediately. We still need to be the ones who tell people it's time to get out when the evil gasses of bigotry and hatred are first smelled.

Hanukkah, more than any other Jewish holiday, celebrates religious freedom. Antiochus, whose decrees against all Jews led to the Maccabean Revolt in 165 BCE, was neither the first nor the

last tyrant to argue that religious differences could not be tolerated. Pharaoh at Pesach, Haman on Purim, they argued that people different than themselves, people with a different religion, wanted to take over the country. Even in our own Torah reading this morning, Joseph himself accuses his brothers of spying out the Land of Egypt so that they could attack. And why shouldn't he be suspicious? Rashbam, a famous Torah commentator explains it easily enough. They had long beards, dark complexions, and wore the garb of desert herdsmen - of course they should be feared! But Joseph sees them not only on the outside, but on the inside as well.

To be a Jew means to carry the mantle of morality. As Jews we have to be especially sensitive, and especially vocal in speaking up and speaking out at how wrong and dangerous it is to imply that every Muslim is a potential terrorist. And we do that, not simply because it is the just and right thing to do, but because it helps us to more clearly define, based on our own history, what it means to be a Jew today. To some that might be "P'shita", but for me, whatever the impetus, that is always a conversation worth having.