



President's Yom Kippur Speech 2011

Good Yontif. Let me ask all of you one question to think about today. Are you a good Jew? You may ask me, what makes a good Jew? Remember I am the simple car guy, so my answer is... I don't know, what makes a good Jew? You know my role here is to ask you for a gift to our annual Yom Kippur Appeal; so making you feel guilty is not going to work like it might have a generation ago. I really don't expect you to answer this question; just that you think about, are you a good Jew?

In preparation for my talk today, and in response to what I have been hearing from congregants related to implementation of our Strategic Plan and the future direction of our Synagogue, I have been doing some reading; concerns with Jewish population issues, assimilation, and Jewish practice today. What I have found, you will not be surprised, is that we live in a community with many of the same concerns that Jews across the country face. A pining for the good old days; when seats were filled on Fridays and Saturdays, and there were two overflowing services during the celebrations of the High Holidays. Were we good Jews then? The question really becomes; what should we do about our changing community? How do we keep our Synagogue relevant today?

I think it is safe to say that most of us in this room define ourselves as Jews, some by birth, others by choice, yet others by association to our family or friends. After that, I imagine most of us would define, our Judaism, in many varied and diverse ways. So, while I can't give you any decisive definition for what is a good Jew, I can tell you my experience of watching and listening is that often, we decide this about others rather than ourselves.

In the book: Hillel, If Not Now, When; Joseph Telushkin uses Hillel's ancient teachings to give practical lessons about Judaism today.

He tells a story about two Jews speaking of a third "Is so and so religious one asks? The answer is often based on the person's level of ritual not ethical observance." So the question will be answered, "Unfortunately he is not religious, but he's a wonderful person." Someone for whom the opposite is true is often described this way, "He's religious but unfortunately he's not ethical." Telushkin maintains that Hillel would never describe a person who violates Judaism's fundamental ethical laws as a "Religious Jew." Further, Telushkin asserts, "There are few Jews for whom Hillel's teachings are not instructive. For secular Jews most of the ethical values that are important, come from religious tradition. For those whom religious observance and study are most important, Hillel can inspire a radical revision of religion by defining as "What is hateful unto you, do not do unto your neighbor." "It is time to not just quote Hillel's words but to take them seriously."

The book provides lessons that are far more powerful than the simple piece I have taken from it, but it made me think about how we view our own practice of Judaism and question how we judge ourselves and others.

My work here at Temple of Aaron as well as with other Jewish Organizations in our community leads me to believe that things are not bleak in our future but they are very different, it is important we keep ourselves relevant without losing our rich history. We need to reach out to a

diverse Jewish population. By that, I mean members who have diverse needs from a synagogue. We want our congregants to find joy and connection here. We want new Jewish families in our community to know us and join us here. Population studies indicate that we are not a shrinking community, but future growth for our institutions will come from outside what has long been considered our typical geography and demographic. We must go, find, and welcome new Jewish residents in St. Paul and the surrounding area. They are not all young, they don't necessarily have families, many are intermarried, and that is why we must offer programs to interest a diverse Jewish population.

I was recently at a United Jewish Fund and Council event, where Gil Mann, a Jewish, journalist, lecturer, entrepreneur, and author spoke to our group. Many of you may know Gil, he has been an active volunteer in Minneapolis and you may have seen his website, BeingJewish.org. He spoke to us about Jewish institutions response to changing needs in the Jewish community today. He used his Book, Sex, G-d, Christmas & Jews, as part of his discussion. The title alone caught my attention. The book is a compilation of emails and questions about faith; his responses to these emails, and follow up responses that came from others visiting his website. Some emails ask for advice others are seeking information. They are from people all over the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Gil states: "Jewish institutions face a delicate balancing act, in the era of Freedom Judaism. They must lead the flock and be led by the flock. To do this requires a difficult examination of the standards, laws, rituals, and norms of Jewish behavior. Some will be maintained, some will be changed, some will be eliminated, but others that have been eliminated may be re-adopted today."

Examples of his ideas include, sharing turf among organizations, developing new life-cycle rituals, asking members their opinions and then delivering programs that people want to attend, more outreach to intermarried families, and greater use of technology and the internet to connect to our community. Some of these things we have done here at the Temple of Aaron, others we certainly can build upon. New ideas often bring the most excitement. Our Board will be introducing the "Adopt a Minyan" program; we hope will be well received. We are also developing a task force to look at what we are offering for intermarried families. Both as they begin their life together and once they have families they want to be a part of Synagogue life. What I am hoping to impress on everyone is that changes are necessary to the future of our Synagogue, and your participation is crucial.

Many of you came and participated in the first Town Hall meeting where we welcomed your input reviewing current and future staffing needs. We will continue to have these meetings about many issues and will ask again for your participation. When they are scheduled, we will promote them in our weekly emails, on our website, in the Aaronian and by mail. You may participate by attending the Town Hall meetings or by simply contacting the Board member in charge and expressing your opinions of the relevant subject. Although the Strategic Plan gives us general direction we find it most helpful to get current input from all of you during implementation.

I am again honored as the President of the Temple of Aaron to ask each of you to consider participating in our annual Yom Kippur appeal. This appeal helps us provide valuable programs and services beyond what our regular dues cover. I am hoping that each of you will participate to the best of your ability and feel good about the gift you are able to give. We, and I mean we as the collective community here, not me, or the board or any individual, appreciate and thank you for your contribution today.

Take your card
Select level and fold down
Send envelope to aisle for collection

Finally, It is with great sadness that we recognize and remember two of the pillars and founders of our education program this past year, Wendy Goodman and Dick Shaller, Alav Hashalom. Joshua Feinblum, Director of Education, along with Susie Haim, School Youth Administrative Assistant, and our dedicated teaching staff have been transitioning the program over this past year, and as we remember the wonderful contributions from both Wendy and Dick, we know the foundation of the education program they started will remain strong. We acknowledge both of them and their families for their endless support.

As I conclude let me take this opportunity to recognize and thank our clergy and staff for all of their hard work this past year. Rabbi Alan Shavit Lonstein, Rabbi Barry Cytron, Cantor Mitchell Kowitz, Executive Director Ken Agranoff, Ritual Coordinator, Larry Eisenstadt. Director of Education Joshua Feinblum and Youth Director Robby Erlich. In addition our support Staff, kitchen staff and custodial staff.

Thank you to our many volunteers who support our Sisterhood, Men's Club, Daily and Sunday Minyan, USY and Board of Directors. Congratulations to our Ner Tamid Award recipient this year Marcia Taple, and to our USY Chapter as the recipient of 4 awards, this past year including, Chapter of Excellence and largest increase in membership.

“Change can be good and bad and is often both at the same time, states Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book Conquering Fear. He asks, “Are you afraid of change? Be more afraid of being unable to change.” I look forward to working with many of you, all good Jews, working together, as we meet the challenges ahead of us.

L'shana Tovah Tikatevu. May you and your loved ones be inscribed in the book of life.