

SHABBAT SERMON
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SYMBOLS

If one more person tells me that Rosh Hashana comes early this year, I'm going to have to bop him! Believe me; I know that Rosh Hashana comes early this year! The fact of the matter is, Rosh Hashana never comes on time ... it either comes early or it comes late. But thank God, it always comes ... and here it is just a few days before the beginning of the New Year and this morning I want to help you prepare some of the foods we as Jews eat as we usher in every New Year. For in that very food we will learn some lessons about two issues that were much talked about in recent months – by Americans and by Jews - Chelsea Clinton's wedding, and the proposed mosque in New York. But first the answer to a question that I know has always been on your minds: Why does a Jewish king have to be anointed near a spring? In the Talmud we are told that a king had to be anointed by a spring. Why? The Talmud answers: so as to symbolize that their monarchy will endure. A spring, you see, is an endless flow whereas a river could dry up in the summer or turn to ice in the winter. By anointing a king by a spring we are symbolically saying that this king's reign should always keep flowing just like a spring.

This seemingly cute and quaint law had ramifications that went way beyond it. For it is then that the Talmud teaches us that now that we have been taught "*simana milsa hi* - that symbols are important", there are several foods a Jew should eat on Rosh Hashana because what they symbolize is important. For example, we are told to eat beets. Why? Because the Hebrew word for "beets" – "silka" – has as its root the same letters that mean "remove." And so, when we eat the silka, we are symbolically praying that "*yistalku oyeiveinu* – our enemies – should be removed." From here a whole tradition of symbolic foods to be eaten at the start of the New Year developed. We eat honey because in Hebrew - *Devash* - has the same numeric value as "*Av harachamin* – compassionate Father." A colleague of mine pointed out that this Hebrew word for honey, "*devash*," has the same numeric value as the Hebrew word for "woman" – "*Isha*" – which is why we call our women, "honey." I don't know if that is so, but I do know that some eat the head of a fish on Rosh Hashana so that we should be at the head this year, and not at the tail. The apple is symbolic of fertility. And some make a big *tzimmes* on Rosh Hashana ... the use of carrots, strangely enough, is not because of its Hebrew name but because of its Yiddish translation. In Yiddish, carrots are "*mehren*" which also means "to increase." So, in eating the carrots we are symbolically praying for our good fortune to increase in the coming year.

Yes, symbols are important in Judaism. And that is why some Jews saw something positive in the recent marriage of Chelsea Clinton to Marc Mezvinsky. It was quite a sight ... the Methodist daughter of a past President of the United States and the present Secretary of State of the United States getting married under a *chuppah*, with a Ketubah and the groom wearing a *yarmulke* and a *tallit*. And while details of what was served at the dinner have not been released, under the circumstances it would not surprise me if there was a centerpiece of a chopped liver mold of the bride and groom! The noted Jewish sociologist, Steven Cohen from the Hebrew Union College, said that we should "celebrate the full acceptance of Jews by the larger society that this marriage represents." To Leonard Saxe of Brandeis University this wedding symbolized "a golden age for Jews in America."

But is that really what it symbolized? My issue is not with the bride and groom. I'm sure they are terrific young people and I do not stand in judgment of their decision to marry each other. That's their business ... not mine! My issue is with the rabbi who performed the wedding. He stood there as a

representative of the Jewish people. Are you aware of the fact that not only did this wedding go against the Orthodox perspective on Jewish law, and the Conservative perspective on Jewish law but even the Reform perspective on Jewish law which prohibits a rabbi from officiating at a wedding with a non-Jewish clergy, and one that takes place on Shabbos? Are you aware of the fact that our sages tell us that the *tallit* is a symbol meant to remind us to obey all 613 commandments? What was the rabbi thinking when he looked at the groom wearing it?

Do we really need a wedding of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky to symbolize our acceptance in America when there are so many better symbols of that? Like that of Jack Lew ... you don't even know who he is, but talk about a Jew being accepted in America! Jack Lew was recently nominated to be the head of the OMB – the Office of Management and Budget. Quite an important position to be sure. And Jack Lew is an Orthodox, Sabbath-observant Jew. He was chosen with the President knowing that he wouldn't be working on Shabbos, and knowing that when Lew worked for President Clinton, the President called him on Shabbos and Lew wouldn't answer the phone. But that didn't stop him from being appointed to one of the most important positions in our country. That's what it means to make it in America as a Jew ... to play by the rules. The rabbi officiating at the wedding of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky symbolizes that we have reached a point where there are no rules.

