

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Morning  
September 29, 2011 - 1 Tishri, 5772  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

Thirty five years ago, on June 27, 1976, Air France Flight 139 travelling from Tel Aviv to Paris via Athens was hijacked by Arab terrorists who boarded during the Athens stopover. The hijackers, armed with guns and grenades, eventually forced the plane to fly to Entebbe, Uganda. The hijacking turned out to be a collaborative effort between the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin. By the end of the day on June 29, the terrorists demands called for the release of 53 convicted terrorists held in Israel, and four other countries.

Yonatan Netanyahu, the older brother of the current Israeli Prime Minister, was the commander of an elite force in the IDF that was simply called "The Unit". As his brother Iddo wrote in the definitive account of the mission, Yoni knew that the Unit would be called upon to mount a rescue effort. The plan was incredibly daring. The Israelis would fly four Hercules aircraft with 200 soldiers, armored personnel carriers, and a mock up of the Mercedes limousine used by the Ugandan dictator and land at the airport in the dark of night. They would mount an attack on the old airport terminal where the hostages were being held, and fly everyone home.

Drew Middleton, military analyst for the New York Times called the raid on Entebbe "An operation with no precedent in military history." The mission was audacious and fraught with risk. Amazingly, there were almost no casualties, and among the soldiers, only one death: the mission commander Yoni Netanyahu.

Yoni, who was virtually unknown to the Israeli public and the world before the raid was an extraordinary leader. One story in particular his brother Iddo remembered was a visit to Yoni's base. During his service, Iddo could not remember ever having even a conversation with his commanding officer. Yoni, on the other hand, shepherded a dozen of his own soldiers through the infirmary, ensuring that each one received the best medical care. He inspired his men to give their best and to be the best. He demanded excellence from his troops, and got it because he asked the best of himself. He was never unwilling to do what he asked of others, never unwilling to go the extra mile. He was also never unwilling to admit what he didn't know, and to learn what wisdom others had to share. Once, when he was

first in command, his team failed in an important training exercise. He went to meet with his commanders, but instead of making excuses or rushing out of the meeting, he sat with his commanders, notebook in hand, for hours, reviewing what he could have done differently, asking for advice, seeking how his unit could improve. Three weeks later, they repeated the operation, and performed flawlessly.

For Yoni, and his men, their service and their mission were not about their own personal glory but about something much bigger - the defense of the state they loved, and the security of the people they served.

We talk a lot about leadership these days. Throughout our society much of what we hear is a clamoring for real leadership, better leadership. There is a deep sense of frustration in our country about the performance of our nation's leaders. In a CBS/New York Times poll on September 15, only 42 percent of Americans approved of the president's job performance; 50 percent disapproved. In the same poll, only 12 percent of Americans approved of the job performance of the US Congress; 80 percent disapproved. Almost three quarters of the citizens of our country say the United States is headed in the wrong direction.

The dysfunction that we see in the highest offices of public life in our country is as frustrating and it is dispiriting. Our country faces incredible problems. Millions of people are out of work, businesses are folding, the rate of poverty is higher than we've seen in decades, and the suffering of millions is devastating. And yet, with all the challenges we face, our leaders seem completely unable to do what is necessary to get things back on track. In all the conversations I have had with friends of every political stripe, hardly anyone seems to have a sense of confidence in our leaders, and there is a growing sense of gloom when it comes to our future.

But maybe we're barking up the wrong tree. Maybe in this season of reflection, when we're asked to turn our attention inward, we need to ask ourselves different questions. Maybe instead of bemoaning the qualities of our leaders, we need to ask ourselves what kind of citizens we have chosen to be.

The fact is that nowadays, we participate in society very differently than people used to. In his famous book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam studies the decline in America's civic investment and participation. From a peak of civic and religious involvement in the early 1960s, Putnam reports that active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations collapsed at an astonishing rate - falling by more than half in just a few

decades. We don't volunteer as much as we used to, we don't join organizations as much as we used to, we don't care nearly as much for the common good as we used to. These trends persist into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to the present day.

