

Sermon for Yom Kippur  
September 17-18, 2010 - 10 Tishri 5771  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

This is the season of forgiveness, and so I am going to ask us all to reach into our hearts to forgive someone against whom I know we all bear a pretty significant grudge. Tonight I am asking each one of us to forgive - our fourth grade Hebrew School Teachers.

My fourth grade Hebrew School teacher was Mora Wolf. Mora Wolf was a young Israeli woman, probably in her twenties. Each week Mora Wolf would pour herself into her Gloria Vanderbilt designer jeans, leaving not much to our fourth grade imaginations, and would join my friends in our small classroom at Temple Beth Ami in Rockville, Maryland, where she would proceed to yell at us for an hour and a half in her slightly disdainful and annoyed Israeli English accent, "What is wrong with you children?" I learned one Hebrew word that year that is forever ingrained in my memory: "SHEKET! BE QUIET!"

I think we could start a support group for men and women in our congregation who were traumatized as children by their fourth grade Hebrew school teachers. If it wasn't the fourth grade teacher, then it was probably the fifth grade teacher, or some rabbi who inflicted the trauma. Thankfully, at Temple Beth El, we have a wonderful team of dedicated and creative teachers in our Maimonides Institute for Jewish Learning, and our kids are not suffering the traumas we did.

But the damage for many of us has been done. I can't begin to tell you how many people I speak to during the course of the year, who, when I encourage them to get more involved in the Temple or to explore their Judaism more seriously relate some story of how badly they were turned off by a fourth, fifth, or sixth grade Hebrew school teacher. But what's sad for me is the fact that we allowed that teacher we encountered twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years ago to close the door to Jewish understanding. So I say it's time to forgive.

Some teachers, like Mora Wolf, were yellers, but the chief trauma I hear over and over again was that our teachers made religious school boring. And we can't stand to be bored. We have created a society that is devoted to the notion that a person should never experience a moment of idle thought or an instant of boredom. We demand that we, and our children, be entertained all the time.

In her book called *Spiritual Boredom*, a book I found ironically intriguing given the title, Dr. Erica Brown explores the phenomenon of boredom in contemporary religious life.<sup>1</sup> According to psychologist Dr. Bruce Leckart, boredom is "a feeling of uninvolvedness, a lack of concentration, absence of motivation, a feeling of emptiness, and above all, no excitement or enthusiasm for what is happening." And too often, this describes our feelings toward Jewish life.

On Shabbat mornings, when we gather to celebrate a young man or woman's bar or bat mitzvah, we often have a goodly number of people who are new to Temple Beth El. They come in the sanctuary and pick a seat near the back, afraid of getting too close to the service. As the service begins, they sit there, stone-faced, with a pallor of uncomfortable dread. Shabbat Shalom, I say. And they look at me like: "You talking to me?" Were it not for their love for the bar/bat mitzvah family, they would prefer to be anywhere else. They come in, assuming they will be bored. They're looking to be bored. I have to tell them even to open the prayerbook. And amazingly, at the end, the color has returned to their faces, they're smiling and laughing. Some even have dried tears on their cheeks. And sometimes, following services, some will approach me and wish me a Shabbat Shalom, and express to me their surprise at how much they enjoyed the experience. I'm grateful, of course, but what's sad to me, is that it's a surprise.

But it's not just in Jewish circles that we find ourselves overwhelmed with boredom. It's true in our jobs, in our lives at home, in our families and marriages. And that sense of boredom creates a spiritual pain that we seek to escape any chance we get.

But entertainment is not really the cure for boredom. It's simply an analgesic, a pain-killer, a distraction. We play ridiculous games on the internet, and channel surf for mindless television, wander shopping malls, shove headphones into our ears and drown out the silence. For it might be that in silence, just a moment of silence, we might get bored.

Because we are so acculturated to using entertainment to wash away our boredom, we find that dealing with the sources of boredom becomes ever more difficult. Boredom is a significant problem, and one that needs to be confronted and addressed.

What is the source of our boredom? Our boredom with Judaism I think is symbolic of the greater malaise we feel in

---

<sup>1</sup> Erica Brown. *Spiritual Boredom: Rediscovering the Wonder of Judaism*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009.

general. Boredom comes when we have lost a sense of wonder or intrigue. I remember a professor I knew at college who was an expert in ornithology - the biology of birds. At the same time he was also a very religious man - an Episcopalian. I asked Dr. Novak how he reconciled his life as a scientist with his passion for religion. "It's easy," he said. "The more I understand about the birds I study, the more amazed I am at the complexity and beauty of life." Even though he had studied ornithology for thirty years, the more he learned, the more his fascination grew.

