

SHABBAT SERMON
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It Depends on Your Perspective ...

Today I want to take a courageous stand. Today I rise to defend the opinion of a controversial figure in the American Jewish community. Despite what might be at stake, today I rise in solidarity with Rabbi Ross Singer.

Two weeks ago from this pulpit, Rabbi Singer delivered a sermon supporting President Obama's statement that a Judge should show empathy and compassion, assets that the President believed Sonia Sotomayor possessed. What Rabbi Singer had to say did not surprise me. When this whole issue came under discussion, he had written a well thought out and well researched Talmudic perspective on the subject which he shared with rabbis across the country through a rabbinic chat room. His thoughts, I can tell you, became the basis of many rabbinic sermons in recent weeks! However, when I asked Rabbi Singer how his sermon was received here at Beth Tfiloh, he said that overall, it was fine, but after services, one or two people disagreed with him. That's got to stop! Disagreeing with your rabbi's sermon is a very unChristian thing to do! And it can start a pattern here at Beth Tfiloh that can only lead to murder and torture!

The fact of the matter is, I do agree with Rabbi Singer ... and Jewish sources also agree with Rabbi Singer. A judge should show empathy and compassion. But I would go a step further. While Rabbi Singer defended this concept in regard to Judge Sotomayor, he disagreed with her statement referring to herself as being qualified to be a judge, because in her words, she is a "wise Latina." People were upset with those words, so much so that even the President and even Judge Sotomayor tried to backtrack from them ... tried to backtrack from the idea that a person's ethnic background should play a role in their legal perspective. But I don't see what the problem is! Ruth Bader Ginsburg has oftentimes spoken of the role her Jewish roots have played in her legal outlook. We as Jews took pride when she expressed those feelings. So, what's the problem now? Diversity on the Court is very important, not just as a symbol but in the outlook that diverse perspectives bring to the Court's thinking. There was a recent Supreme Court case of a 13 year old girl who had been strip searched by Arizona school officials looking for drugs. During the oral arguments some of the Justices minimized the girl's lasting humiliation, but Judge Ginsburg stood out in her concern for the teenager. She was later quoted as saying that the other members of the Court "have never been a 13 year old girl ... it's a very sensitive age for a girl ... I didn't think my colleagues, some of them, quite understood." Eventually, she swayed the thinking of the men on the Court to her side. Being a woman made a difference ... just as being a Jew makes a difference to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. So why not for Sonia Sotomayor?

Even more, there are Jewish laws that are based on the diverse experience and backgrounds of rabbis. Two of the most noted rabbis in the Talmud are Reb Yochanan and Resh Lakish. There is a debate in the Talmud when is a knife or a sword considered complete ... as only a completed item is eligible to the laws of impurity. Reb Yochanan says: a knife becomes complete and eligible to become impure when the utensil is tempered in a furnace. But Resh Lakish says: no, it requires another step to completion; it requires then be polished with water. Resh Laskish, believed that a knife or sword used against others must be shiny in order to strike fear in the hearts of potential victims. When Reb Yochanan heard Resh Lakish express this

opinion, Reb Yochanan said to him, “You must know what you’re talking about.” In his words, “A thief knows the tools of his thievery.” You see, before becoming a Talmudic sage Resh Lakish had been a robber! And so, Reb Yochanan is saying: you are better qualified to establish this law because your life experience puts you in a position of knowing: “It takes one to know one!” ... You know better, you’ve been there! Yes, life experience makes a difference in our judgment and indeed, I believe, played a role in one of the most famous of all Talmudic disagreements.

You all know who Noach was. Noach built the ark that saved the world. But the Biblical verse which describes him is the basis of a well-known rabbinic disagreement. “*Elah toldot Noach – Noach ish tzaddik tamim haya b’dorotov et ha-Elokim hithalech Noach*. These are the generations of Noach. Noach was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generation. Noach walked with God.” A seemingly simple and clear cut statement but that’s not the way the rabbis saw it. The rabbis wanted to know what it means when it says that “Noach was righteous and wholehearted *“in his generation.”* And immediately the biblical commentator Rashi says “Some of our rabbis explain it to his credit: *he was righteous even in his generation; it follows that had he lived in a generation of righteous people he would have been even more righteous, owing to the force of good example.* Others, however, explain it to his discredit: “*In comparison with his own generation he was accounted righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Abraham he would have been accounted as of no importance.*” This argument always bothered me. I can understand the rabbi who argued that this statement is to Noach’s credit. After all, the Torah clearly says he was in “*ish tzaddik – a righteous man.*” The Torah clearly says, “He walked with God.” You can’t do better than that! Why should this other rabbi question his credentials and say, yes in *his* generation he was considered good, but by the standards of Abraham’s generation he wouldn’t have been considered much of anything. That’s so unfair!

I think a case can be made that the judgments of the rabbis had little to do with Noach. It had a lot more to do with the rabbis themselves. According to the Talmud, it was Rabbi Yochanan who made light of Noach. And it was Resh Lakish who held Noach in high esteem. At a very young age Reb Yochanan was placed in the academy to study. Right from the start Reb Yochanan was surrounded by students, scholars and righteous people. For him that was the norm. Resh Lakish, on the other hand, as we said, started off as a robber. He also worked as a gladiator in order to support himself. Resh Lakish saw and experienced the world as it was. He knew of all of its allurements and enticements. And yet, he decided to become a Talmudic scholar. Is it not possible that Resh Lakish defended the character of Noach because he could appreciate Noach’s greatness? He could understand the challenge that Noach faced living in a sinful world and still remain loyal and steadfast in his righteousness? Resh Lakish understood what Reb Yochanan – who lived in the sheltered environment of the Yeshiva world - perhaps could not have understood.