We have created what I'd like to call an IPOD culture. The IPOD was the single most successful product launch of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's an amazingly cool device. I love mine and I'm sure many of you love yours. But in many ways it defines the experience of the world in which we live. Unlike in years past, when we would listen to music together on the radio in the car or on the stereo in the family room, the IPOD is a solitary experience. You listen by yourself, and no one else gets to share in that experience, as the music is almost always pumped into one and only one head. The IPOD is convenient - it goes anywhere and it requires very little effort to use. It is defined by its customization - you only have to listen to exactly the music you like. You get to hear exactly what you want, whenever you want.

In our society, we want an IPOD kind of life. We want life to be fully customized to our specifications, we want to define what we experience, and when we experience it. We like things easy and convenient, and we don't want to have to deal with anyone else's preferences but our own. We want what we want when we want it. Everything is personalized and on-demand, from the television we watch, to the things we want to buy, to the experiences we want to have.

But our laser-like focus on our own individual cares and concerns comes at a cost. Historian Kenneth T. Jackson writes: "A major casualty of America's drive-in culture is the weakened 'sense of community' ... I refer to a tendency for social life to become 'privatized,' and to a reduced feeling of concern and responsibility among families for their neighbors ... The real shift," he says, "is the way in which our lives are now centered inside the house, rather than on the neighborhood or the community.. "

As our lives become more atomized and private, our civic involvement declines. We no longer attend public meetings, we don't chair committees, we volunteer fewer hours. We spend our time taking care of ourselves, indulging in our own needs, wants, and desires.

All this has changed the way we look at the world around us. We no longer think like citizens, but like consumers. We expect the world to cater to our needs, our wants, our desires. We expect others to make our lives more convenient, and we

expect to get more and more for a lower and lower investment of time, energy, and care.

While we experience these phenomena acutely in our day and age, these problems are certain not unique to our generation. Throughout the centuries Jewish tradition has taught us that our relationship with God is found, not alone, but in the nexus of community. The pinnacle of Jewish history was found at Mt. Sinai, where all of the Jewish people, secured finally in a divine web of relation, each one invested in care and concern for the other, were able collectively to hear the commanding voice of the Holy One, a voice which demanded that they create a society of love, care, concern, and trust, a society where one had to be keep one's word, be honest and respectful, and guard against causing harm. The project of building the tabernacle, the sanctuary the Israelites would carry with them while wandering in the wilderness, was only to be built when the community came together voluntarily, each person giving only when his heart was moved to give. The Talmud states it most plainly in the Pirke Avot where Hillel declares: "Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibur - Do not separate yourself from your community." We are admonished to consider the poor as members of our own household, to care for the vulnerable - the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. We are admonished to celebrate life together, to see the birth of a child as a cause for communal celebration, to see his growth and education as a community responsibility, to celebrate her marriage as if she were our own child, to visit him when he is sick and comfort her when she is in mourning. The celebration of Judaism is not a private affair, and a Jewish life is not lived in private. Our cares and concerns ought not be solely for our own sakes, and our energies need to be directed to causes greater than ourselves.

Once when Iddo Netanyahu was visiting his brother at his base, he met his high school friend Michael at the gate. Iddo asked why Michael was serving sentry duty. "Don't ask," he said. "Things are a mess. I've got a stress fracture and I can't take part in training exercises."

"What company are you in?"

"Haruv. Your brother's company. I just feel awful about this injury. Really awful."

"How come?" he asked.

"Listen - how can you say no to a commander like that? How can you?"

What could engender that kind of commitment in a young man like Michael? What could have inspired him to that level of

devotion? It wasn't from what he expected of his commander, but what his commander inspired him to want to contribute. He felt inspired to embrace the larger mission, and it is that same inspiration that enabled the Unit to carry out the greatest rescue mission ever. The mission was incredibly risky, difficult, and dangerous, and yet members of the Unit actively lobbied Yoni to participate, and those who were not asked to participate felt a great sense of loss. Every member of that unit wanted to participate because they had devoted their lives to building something together, not simply a Jewish state, but a world in which the Jewish people would no longer be vulnerable, no longer be persecuted, no longer be captured with no one to redeem them. They wanted to build a world in which the Jewish people were strong, capable, and bound together in a common bond of mutual care, responsibility, and life.

