

SHABBAT SERMON
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Two Rights Don't Make a Wrong ...

Last Shabbos marked an anniversary for the Jewish people ... this Shabbos marks an anniversary for the Jewish people. Together they explain why I would never want to be Prime Minister of the state of Israel, and also help us to better understand something we're going to eat at the Pesach Seder.

Pesach is right around the corner. This is the season for asking questions. But the truth of the matter is, for a Jew, every season is a time for asking questions. We are the people who answer questions with a question! We are the people that we are because we ask questions. Isadore I. Rabi, a Jewish Nobel Prize winner in physics, when asked, "Why did you become a scientist rather than a doctor, lawyer or business man like the other immigrant kids in your neighborhood?" replied, "My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Whenever I came home from school she never asked me, 'Did you learn anything today?' she asked, 'Did you ask a good question today?' That difference – asking good questions – made me become a scientist."

Well, we're living in an age when questions are asked of rabbis that were never asked before; everything from "Can you say kaddish for your dog?" to whether Spencer is an appropriate name to remember Grandpa Shloimi. But for me, in some ways, the most unique, most "this generation" question I ever received is one I've told in classes but never in a sermon. So listen ...

A while back a woman calls me and tells me that she and her husband are expecting a child in June. They don't know if it's a boy or a girl. But what they want to know is whether the child is Jewish. So, I immediately ask, "Are YOU Jewish?" And she replies, "Yes, but I'm not carrying the child." I say, "What do you mean you're not carrying the child?" So she explains that she and her husband had difficulty conceiving and so what they did was, they took his sperm and her egg, and put it in a petri dish and then had it inseminated into another woman. To which I immediately chimed in, "You did what! I come from Brooklyn and there we had a completely different way of making babies!" Anyway, as it turns out, the surrogate mother is not Jewish ... so, the question is: does the baby's religion follow the donor mother, or the delivery mother ... or something like that!

You tell me: what do you think? By a show of hands, who would you consider the "real" mother ... the biological mother or what's called the "gestational surrogate mother?" Let's see by a show of hands ... how many vote for the biological mother? How many vote for the surrogate mother?

Now let me tell you the correct answer from the perspective of Jewish law, an answer I didn't know, as I explained to my caller: I'm only a general practitioner ... I would have to

contact a specialist. And I called a rabbi who is noted for his knowledge of Jewish medical ethics. This is what he told me: the correct answer is: you're right! You are ALL right! There is a clear case to be made for the biological mother and there is a clear case to be made for the surrogate mother! And so, is the child Jewish or not? And the answer is: yes! And we treat the child accordingly. So what do we do? If it is a girl, we take her to the mikvah for the sake of conversion but we don't recite a blessing because it's possible that she doesn't have to be converted. And to recite a blessing you might be taking God's name in vain. The same is true in regard to a boy; he is taken to a mikvah and again, no blessing is recited. And on the eighth day he has a bris. Which leaves us with one question: a different blessing is recited at a bris for a Jewish baby then is recited at a bris where we are converting a child – or an adult for that matter. So, which blessing do we recite ... the one for a natural Jew or the one for a converting Jew? Answer is: neither! We can't recite either blessing because we are not sure which one to recite, and we don't want to take God's name in vain.

What do we learn from this? We learn that an old Jewish joke is not really a joke. You know the old Jewish joke about the two people who come to their rabbi with a dispute. The first one tells his side and he argues so persuasively that the rabbi says to him, "You're right!" Then the other person tells his side and he, too, argues so persuasively that the rabbi says to him, "You're right!" The rabbi's wife is listening and at this point she loses her patience and says to her husband, "Idiot! They're saying opposite things yet you're telling them they're right." To which he replies, "You're right!"

No joke ... it's important to understand in life sometimes there are two "rights" and that does not make a wrong.

Which brings us to our two anniversaries, and why I wouldn't want to be Prime Minister of the state of Israel. This past Thursday marked a historic anniversary for the Jewish people. It was 30 years ago – March 26, 1979 – that Israel signed a peace treaty with Egypt at the White House. The picture of that moment is still etched in our minds of Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter clasping hands together. (The fact that both Sadat and Begin are gone and Carter is still around could make one question whether there is a God in this world ... but that's for another sermon!) I remember my feelings 30 years ago; it was a feeling shared by all lovers of Israel ... no more war, no more heartbreak, and no more suffering.

That was 30 years ago this week. Little did we know what awaited us. Not only did that peace turn out to be a "cold" one, with the President of Egypt never agreeing to make an official visit to Israel in the past 30 years ... but the past 30 years have brought us on-going war, terrorism and heartbreak. Which brings us to last week. Last Shabbos marked 1000 days that Gilad Shalit – the Israeli soldier kidnapped by Hamas – was still held as a hostage in the on-going battle between Israel and the Palestinians who still do not recognize Israel's right to exist.

