

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*“Bands of Brothers”*

It's not too often that a story from Baltimore makes it to the front page of the *New York Times*. But that's just what happened on Nov. 16 of this year. As soon as I read the story, I thought about how smart my mother was in something she taught us more than 45 years ago.

It was in June, 1961 that my family found itself in rather unique circumstances. I had just graduated High School and was about to enter as a freshman at Yeshiva University. At the same time, my brother, Saul, was receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from Yeshiva University. My brother, Jerry, was receiving his Master's in Hebrew Literature and Rabbinic Ordination from Yeshiva University. And my father was receiving his Doctorate from Yeshiva University ... all at the same time! This was considered to be so rare and unique that the *New York Times*, *New York Post* and *Daily News* carried a picture of my family with an article detailing what was occurring. And while so many people were extending mazel tovs to my family, I remember my mother saying, "I hope and pray that this is the last time our family name will be in the newspapers, because nine out of ten times, when your name gets in the newspapers it is not going to be for something good."

Well, that's just what happened to Howard and Alvin Krongard on Nov. 16 of this year. Howard, known as 'Buzzy' and Alvin, known as 'Cookie' are native Baltimoreans who have risen to positions of prominence, each in their own right, and each is well known and highly respected for their achievements. Cookie Krongard is the State Department's Inspector General. Buzzy Krongard, after rising to the top of Alex Brown & Sons, rose to the number three post in the CIA. Not bad for two Jewish boys who were born and raised in Ashburton. Their father was in the "cloak and suit" business. They went to P.S. #18 at Park Circle and then on to Garrison Junior High, then to City College where they both earned scholarships to Princeton. We will never know what contributions these two could have made to the Jewish people. After college, we didn't hear much about them as Jews. But if they never made it as Jews, they certainly became American success stories.

But on Nov. 16 they found themselves on the front page of the *New York Times*; a day after they were on the front pages of The Sunpaper. And as my mother had warned, it wasn't for something good. The story, on its simplest level, involves a potential conflict of interest. Buzzy serves on the Advisory Board of Blackwater, the Security Contractor that is under investigation for some of its actions in Iraq. But the investigation involves the State Dept. where his brother is Inspector General, leading to accusations that Cookie may be going easy on Blackwater because Buzzy serves on its Board. The conflict involves whether one brother knew of the other's involvement. But what made the conflict into a modern version of a Greek tragedy, what made the story being headlined with the words: "Brothers Bad Blood and the Blackwater

Tangle” is that these brothers barely speak to each other, have little – if anything – to do with each other.

This week Jews the world over usher in the festival of Chanukah. Next Saturday something will take place that takes place every year during the festival of Chanukah. Our Torah portion will be the sedra of Miketz. That’s what happens every year ... that’s how the calendar works out. No other holiday ends up with the same regular Sabbath portion – just Chanukah and Miketz. What do Chanukah and Miketz have in common? Well, I’ll give you one answer: they both tell the story of brothers. But oh, how different the stories are! The Chanukah story tells how the five sons of Mattathias, the High Priest, banded together leading a revolt against the mighty Syrian/Greek Empire. The story in next week’s Torah portion continues to tell the story of the split that takes place with Joseph and his brothers who sell him into slavery in Egypt.

Our sages, in arranging the calendar in such a way for these two stories to be told together, provide us a powerful lesson: how brothers treat each other affects not only themselves but can have far reaching affects that no one could ever dream of. The Maccabee brothers’ military victory not only brought about the survival of Judaism but without this victory there wouldn’t have been a Christianity. Indeed, until the sixth century there was a date in the Christian calendar celebrating the Maccabee victory. All this from a ‘band of brothers,’ brothers who stuck together.

What happens when brothers fight? Look what happened with Joseph and his brothers ... the conflict went way beyond the family. As the Talmud puts it in regard to the coat of many colors that evoked such jealous rage amongst the brothers: “A thread weighing only two selaim milat ... caused our forefathers to go down to Egypt.” It’s all because Joseph and his brothers couldn’t get along that our people endured 210 years of slavery in Egypt!

The juxtaposition of reading the story of Joseph and his brothers during Chanukah when we read the story of Judah and his brothers reminds us of just how important it is for brothers to get along.

