

## **Sermon for Parashat Shemini 5765**

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The new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Illinois, opens today and is causing quite a controversy in the historical community. The creators and architects of this new museum have utilized the newest technology and special effects to display not just what was in Abraham Lincoln's house but what was in his head. For those who have always been Lincoln aficionados there has always been a mystique about him. For those fascinated with the years of Abraham Lincoln's life, the 1860 were an exciting time that doesn't need newfangled approaches and talking ghosts to bring that period of American history to life. This new museum brings together authentic artifacts and flashy multimedia installations. Traditionalist curators argue that glitzy technology is inappropriate, but others believe it's the right approach for the 21st century.

Bob Rogers, the designer of the museum, who left Disney to found BRC Imagination Arts, says that the museum is a blend of "showmanship and scholarship." And that "the truth is really, really interesting and if presented correctly with great technology and world-class storytelling, the scholarship and the showmanship can be done 100% without compromising either one." But John Simon Wise, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University, says it is nothing more than a Lincoln Theme Park and that the authentic information about Lincoln's life is exciting enough on its own. The director, Robert Brown, explains that we live in a new era. We live in a time when museums are making their exhibits more accessible. Special effects are needed for a generation raised on computers and video games. And the idea is to inspire people to learn more.

The same can be said of synagogues and shuls and places of worship throughout the United States and abroad. I fear we too are becoming museums. And the argument is almost exactly the same. There are those who scream we must make the service and the programs more accessible. We need to utilize new technology to reach out to our membership and the surrounding community in order to invite them in and involve them in the holy work we are doing. There are those who assert our webpage isn't as user-friendly as it could be and our religious school is not as cutting edge as it ought to be. There are those who would like us to add a rock band to our Friday night davening and reduce our standards for those who occupy officer positions in the governance of our community. There have even been those who have suggested we build a gym and a workout room and completely return to the model described so well by Marshall Sklare in his study on the synagogue center.

Many of the ideas we have taken seriously, and we work hard to evaluate the new and improved before we replace the tried and the tested. That seems to be the story we are presented with in this morning's reading, and it bears a tragic result. At the end of last week's reading, Aaron and his sons are anointed as the priests. In an extraordinary moment of national celebration Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar assume the mantle of the priesthood and are installed as the religious leadership of our people through their activity in the Tabernacle. And they begin their work in earnest. At the beginning of this week's reading, Aaron and his sons continue the drama bringing an *egel l'hatat*. *Va-yakrivu b'nai aharon et ha-dam elav, va-yitbol etzba'o ba-dam va-yiten al karnot hamizbeah v'et ha-dam yatzak el y'sod ha-mizbeah*. Aaron's sons brought the blood to him; he dipped his finger in the blood and put it on the horns of the altar; and he poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. (Leviticus 9:9) And then they brought the *korban ha-am*, and then the *korban minha*. And then Aaron – filled with the adrenaline of

executing both literally and figuratively the duties of the highest office of the land – emerges to speak to the people he represents, and he offers a grand blessing. Bolstered by the experience and feeling their blood course through their veins in excitement and anticipation of a further role for themselves, Nadav and Avihu grab their fire pans and rush into the Holy of Holies. They were determined to bring a new sacrifice designed for the younger generation, the generation of the wilderness, generation “W.” Nadav and Avihu were uniquely qualified to speak to generation “W” who were used to the special effects of seeing a sea split and manna fall from the sky, of witnessing the light and sound show associated with revelation at Sinai and seeing water come from a rock. This is a new generation that needs a new more accessible form of the religion, not some antiquated version of their fathers. *Va’yikhu v’nai aharon, nadav va’avihu ish mahtato va-yit’nu vahen aish va-yasimu aleha k’toret, va-yakrivu lifnei Adonai aish zarah asher lo tzivah otam.* Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which God had not commanded them to do. (10:1)

They took matters in their own hands and they began the first Jewish renewal movement. New Age Judaism is born and immediately it died. The very next verse tells us that something horrific occurred. The strange fire got out of control and it consumed them. The extraordinary high of the installation and the successful offering of the initial sacrifices have now turned horrible in a moment of national and personal catastrophe, and there is no good explanation. The Rabbis attempt to make sense of the loss. They work hard to ascribe guilt and blame, but in my humble opinion their explanations are nothing other than blaming the victim. The text offers an approach through Moses’ words of consolation to his brother Aaron, but that too could be categorized as useless and possibly antiquated theology suggesting only the good die young and that in some

bizarre way this is how God is sanctified. I don't buy it personally or professionally and I refuse to sell it either.

This was an accident plain and simple, and as Ben Sira taught we have been shown more than we can ever understand. There are many things that happen in life for which we immediately know their reason and rationale, there are some events that occur that over time come into focus, and there are some things that simply never add up and which we will never understand. This is such an event.

But it affords us now at least an opportunity to ask the theoretical question. Are there people who try extraordinary things, people who think out of the box, people who stretch the limits in order to progress ideas that are not normative? There certainly are, and they often come dramatically close and in some cases in fact do lose their lives trying. There are people who do it in the physical sciences and there are those who do it in the social sciences. There are people who do it in education suggesting we try teaching people differently than in the past, and there are those who do it in the realm of religion.

Rashbam makes an incredible comment. *Hayom lo tzivah v'lo ratza...sheh-yaviu aish shel hedyo...v'lo tov hayom l'havi aish zarah.* Rashbam says today wasn't the day. Today just wasn't the right time to bring some other fire, to use some strange approach. He seems to suggest this was an idea whose time had not yet arrived. But pushing the envelope always seems that way. And sometimes the result is calamitous. Rashbam, rather than focusing on the deed, chooses to focus on the timing. Rashbam rather than evaluating the events and the merits of such an approach, says they may have been the right people with the right idea at the wrong time, and the consequence cost them their lives. He doesn't blame and he doesn't draw some fanatical pious message

about religious fundamentalism. He offers us a pragmatism. And ultimately that is how religion works and that is how synagogue life unfolds. So many have been burned, so many have been hurt by ideas whose time had not yet arrived. But that must never make us shy away from trying the new and improved while we honor and cherish the traditional and the proven.

We must vigorously pursue that which is innovative and creative while we are vigilant about remaining genuinely rigorous. The creators and architects of the new Lincoln museum have utilized the newest technology and special effects to display not just what was in Abraham Lincoln's house but what was in his head. We must live in the house of our people - the synagogue - and in the minds of our rabbis as we seek a Judaism that is vibrant and authentic. We too must utilize that which may at first be unappealing to the traditionalist if it does no damage to our sacred tradition and it inspires people to learn and to practice.

Museum culture has changed and there can be no denying it. Go to our very own Constitution Center and you will be blown away. There is no question about the educational value of this relatively new institution.

One of the exhibits at the new Lincoln Presidential Museum combines a live actor and a holographic image of Abraham Lincoln simultaneously reading the Gettysburg address. Another exhibit imagines a commercial that might have been aired on television if television had existed. "Union: the founding fathers created it. Our forefathers shed their blood to defend it. And now only one man can preserve it...Abraham Lincoln."

I wonder if we could create a commercial for Judaism, our synagogue, and the ritual practices that have elevated the experience of the Jew for millennia that would make it appealing to the 90% of American Jews who

have opted out. I wonder if we could produce glitzy brochures and fancy flyers and radio sound bites and commercial spots to promote our sacred legacy. And I wonder, would b we be raising the bar or killing ourselves trying? I wish I knew. But we do know that if we are to be successful, we have to evaluate seriously every idea that is presented and determine if its time has come.