We've got to be careful when it comes to symbols. Symbols are very important, especially during this High Holiday season. The Shofar is a symbol, beating our breasts is a symbol, casting bread into the water at the Tashlich ceremony is a symbol. But you know what? Not only are we told what to use for our symbols, we are also told what *not* to use, for there are some symbols that can be misunderstood. Do you know that there is a tradition that on Rosh Hashana you're not supposed to eat nuts. That's right! Why? Because the Hebrew word for "nuts" – "*egoz*" has the same numeric value as that of the Hebrew word for sin – "*cheit*." And we don't want to eat anything on Rosh Hashana that may remind us – or God – of sin. And you know what else? The numeric value is off by one, but that didn't stop the rabbis from being cautious. Indeed, on Yom Kippur we don't do something because of the caution of our sages of a symbol being misunderstood. There was much gold that went into the building of the Temple. We are told that the ark was covered with gold outwardly and inwardly, and the priests would wear gold objects ... all symbolizing the glory of God. But come Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year – the priests would not wear any gold. And we have a tradition of doing the same. Why? Because the very same gold that can be the symbol of beauty might also symbolize that horrible sin of the Golden Calf, and we don't want that to be brought to mind when we are judged on Yom Kippur. As the Talmud puts it: "*Ein kataigor ma'aseh sanegor* – a prosecutor cannot become a defense attorney."

You've got to be careful when it comes to symbols being misunderstood. And that is why I believe the majority of the American people are against building the Islamic mosque/center just two blocks away from Ground Zero in New York. Of course, Muslims have the right to build the mosque wherever they want. But that doesn't make it the right thing to build it near Ground Zero, whose very ground contains the ashes of more than 1000 Americans who were killed there in the name of Islam and who were never buried because there was nothing left of them except for what lies in that ground. I'm sure that there are some people whose opposition to the mosque is based on a hatred for Islam. Those are the very same people who usually, although not always, are the ones who hate Jews, blacks and anyone else who is not like them. They've got a problem but America does not have a problem with Islam ... there are more than 2000 mosques here in America. Did you know that? Did you know that the first mosque in America was built in the 1700's ... on Kent Island, of all places! Did you know that here in America every year there are six times more anti-Jewish attacks than anti-Muslim attacks ... and America is most certainly not an anti-Semitic country! Did you know that Miss USA is a Muslim? But did you also know that she has come out against the building of a mosque near Ground Zero? There are a lot of reasons why people are opposed. I don't want to get into the issues regarding who is paying for the mosque, or is the Imam who is building the mosque as good a guy as he is made out to be, and what about

some of his and his wife's statements about Hamas and suicide bombings and responsibility for 9/11 ... I don't want to do that because, to tell you the truth, there is something inside me that feels bad for American Muslims. You don't have to be a bigot or a racist to feel uncomfortable and a bit unsettled if the person next to you on the airplane is reading from the Quran. I feel bad for them, I really do. I felt horrible when I read that Donna Shalala, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and now President of the University of Miami, was delayed and interrogated at Ben Gurion Airport for more than two hours last month. Shalala is of Lebanese descent and because of that she was subjected to what she called a "humiliating" security debriefing and asked "invasive" personal questions. All this because she had been visiting Israel as part of a group sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, and she was meeting with leaders of Bar Ilan University to discuss a joint venture medical school. It was really a horrible thing to happen to such a woman. But you know what she said? "While I was inconvenienced, Israel's security and the security of travelers are far more important. I've been going in and out of Israel for many years and expect to visit again." I would hope that those behind the Islamic mosque in New York would be equally understanding. Tom Shales – the highly respected media critic for the *Washington Post* – wrote regarding the mosque controversy: "It seems to me a colossal waste of time, a huge expenditure of national energy over something that is ultimately symbolic." But that's the whole point, Mr. Shales ... for the mosque's advocates, the mosque, and center symbolizes reconciliation and healing. But who knows what it symbolizes to the Islamic terrorists who are trying to destroy us? And we know what it symbolizes to a majority of Americans who feel like we Jews felt when nuns tried to build a monastery next to Auschwitz as a symbol of prayer and healing. But we Jews saw it as a reminder that the Holocaust had been perpetrated right in the heart of Christian Europe. Pope John Paul, to his everlasting credit, understood that as well. Yes, not all Christians were Nazis. But all the Nazis were Christians. Similarly, not all Muslims are terrorists but all the 9/11 terrorists and many others are Muslim. And while a war is still going on, an American Imam should understand as well. You want to build a symbol of reconciliation next to Ground Zero? Build a hospital ... not a mosque. Build a hospital offering long term care for police and firefighters and soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. What a meaningful symbol that could be.

Symbols have meaning and we should remember that in our own homes, for the symbols in our home tell our children and friends what our values are. It says one thing about us if there is a Confederate flag flying in our home, quite another if there is a tapestry with a dove and an olive branch. It says one thing if there is a head of a moose hanging on our wall in the den, quite another if it is a bust of the head of Einstein. It is one thing if our living room credenza is lined with martini glasses, quite another if it is lined with charity boxes.

Yes, symbols are important. And as we eat the traditional symbolic foods on Rosh Hashana, perhaps this year, given the economic crisis that Americans confront, as we usher in the Day of Judgment perhaps it is appropriate to add three new symbolic foods to our repertoire: a piece of lettuce, half a raisin and a stalk of celery in the hope that the Almighty will "let us have a raise in salary," and we should be inscribed for a good and sweet New Year.

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