We get bored at synagogues because we don't understand what's going on. We get bored with art museums because we don't understand how to look at art. We get bored at baseball games because we don't understand the complexity of what looks like a simple game of run, hit, and catch. We get bored with our marriages because we stop understanding each other. We get bored with our lives because we don't understand our selves, our purpose in life, or our mission.

We often think that boredom is a result of what is presented to us, but the fact is that boredom is often a choice. We can choose to be bored or choose to be engaged. It all depends on a simple decision - will we choose to be engaged? To what will we be committed?

There is a famous parable about three stone-cutters who are building a cathedral. The first is asked: what are you doing? He looks up with a scowl - "What does it look like?" he says. "I'm cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches. I've been doing this ever since I was old enough to work, and I'll be doing it until the day before I die." The second is asked: what are you doing? He looks up with a smile - "I'm making a living. With the money I earn by cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches, I can keep a roof over our heads, put clothes on our backs, and put food on the table." The third is asked: what are you doing? He looks up; his face is radiant. "I am building a house for God," he says. "By cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches, I am helping to build a place where people will come to find shelter and comfort and to commune with the Master of the Universe. And it will stand for a thousand years."<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing that is, in and of itself, boring. Boring is what we choose it to be. An art museum, a baseball game, this Yom Kippur service can be, either fascinating, engaging, or

---

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen. *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, p. 161.

painfully boring. It all depends on how much of ourselves we choose to invest.

And these days, we are very conservative investors of our selves. We are wary of commitment, careful before we sign on the dotted line, anxious to keep our options open and to make sure we can get out of our commitments. But our inability to jump in with both feet is a major source of our discontent. We become so totally focused on our own personal experience, on our individual cares and feelings, that we limit our possibility of experience, and thus invite boredom. As Richard Winter wrote in his book *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment*, "One of the reasons why boredom has become so much more common is because we have become too preoccupied with looking after ourselves, making sure our needs are met and, to put it bluntly, we have become too selfish."<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, at the core of Jewish tradition, the remedy to our boredom. Judaism ultimately is based on a covenant. A covenant is a commitment, an agreement to which we pledge ourselves, not for a limited period of time, but for the rest of our lives. And it is this notion of covenant, of sustained commitment, that has really gotten lost in our world today.

I am terribly guilty of a major sin. I'm not good with response cards. I am so grateful to be invited to a wedding or bar/bat mitzvah celebration - I wish I could attend them all. But unfortunately, my schedule does not allow me to participate as often as I would like. I hate, however, to have to respond as a "no", so I hold on to the invitation, and think, hopefully, that I'll be able to rearrange my schedule somehow to attend. And then, inevitably, as I dither about how I will manage multiple commitments, the response date goes by, and I haven't responded. I am, whether for good or not so good reasons, commitment averse. And I'm sorry.

But I think most of us are also terribly commitment averse. We hate to RSVP. We hold out to the last minute before we commit to anything. We prefer to keep our options open. Studies have shown that young people today are postponing all kinds of commitments, marriage, career, home, or community. Just ask someone to volunteer for a project or committee, and you may very well hear, "You know, I just can't make that kind of commitment." Where we used to be able to rely on the commitment of corporations for lifetime employment, or on the loyalty of an employee, now all bets are off. As we have seen in the last several years, many corporations look only at the bottom line

---

<sup>3</sup> *Spiritual Boredom* pp. 135-36.

and their responsibility to shareholders, whereas employees will look out for number one.

Thinking of commitment can be scary, because it seems like we are limiting our freedom, and in some ways, it would seem contrary to what Judaism would teach. After all, isn't freedom what Judaism is all about? Don't we tell and retell the story of the Exodus year after year because we are a people who celebrates freedom?

The answer is yes. We are a people who celebrates freedom. But we celebrate freedom not simply for freedom's sake, but because our freedom has a purpose. And that purpose is for us to be free to commit to a life lived for higher and holier purposes than our selfish needs and concerns. We celebrate freedom because an authentic and true commitment can only be made by someone who is free.

