

Sermon Parashat Yitro 5766
February 18, 2006
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

I am sure by now, just two years into my tenure at Har Zion, that you are already tired of hearing about my kids. Honestly, my children are also tired of being embarrassed by their father from this bimah. It is bad enough that I do and say things in front of their friends that leave them mortified, but I also abuse my parental privilege by sharing moments from the pulpit. However, permit me just one more.

One morning last week I was going through the morning routine of getting the kids ready for school, feeding them breakfast, getting lunches in order and then out the door, into the car and to school. As you can imagine, it can be pretty frenzied even though they can all get themselves dressed and most can even get their own breakfast. I had made sure lunches were made the night before, but no matter, at 6:30 when the alarm goes off it is a mad dash. People are scurrying around, dresser drawers opening and closing, in and out of the bathrooms, doors opening and closing. One is looking for a lost sneaker, another unhappy with the breakfast cereal choices and another printing one last copy of homework. Finally we are all set and I yell “we will be leaving in five minutes.” Then I notice one child is missing. I could have sworn I had seen each one. I was sure each child was dressed. I was positive I gave each one something to eat. But now one was missing. So I start to call out - where is ...? When I get no response, I start the search and sure enough Yasmin is in her bathroom just standing there looking in the mirror. She is making faces and smiling. With all the turmoil she was taking a break with a friendly face, her own. Amidst the chaos, she was seeing what her face looked like with a smile, with a frown, showing her teeth, winking, scrunching up her nose, moving her lips around, expanding her cheeks. She was just enjoying her face. I asked her, “what are doing?” To which she said, “I am just looking at myself.”

“So what do you think?”

“I think I look good.”

“Me too ... Now lets go to school.”

From now on I am going to call that activity "pulling a Yasmin." When you pause for a moment to enjoy what you see in the mirror, that is "pulling a Yasmin" and we all need to do that.

Oh what we can learn from our children. Oh that we could enjoy looking in the mirror. Oh how I wish I could look in the mirror and not see my ever-growing forehead - or wrinkles I never had before. I have heard it from others. When most of us look in the mirror all we see are the flaws instead of the beauty that is there. It is not because we were born that way, it is because the rest of the world has taught us to look that way. We hear all the time about the mistakes and about how we have fallen short of the mark. Our siblings inform us, our parents tell us, our co-workers enlighten us, sometimes even our spouses remind us. All do it in the name of constructive criticism but none-the-less the damage is done. Yes, we should all develop thicker skins. We should all learn how to take practical feedback - but deep inside our society of negativity is weighing in and weighing on us. The collateral damage of a society that is overly critical is a poor sense of self. Each of us has a contribution to make, each of us is special and we ought to feel good about ourselves. It is time we start putting that message out there. Not trying to prove it, but by feeling it, owning it inside and then letting that sense of self shine through. If I feel my worth, I don't have to prove it.

This morning's reading brings us to the Ten Commandments. To the religious person, these commandments form the bedrock of society. Today I want to focus your attention on the first commandment. "I am the Lord *your* God." (Exodus 20:2) For the next few minutes just think about why the text of the torah, a text in which every word must be analyzed, a texts whose meanings bear more meaning. Why, "your God" Why not just "God?" The first commandment could have said "I am the Lord God." In the Hebrew text it is just one letter. So simple an alteration and so magnificent a change. By changing the last letter of the phrase, the Torah tells us that we are important in the relationship and our opinion matters. In a world that constantly puts it's ideas above ours, the Torah says our voice is important and our individual voice is beautiful.

Peskta D'Rav Kahana explains, the Hebrew for the word "your" here is singular, because every person comes to understand God in his or her own way. "God is like a mirror. The mirror never

changes, but everyone who looks at it sees a different face.” (Pesikta D’rav Kahana 12) God is like a mirror reflecting our value back on us.

There is a wonderful story of a boy who has gone skiing with his father. Part way down the mountain the boy falls and starts to slide. He reaches out and grabs hold of a branch. Then he begins to yell. “Help me” and he hears his echo yell back, “Help me.” Sensing someone is mocking him, he yells, “you are a coward,” the echo yells back “you are a coward,” Then he screams “show yourself.” And the echo responds, “show yourself.” Finally the father of the boy catches up with his son who is now in tears and the boy looks up at his father and says, “Who is that making fun of me?” To which the father smiles and says, “That is just an echo, but it is also life.” You see, when you yell out life responds the way you do. Watch, I yell out you are a winner and so life yells back, you are a winner.” What ever you put out there, life responds. If we put out toxicity, complaints, and anger that is what will return but if we put out a sense of purpose, a sense of value, a sense of peace - life will respond the same.

Our morning’s worship begins with a quiet statement, a single utterance before the formal liturgy begins. *Elohai neshama shenatata bi tihora hi, ata yitzarta, ata nefachta bi.* God the soul You created is pure, You formed and You breathed it into me. We start that way each day because prayer is supposed to remind us of our value as well. Prayer is supposed to help us not only see God’s holiness but see our holiness as well. That doesn’t mean we become self absorbed. That doesn’t mean the world is about me alone, it just means we must find our holiness and guard it because God made us that way.

Heschel teaches, “Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. (*The Essence of Spiritual Living*, page 6 Quest for God by Abraham Joshua Heschel) Prayer is the way to master what is inferior in us, to discern between the significant and the trivial, between the vital and the futile, by taking counsel with what we know about the will of God, by seeing our fate in proportion to God. (ibid.)

There is a wonderful comment by Rabbi Simha Bunum. He explains that everyone has two pockets so that he can reach into one or the other according to his needs. In his right pocket are

to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in his left: 'I am earth and ashes.' We spend too much time reaching into the pocket that amplifies our faults, our mistakes and our missteps. We are hard on each other. We have grown to believe that is what we are supposed to do at least when we are in this sacred place. It comes from years of attending High Holiday services that are about self correction. But today I suggest reach into the other pocket. Acknowledge all that is good and right in your life. Enjoy who you are and what you have accomplished. You provide for your family. You love your spouse. You are honest in your business dealings. You are fair with your co-workers. You are kind. So reach into that pocket and say, "for my sake the world was created."

Almost every day I receive another offer in the mail that says I am approved for their low interest credit card. The words "I am approved" jump out at me and then I discard the offer. Would that we, that I, could simply accept the idea if not the offer. Would that we would all know that we are approved. God loves us for who we are. Sure we can do better. Sure we can always do more and there is time for improvement. But, just for today, just for right now, let's remember to pray a little, take the piece of paper out of our pocket that says "for me the world was created" and do a Yasmin and smile.