

SERMON SHABBAT SUKKOT 5767

When I was younger my father used to rush around. He was always so busy. He was always moving from one place to another, from one class to another, from one meeting to another or from one hospital to another. He seemed like he was in perpetual motion. The truth is I didn't even know what perpetual motion meant, I just heard my mother say it all the time.

The funny thing about my dad was that whenever he stopped he would immediately fall asleep. He would always say to us, I can't wait for the Sunday night movie. We all loved the Sunday night movie because we would all gather together in the den and take our place on the floor. My father loved to lie on the floor so we would lie next to him, each of us laying our heads on his stomach. I loved watching the movie, as my head would go up and down with each breath he would take. I would know immediately when he fell asleep because his breath began to slow down and then he began to snore.

At the end of the movie we would have to wake my father. He was always in such a deep sleep that he would say, "Go on to bed and I'll get up in a minute." Of course we worried that he would spend the night right there on the floor so we would gather around him and then lift him up. He would make believe he couldn't stand and we would guide him up to his room and then we would go off to bed. I don't know if I even remember a single movie title from those days but I certainly remember my dad falling asleep. He seemed to fall asleep everywhere. I guess he was just so worn out. He was so exhausted that he would fall asleep even if we went to visit a relative. If we went to a baseball game he would fall asleep. He seemed to miss so much.

In our rush to accomplish so much, we too, rush from event to event and from obligation to obligation but we are really missing out on an awful lot. During this rush we are sacrificing so much and this is why our holy system of living requires us to make time to sit under the shade of a tree and enjoy the breeze. In the language of organized religion, we call that holiday. Holidays ask us to stop, pause and take a breath while the holiday of Sukkot also asks us to go outside.

The ancient world marked these days with ritual sacrifices, hence the reading for this morning discusses the sacrifices offered during these ancient times. More than just going outside during this pilgrimage holiday, the Jewish people made their way to Jerusalem. Either way they were forced to take a break from their regular schedule. This earliest recollection is a necessary component to relive the events of the past and that is why we do it. However, the choice of where the reading actually begins is peculiar. The rabbis could have simply chosen to focus on the various animals brought forth but the text starts a few verses earlier. It is precisely those opening sentences that draw our attention and ask us to sit up and take notice of a uniquely poignant comment. Even before we get to the sacrificial component we begin with the parent-child relationship of the animal. We see this as instructive to the human parent-child connection.

Rambam writes, "There is no distinction between the suffering of a human being and that of the beast since feelings of maternal affection (and I would add paternal affection) belong not to the intellectual faculty but to the emotional faculty." This is common to humans and animals alike." When the Torah says, "*v'haya shivat yamim tachat imo*," when ox or sheep are born, they shall stay seven days with their mother," we understand the incredible power of that time. The moment when life starts is a moment of culmination and beginning all at once.

Then the reading continues, "However, no animal from the herd shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young." (Lev. 22:28) reminding us that we can be too cruel. Almost

instinctually we have a drive to destroy and so the *B'khor Shor* tells us this verse is trying to teach us that God pities the animal and we should not embrace cruel habits.

Dreams are fulfilled and with the child new dreams are also born. Last week dreams died once again. Like the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999 and the attack on a high school in Bailey, Colorado Sept. 27, this week on the holiest day of the year our dreams died. Monday morning Charles Carl Roberts IV ran his milk route as usual and walked his own children to school, then unleashed his anger in Lancaster, PA. In his suicide note Roberts said he was haunted by the 1997 death of his premature daughter. The baby, Elise, died 20 minutes after delivery. "He was very troubled psychologically and dealing with things nobody else knew about." Ayeh, the incredible supremacy of those first minutes, days and weeks of life.

The suicide note that Roberts left is in no way an excuse for the actions of a madman. It is a testimony to the fact that the events between a parent and a child in the first days, even the first hours, can change a person's life. As much as the child is affected so is the parent. The bonds are formed even in the womb and I would suggest for the father as well as for the mother. We think so much about the way we can affect a child's life whether they are our own or someone else's and we ought to realize we are changed by those interactions as well. However, we rarely take into account how they change us. As much as we want to shape another's life, our lives too are formed.

How do we make sense of the events of this past week? A brutal shooting in Lancaster, PA leaves us asking how do we make sense of the human project? We ultimately let go of our children, we send them off to school, and we let them travel abroad. We let them grow up. We can't control everything, but we can try to control those times we are together. The early stages are so critical because they form the basis of identity and have lasting effects on self-esteem. This is why people in positions of authority must be so careful in how they interact with those under their influence. Are we filling those days with positive or negative moments? In the face of tragedy we always want to do something. So go home and hug your kids, hold your spouse's hand, kiss a friend. Tell someone you care about them. In the face of a senseless loss of life - let someone know their life makes a difference to you.

Rev. Douglas Hileman said from the pulpit of Georgetown United Methodist Church, "Set your troubled hearts to rest." And I add to his words, while encouraging you to do as this small, quiet Amish community of Nickle Mines, PA is doing, gather together to pray for those still lying in critical condition. Pray for the surviving family members and for the souls of those little girls who perished. We have replaced sacrifice with prayer. So pray for them and pray for yourself. Amidst the words of the silent amidah, take a minute to offer a personal and private prayer. Maybe this will be the last time an event like this will take place. I certainly pray it is.