Erica Brown asks us to think about the story of our people's Exodus from Egypt. The trek through the wilderness was anything but entertaining. It was difficult and challenging, and probably extremely boring. In the book of Numbers the people grow bored of their journey and the Manna, the food from heaven that God has given them to eat. "Now our souls are dried up;" they complain. "There is nothing at all, nothing but this manna before our eyes." The tedium of life in the wilderness has made it impossible for them to appreciate the miracles they experience every day.

Now imagine, she says, that Moses would have taken the Israelites seriously. Imagine if Moses had said: "Okay. This clearly isn't working out. You're all right. I'm wrong. Let's go back." We would never have made it to the land of Israel, never have been, as the Israeli national anthem Hatikva claims, "a free people in our land."<sup>4</sup> Each of us is here tonight because of the commitment our people has made to each other and to generations to come. Each of us is here tonight because instead of succumbing to a sense of alienation and boredom, generations of our ancestors chose instead to look harder and to seek out the fascination and wonder that Judaism teaches us to foster inside. It is through commitment that we find our path to wonder and awe, and through that energizing of the spirit, a greater understanding of life's meaning and purpose.

Our Torah portion tomorrow/today speaks of commitment. It says that all of us - men and women; young and old; from the leaders to the water-drawers - all gathered together to stand before God. And in that moment of meeting, we embraced the

---

<sup>4</sup> *Spiritual Boredom*, pp. 19-20.

covenant - a covenant that lasts until today, a covenant we are asked to reaffirm tonight/today. It is our obligation to reaffirm that covenant, to use the glorious freedom we each enjoy to commit our lives to something larger, to reach out for something greater, to look within ourselves, each other, and out into the world for something deeper and holier.

When we were in fourth grade, we didn't connect to Judaism, because we couldn't see the connection. And so, our response to this sense of disconnect was ultimately to disconnect.

So if we want to reconnect to Judaism, then we need to look for Jewish connections. This is core of what it means to engage in Jewish study. The secret of Jewish study is to realize that there is much more than meets the eye in a piece of text or tradition. Each story and law, when we examine it very carefully, has the capacity to give us an extraordinary depth of wisdom and understanding. What my fourth grade teacher couldn't show me was that if I concentrated more on what lay before my bored and glazed-over eyes, I would be amazed at what lay beneath. The famous philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that if we invest ourselves in Jewish study, and open our hearts and minds in a posture of wonder, our boredom will be replaced with a sense of awe and fascination, of spiritual joy and ecstasy, a renewed sense of passion and compassion for life, and ultimately a greater sense of peace in our hearts.

We need to live a life in which we consciously, freely, and fully commit to the principles, the causes, and the purposes of our covenant with God. Our covenant is not a lease, where we'll commit for a year and renegotiate later. We need to not make half-hearted or temporary commitments, but to make our commitment a covenant, an agreement we endeavor to last for the rest of our lives.

Professor Carol Ochs once said that a covenant is a life-long commitment we make, not fully appreciating the depth and breadth of the commitment, but having faith in the knowledge that it has the power to change our lives. It's scary to make a commitment. Commitment makes us vulnerable, commitment seems to shut out our options, but ultimately, commitment is what will bring us where we want to be.

This year I invite you to recommit yourselves and your families to the covenant of Israel. Pledge with me that we will take our Judaism more seriously. Pledge with me that we will not deny our children a full Jewish education, and insist they continue their Jewish education through High School and beyond. Pledge with me that we will make time each week for Jewish study, to delve into the stores of Jewish religious wisdom and

expand what we know. Sign up for at the Union For Reform Judaism's "Ten Minutes of Torah" e-mail.<sup>5</sup> Take just ten minutes a day to learn something about the weekly Torah portion, something new about our prayerbook, and something new about Jewish law. The Temple Website will have a link so you can sign up. Join me on Saturday mornings at 9:30 for an hour of Torah study - you need have no religious background to walk away with an invigorating sense of amazement and wonder at the magic of our holy text. Sign up for a class, participate in Mitzvah Day, journey with us to Israel, take part in our congregation's Torah writing project.

In this New Year 5771, let us reclaim our sense of awe and wonder, and cast off the boredom we bring to our Jewish lives. Let us forgive our fourth grade Hebrew school teachers, and reclaim a sense of passion and joy in our ongoing commitment to God's holy purposes for us - lives that are filled with love and excitement, fulfillment and peace.

---

<sup>5</sup> See link -- <http://urj.org/learning/torah/ten/>