

SHABBAT SERMON
JANUARY 2, 2010
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Lessons for the New Year from the Old Year ...

This is the first Shabbos in the New Year 2010 but I am still not finished with last year. I know that with the ball lowering at Times Square on New Years Eve we are supposed to “ring out the old and ring in the new.” But I still have some unfinished business from last year which I want to take care of this morning. There are three stories – three Jewish stories – I came across last year that I wanted to comment on, but somehow they didn’t fit in to any of my sermons. But the three are noteworthy because one was the most emailed story of the year, one the most exciting story of the year, and one the strangest story of the year.

Whenever a story of Jewish interest appears in a newspaper people email it to me ... sometimes more than one person. There was a story in the *New York Times* on Dec. 5 which at least a dozen people forwarded to me. The headline of the story was: “Yes, Miky, there are rabbis in Montana.” The story began with the words, “In Montana a rabbi is an unusual sight, so when a Hasidic one walked into the state capital last December with his long beard, black hat and long black coat, a police officer grabbed his bomb-sniffing German Shepherd and went to ask the exotic visitor a few questions.” Now the story, in and of itself, was quite remarkable. The comedian Lenny Bruce had a well known routine in which he differentiates between Jewish and non-Jewish and it included this line: “If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish ... it doesn’t matter if you are Catholic, if you live in New York you are Jewish! If you live in Butte, Montana, you are going to be goyish even if you are Jewish!” So yes, it was interesting to read that there are Jews – Hasidic Jews – living in Montana!

But that’s not the part of the story that I found most interesting. The part I found most interesting was the fact that when the rabbi had come to the State House, he was met by a policeman who introduced him to Miky – their security dog. It ends up that Miky was raised in Israel where he was trained by the Israel Defense Forces to sniff out explosives. The police in Montana had bought him to help in security in that state. But there was one problem ... Miky had been trained entirely in Hebrew! And the Montana police could not get him to respond to their commands. So they needed the rabbi to help translate for them.

And I thought to myself: here we are – 6 million Jews living in America – so few of us can speak a word of Hebrew ... and here is a dog who was trained to be able to. And I wondered to myself: if he can, why can’t we? I was raised in schools where they taught in Yiddish. Hebrew has always been a challenge for me ... I understand it but I get tongue-tied when I have to speak it with all of its grammatical variations. But after reading about Mikey, I decided that if he can do it ... so can I! And I challenge all of you to do the same. I suspect Mikey is not fluent in Hebrew, and you don’t have to be either, but a few Hebrew words here and there can set a tone and make all the difference. Let Mikey be our inspiration.

The most exciting Jewish story of the year was the recent announcement that Tootsie Rolls are now kosher! This is one of the greatest developments in American Jewish history since Oreos became kosher. With Tootsie Rolls now being kosher, it seems as if everything – or almost everything – is now kosher. Growing up I remember that whenever the family went away on a trip we had to bring along the necessary food because the supermarkets wherever we went had so little that was kosher. That is certainly not true anymore! We have come a long way from the time that Sherry and I went to Las Vegas some 35 years ago, and before takeoff there was an announcement from the Captain which proclaimed, “Would the two Jews who ordered kosher food please raise their hands!” I slid under my seat! But kosher is “in” now! Mohamed el Baradei was until recently the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and he was no friend of Israel. He is an Egyptian and a Muslim and usually found all sorts of excuses for not condemning Iran. In one of his last statements he said that Iran will feel it is “more kosher” if it has the knowledge for a nuke, but not the actual nuke. An Egyptian ... a Muslim ... an enemy of Israel is speaking about “more kosher!” Why aren’t Jews doing the same? I’m not talking about everyone becoming glatt kosher. I am talking about a first step ... and you want to hear a first step? There are parents in our preschool and Hebrew school and Day School that make pizza birthday parties and the pizza they get is from Papa Johns or Chuck-E-Cheese when they could be getting pizza from Tov Pizza or Mama Leah’s. In other words, they are making a conscious decision not to have a kosher party, knowing full well that there will be some children at the party who won’t be able to eat the pizza, and will end up feeling like second-class citizens! And all I will say to you is: if it means enough for Tootsie Rolls to go kosher to please the Jews, it should also mean that all of us could be a lot more kosher to please our fellow Jews.

For me the strangest Jewish story of the year was found in the April 6 edition of *Time Magazine* where well known people were asked to list who they thought should be included in *Time Magazine*’s “100 World’s Most Influential People.” LeBron James, the great basketball player, came up with a response that to this day no one has fully explained. He chose Jay Schottenstein. And he went on to explain, “Jay Schottenstein, an Ohio business leader and philanthropist, has supported the translation and elucidation of the Talmud Bavli into English, Hebrew and French. The Schottenstein edition of the Talmud is now utilized by more than 2 million people worldwide.” Can someone explain to me what LeBron James was thinking? He is choosing Jay Schottenstein because Schottenstein helped pay for the translation of the Talmud? Don’t tell me LeBron James studies the Daf Yomi every day! The truth of the matter is, his choice is a worthy one! The Artscroll translation of the Talmud, which Mr. Schottenstein helped fund, is one of the most significant works of Jewish scholarship. There had been an English translation of the Talmud – the Soncino edition – but that can’t compare to the Schottenstein Artscroll edition. This newest edition of the Talmud not only translates and not only put vowels into the Aramaic words, but the notes on the bottom make it possible to do what until now was never really possible for the masses: we can all sit and learn Talmud by ourselves. No, it doesn’t compare to having a teacher but still, the world of the Talmud is now open to all of us. LeBron James appreciates this ... why don’t we? Remember how significant the Talmud is. Jews and Christians both agree on the divinity of what Christians call the “Old Testament” – it is the Talmud that separates us and underscores what Jewish law and tradition really is. To be an intelligent Jew requires the study of the Talmud. And that’s why it is taught to young children as soon as they are able to comprehend it in Yeshiva. And that’s why there are adults who do

nothing else but study Talmud day and night. And then there is us. What do we do? How much time do we set aside for learning about our heritage? LeBron appreciates what's now available to us ... now we Jews must learn to do the same.

So those are the three stories I wanted to reflect on before we move on in this New Year. They are three wonderful stories, and if we learn from them – to use Hebrew a little more, to keep kosher a little more, to learn Talmud a little more – then we'll be in for quite a year ... a year in which we will fulfill the words we proclaimed at the end of this morning's Torah reading: "*Chazak chazak chazak v'nischazek* – we will be strong, we will be strong and we will strengthen one another."

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