Which brings us to converts, obviously! Our Bat Mitzvah address this morning was really something! When I first heard it, I was blown away! One does not usually speak about conversion in such a public forum and in such open terms. But the more I thought of what she had to say, it saddened me deeply to realize that if she were born today she and her family might not have been able to convert. What a loss that would have been for us. The fact is – sad but true – there has never been a time in the history of our people that it has been made more difficult for a person to convert than today. One would think that anyone who wants to convert, after the Holocaust when we lost 1/3 of our people, should be welcomed with open arms. And one would think that in a time when intermarriage threatens the underpinnings of our people, everything possible should be done to encourage non-Jewish spouses and their children to become part of the Jewish people. Of course there are some who would say that Judaism never encouraged converts ... but that’s just not so! Maimonides writes how during the times of King David and King

Solomon, and I quote: “There were many converts who were converted before untrained courts. The High Court was suspicious of them but they did not reject them.” The noted Jewish historian, Salo Baron, points out that in the year 586 BCE there were 150,000 Jews; by the first century there were 8 million. What caused such a massive growth in population? In large part, he says, it was due to conversion. In fact, we were so successful in encouraging converts that in the Book of Matthew, it is written: “Alas you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you travel over sea and land to make a single proselyte and anyone who becomes one you make twice as fit for hell as you are.” It is only in the last 100 years or so that it seems every roadblock was thrown into the path of potential converts until it has reached a point today where, truth to tell, I am not sure that anyone I convert will be accepted by the Rabbinate in Israel. There have been women converts in Israel whose conversion was revoked – something which was unheard of in the past – because they were found to be wearing pants or didn’t cover their hair! Rabbis like myself and Rabbi Newman and many other leaders of Modern Orthodox synagogues not only have the credentials of their converts questioned, but their own credentials questioned as well! Just last week the Chief Rabbi of the city of Rishon Lezion refused to issue a marriage license for a couple living in his city because he deemed the bride’s conversion to be “unkosher.” And who was it who had converted this bride? The conversion had been performed under the auspices of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate of Israel! So if their conversions are not accepted, what can you expect of mine?

I think of the people I have converted over the years ... so many have become regulars in our synagogue. And so many more are more observant than their spouses! Many of them are giving their children a day school education. My ultra-Orthodox colleagues would reject them. What a loss that would be for our people!

This is a terrible situation we are confronting ... and we are confronting it in large part because the rabbis who have been put into power are the ultra-Orthodox, and for all practical purposes, they’ve never really had to deal with a convert. In fact, they’ve never had to really deal with non-Jews, living as they do in places like B’nei Barak and Monsey. They have “cases” brought to them for opinions. I and other rabbis have people – real people – come to us. Like Reb Yochanan, they are isolated from the world around them and have no idea of the sacrifices, the difficulties, the problems, the family conflicts, that arise when someone chooses to convert. There was a rabbi in ancient times who understood this ... it is this rabbi who is quoted in the Talmud as having said: “In the eyes of God a proselyte is preferred to a Jew, even to those Jews who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and of whom God is so proud. Why is this so? Because if it were not for the lightening and the thunder and the blowing of the Heavenly Shofar at the time of the giving of the Torah, the Jews would not have accepted it, but a proselyte who has not seen nor heard all this and embraced the Torah of his own free will – could God love anyone more than him?” I guess it should not come as a surprise to hear that the rabbi who said this was Resh Lakish!

Resh Lakish knew how hard it is to change. Resh Lakish understood the world in which he lived. Resh Lakish’s life experience enabled him to judge others in an open-minded, loving, embracing way. And we in the Jewish world, in the real world, a world of Justice Ginsburgs and Jews-by-choice must learn to do the same.

Yesterday in the synagogue we sounded the Shofar ushering in the Hebrew month of Elul – the month preceding Rosh Hashana. The blast of that Shofar is there to remind us: *hinei baw yom hadin* – behold the day of judgment comes. Soon, we are to be judged by God. How do we want Him to judge us? According to Jewish tradition, God rewards and punishes, *midah k’neged midah* – measure for measure. He judges that way as well. To those who are narrow minded in

their perspective and quick and harsh in their judgment, that's the way God judges them. And for those who, in judging, give others the benefit of the doubt . . . that's what God gives them as well. In the words of the Talmud: "*K'shem sh'dantani l'zchut – Hamakom yadin etchem lizchut* – If you judge man by giving the benefit of the doubt, God will judge you by giving you the benefit of the doubt!" And so in the weeks ahead, let all of us who judge – and all of us do – not only those who sit on the bench – let all of us who judge hesitate a hundred times before we say anything cruel about anyone. Let us check and re-check our motives and our perspectives. Let us look at each case from our perspective . . . and theirs! And let us judge everyone on the scale of merit, because as we judge, so shall we be judged.

May we all be judged for a *shanah tovah u'metukah* – a good and sweet New Year.
Amen.

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