There is no issue that more united the people of Israel than their single-minded determination to see Gilad Shalit freed. But it is possible that there is also no issue that more divides the Israeli people than the issue of the *price* to be paid for freeing Gilad Shalit. Hamas is demanding the release of 450 terrorists that Israel has imprisoned. Some of these are the masterminds and perpetrators of some of the worst horrors that Israel has experienced in recent years; from the suicide bombings at the Pesach Seder in Netanya to bus bombings and bombings at the Dolphinarium. Israel has agreed to release many of them, but insists that some of them who are released not be allowed to return to Gaza or the West Bank where they will go back to killing Jews, but that they must be expelled to some other country.

Now the fact is that in the past Israel has released thousands of prisoners to get back their hostages. And the fact is, *pidyon shevuim*, ransoming hostages is an important aspect of Jewish law. But Jewish law also says that one is not permitted to pay too high a price. So what is too high a price? That's the question that divides Israel. Leading up to that 1000th day anniversary, Gilad Shalit's parents camped outside of the Prime Minister's office, joined by many others calling for the Prime Minister to do whatever was necessary to gain the release of Gilad Shalit. But encamped across the street from them was another group and this group was made up of families who lost loved ones through the barbarity of the terrorists who were now to be released. From their perspective, releasing these terrorists would only encourage more terrorism in the future.

So, who is right ... Gilad Shalit's mother, who wrote an open letter to him last week in which she said, "Almost 1000 days ... and every hour, every minute, every second are an eternity ... my eyes scream and my heart roars at the country's leaders: please release my son! Bring him back to me, his mother ... I trusted my country to fulfill the commitment between me – the mother – sending her son to the draft and the powers that be but they have not returned you ... Gilad, I want to hug you, hold you close to me and to the bosom of your family. I want to return as a united family to our comfortable anonymity that we once had ... I want my son Gilad." Or are the parents of Israeli children who were killed by terrorists right in the letter they wrote to Mrs. Shalit where they write, "For two weeks we sat across the street and watched you. We saw you sitting at your tent and receiving hundreds of visitors. Even though our children are buried at cemeteries we would not want to trade places with you today ... Gilad needs to be released in a way that secures our future, that would ensure the cessation of abductions and would prevent terror. We must do it in a way that chooses the present and the future for the sake of all citizens of our country, over Gilad's well being."

Israel is split on who is right. And in some ways, every Israeli is split on who is right. One of Israel's most respected editorialists, Yoel Marcus, writing in Haaretz, a while back wrote a column entitled, "Yes, at any price." Last week he wrote a column entitled, "Not at any price." So who is right? This is a decision that the Prime Minister has to make. And I would never want to have his job, because you and I know that both sides are right! And two rights don't make a wrong!

This is an important lesson for us to keep in mind as we prepare for the Pesach Seder. The Seder is the time when family is together. The Seder is a time for family discussions. And sometimes those discussions turn ugly. I remember reading someone's memoir telling of the Pesach Seder where such a fight broke out that her father threw the brisket at her mother. That's some memory ... I'm sure never to be forgotten! So when a discussion comes up at your Pesach Seder and there is disagreement, remember: you may not be the only person that is right. It depends upon one's perspective and no one expressed this more clearly than Geulah Cohen, a right-wing, hardline member of the Knesset during the first Lebanon war, when she was asked what she would do if her son – who was a paratrooper in that war – was taken prisoner. Her reply was, "As a mother, I would be outside the Prime Minister's office with a megaphone 24 hours a day calling on the government to do everything it took to obtain his release. But as a Knesset member, I would sit inside the Prime Minister's office and tell him not to listen to the people outside." Yes, she understood that how she would view a hostage swap would depend on whether she was viewing from the perspective of a member of the Knesset or from the perspective of a mother and both perspectives are right.

This is a lesson that is very hard for some people to remember. And so, to remind you at the Seder, right before we eat the meal we have *korech* where we put the *moror* between two

pieces of *matzoh*, make it into a sandwich and eat it. Why do we do this? We had just eaten a piece of *matzoh* and we had just eaten a piece of *moror*. Why the need for this sandwich? It goes back to a dispute in the Talmud. In the Bible we are told regarding the Pascal sacrifice that it had to be “*al matzos u’mororim yochluhu* – it had to be eaten with *matzoh* and *moror*.” According to some rabbis, this meant that the *matzoh* and *moror* had to be eaten separately. Other rabbis said it doesn’t make a difference. Hillel said it means that they have to be eaten together. So what do we do? First, we eat them separately, and then we eat them together ... reminding us that on some issues, you’re right ... you’re right ... and you’re also right!

Let us take this lesson to heart and then at the Pesach Seder not only will the food be good, but the discussions will be good as well. And we will truly have a Pesach which is a *chag kasher v’sameach* – a Pesach holiday that is not only kosher, but joyous as well.

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