It is not easy ... I know it’s not easy. Few brothers are as close as me and my brothers. And sometimes, believe me, it’s not easy! At my brother Jerry’s Bar Mitzvah, my brother Saul broke my arm! That wasn’t nice! There is always going to be squabbles amongst brothers. A while back there was a story in the newspaper about two brothers named Mike and Bob. Listen to how the story began: “Bob threw the first punch. That is one way he is different from his identical twin and doubles partner, Mike. Bob always throws the first punch. It was a year ago, in the back seat of a car ... one of the Bryan’s insulted the other. The other fired back ... Bob threw a punch. At their rented flat, Mike mule kicked - that is their term - Bob in the ribs. Bob smashed one of Mike’s guitars against the wall.” Sounds pretty bad, doesn’t it? But then one brother adds, “We were eating dinner together five minutes later.” Do you know who they are? They are Mike and Bob Bryan and they are the world champions in doubles tennis. Sure they fight, but they sure know how to play ball together! And most brothers, at some point, come to understand that. Look at our patriarchs ... Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael ... brothers in conflict. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau ... brothers in conflict. Similarly, Jacob’s sons were in conflict. But in each instance they got back together. When? The Torah tells us: “And

Abraham expired ... and Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah.” Similarly, says the Torah, “And Isaac expired ... and Esau and Jacob, his sons, buried him.” The same took place with Jacob’s sons when it came time to bury him. They were all united once again. Yes, better late than never, but why wait when it’s so late.

I remember some years ago reading a book called “Fathers Aren’t Supposed To Die.” It’s a story of five brothers who had grown distant in life and suddenly they all get the phone call; the phone call that all of us must inevitably get. Their father is lying in a hospital bed unable to speak, bleeding in the brain. The book poignantly describes how each of the brothers deals with their father’s death, but more so it describes how each of the brothers now deal with each other. A few sentences on the last page tells it all where the author, T.M. Shine, writes, “I think about how those days I spent holed up in the hospital rooms with my brother Will, were like when we brothers were jammed into a small bedroom as kids. I find some solace that we were so close in the beginning and so close in the end. Like so many fractured relationships maybe those are the only times that really matter. Maybe. But my heart truly tells me that it’s in the middle that we need one another the most. That is the only thing I have learned from this ordeal. It is my regret.” Yes, in the beginning and end, brothers and sisters are together. If you’re not now, reach out . . . it’s in the middle when you need each other the most.

And believe me, I don’t mean to leave out sisters! Joseph and his brothers and Judah and his brothers, each ‘bands of brothers’ according to our tradition, had a sister as well. Joseph and his brothers had Dinah. Judah and his brothers, according to one tradition, had a sister named Judith. In both cases the brothers took a united, protective, attitude toward their sister. And that’s the way it’s supposed to be!

You know, next Saturday not only provides us with the story of Joseph and his brothers and Judah Maccabee and his brothers, it also provides us an opportunity as we usher in the Sabbath to light both the Sabbath candles and the Chanukah candles. But let me ask you this question: What if you could only afford enough candles to do one – to light either for the Sabbath or for Chanukah? What should you do? Both are rabbinic commandments, both have equal status. But if you can only do one, which do you do? Jewish law says: You kindle the Sabbath lights. Why? While both commemorate great events and both have great religious significance, the Shabbos candles serve a purpose that the Chanukah candles do not. The Shabbos candles illuminate the house on Friday evening. The element of “Shalom Bayit” – family tranquility comes into play. If we have to eat in darkness, conflicts within the family can break out. And Jewish law has us do everything possible to avoid that, even if it means not lighting the Chanukah menorah.

Chanukah beckons. Chanukah is a time for gift giving. I can’t think of a more beautiful gift that one could give their parents – whether their parents are alive or live on through memory – then the gift of children united. I can’t think of a greater gift that you can give yourself. Yosef Jacobson, the editor-in-chief of the largest Yiddish/English weekly paper in the United States, points out that in last week’s Torah portion, we read of how the brothers Esau and Jacob were reunited. The next scene tells us, “Jacob arrived *whole* to the city of Shechem.” That is an extraordinary description for a human being. He arrived “whole.” Perhaps it was made possible because he had been reunited with his brother. Only when siblings stand together is each one

whole within themselves. Buzzy and Cookie Krongard may be at the pinnacle of success in America but they are not “whole” people. Something is missing! If you have a brother or sister, give them a gift for Chanukah. It can just be a phone call (try not to make it collect) to wish them a happy Chanukah, fulfilling the words of the psalmist: “Hinei mah tov u’mah na-im shevet achim gam yachad – how good and beautiful it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.” Amen.

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