Think about why you joined Temple Beth El. Many people join our synagogue because of a service they feel like they need to get - a religious education for our children, an opportunity to celebrate an important life-cycle event, such as Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a wedding, or God-forbid, a funeral. Maybe we join because we want to have access to a resource that provides opportunities for our own spiritual growth and expression.

But what if we thought about synagogue membership differently? What if instead of thinking about what we can get from the synagogue, we thought about what gifts we can bring to the synagogue? What would it be like if Temple Beth El was not, in our consciousness, a service provider, but rather a community to which we hoped to offer our service?

Peter Block, in his book *COMMUNITY: The Structure of Belonging*, suggests that citizenship is not a series of questions that ask what we derive as benefits and entitlements of belonging to a community. Citizenship is not about getting the best value for our dollar or about making sure we get everything we paid for. Citizenship is a series of questions that ask what we can contribute to the community. Citizenship comes about, not when we look to be served, but rather when we look to offer service. Citizenship is not when we look to our leaders for answers, but when we offer answers to our leaders.

I am proud that so many members of our congregation serve as officers and board members of a host of community organizations - Ruth Rales Jewish Family Service, the Levis JCC, the Donna Klein Jewish Academy, the Jewish Association for Residential Care, the Jewish Federation and the Jewish Community Foundation. We serve as presidents and board members of PTAs and school foundations. We serve our congregation as officers

and board members, leaders in sisterhood, brotherhood, and parenthood, the Giving Tree, Zugot, and on a wide variety of committees and initiatives.

And what do we get from our service and the investment of precious resources like time, energy, and finances? Not only do we advance the mission of the organizations we seek to help, but we get much more. We learn valuable skills of organizing and working with others, how to run a meeting, how to give a presentation, how to plan and execute a project, how to lobby public officials. We build a network of acquaintances and friends that may help us build a business, find a babysitter for our kids, find a few new friends that may be good company on a Saturday night, or build friendships that may last a lifetime. Oh yeah, and one more thing. In addition to enjoying a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that comes from helping to build something larger than ourselves, we may simply have a really good time.

If we want to transform our society into one that more effectively cares for itself, then we need to begin to take far more seriously our responsibilities as citizens mutually responsible for one another. Communities are built by marshalling the assets and gifts of their citizens, not from struggling to find the magic formula that will somehow meet the needs or deficiencies we want to have solved.

So in the new year, I have a simple question: What will we choose to build together? What gifts do you possess that you can offer to our community? Many families in our congregation, when the children have completed their Jewish education and are off into their own lives, begin to ask a simple question: Now what?

Now what is a good question to think of during the High Holy days. In answering this question, it would seem natural for us to ask: "What does the synagogue offer me?" And while it's a fair question, there is a better question. That question is: "What do we want to create together?"

This fall Temple Beth El will be convening a series of focus groups for our adult members to begin to ask this question as we seek to recreate and reenvision what adult life at Temple Beth El looks like. We invite you to participate in that conversation, to offer your ideas, your dreams, your wisdom, and to invite you to commit to helping us create a new future for the synagogue. This is the question we will be asking for years to come, not simply for members who are in the post-carpool phase of life, but for all members of the congregation.

On this Rosh HaShanah, as we begin a New Year, let us pledge reengage as citizens of our community. Let us look deep within to take stock of our gifts, and then resolve to offer those gifts to our community, certainly this congregational community, but also the larger community in which we live, and the nation that needs us to dream. Let us spend less time assigning blame for what has past and more time imagining what we could build together. Perhaps if we choose to be different kinds of citizens, then we can truly accomplish what others would say is impossible. And together we can make the year 5772 the dawn of a new era, of strengthened community, of renewed prosperity, of a greater sense of purpose meaning and of lasting peace.