

**“America is a Great Country: Let’s Not Forget It”**

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I’m sorry but I have to do a little more bragging. I can’t help myself. There’s a great high school organization called the Cappies. It’s the high school equivalent of the Tonys. Our son Adi, directed a play this year at Barrack Hebrew Academy called, “Barefoot in the Park,” and it was nominated for eight Cappies. Of course, it won four of them including best play. Our daughter Nina who is in the ninth grade, wanted to be supportive of her brother and said she would work on costumes and help the stage crew. So, when “Barefoot in the Park” won best play, she went down to the stage with the rest of the cast and crew to accept the award. “I got to go on stage,” she said. Though her role may have seemed insignificant, she made a contribution and felt part of the whole for having participated. Clearly Sifrei Eliyahu Zuta (1:3) was correct when it taught that a person who shares in the sorrow of the community will certainly share in its joy.

I know the example seems a bit trite. I know that a school play, though fun and a lot of hard work, is not necessarily a fair model for societal change – but it is instructive. Let me tell you what I mean. Belonging to something, being committed to something, finding your passion, starts somewhere and once you taste it, it is infectious. It starts with believing in something bigger than oneself.

There is no question that when the students set out to produce “Barefoot in the Park” this fall, all they wanted to do was to put on the best production that the little school could. Sure there was the added incentive that this would be the last production to be staged in the lobby of the Akiba campus. Sure there was the added incentive that there would be critics coming and they would be performing in front of family and friends. Yes, there was the added incentive that for many this would be their last high school production – and they worked hard. Long hours and deep commitment brought eight Cappy nominations – more than the school had ever received. There was the quiet chant of these students as they entered the auditorium of the Upper Darby School of the Performing Arts and it was filled with many schools with large student bodies and massive resources. With this in mind, “Barefoot in the Park” quickly became the little play that could. When the program began, the first nomination passed without a win. Then we saw a scene performed from “Barefoot in the Park” and it fell a little flat. Then the first win for Barrack, then a second, then a third, and then the culmination at the end of the evening “Best play.” Barrack Hebrew Academy won *Best Play* for “Barefoot in the Park.” Then the roar, “We are the little play that could.” Then I overheard someone from another school say, “Boy, they really cleaned up.” They really were good and they really did. They cleaned up and they were the little play that could. The reason is simple, they had an idea, they believed in the idea and they each did their part. It was a simple idea, they wanted to put on the best play they could. First they believed they could and then they worked really hard. The byproduct was a sense of accomplishment and a sense of belonging. Now they will have that memory for the rest of their lives and those memories could propel them to great things.

Today, the book of Leviticus comes to a close and, as is the nature of the Torah, it once again pleads with the people to adhere to the will of God. By doing so, the Torah reminds us of the beautiful gifts that come with throwing one’s lot in with our people. If you adhere to the requests of God, there is great bounty and there are wonderful rewards. If not, disaster waits. For the biblical experience, reward comes in material success while punishment is found in agricultural demise. Although the language of

reward and punishment may have changed in their application, today we speak in similar terminology. From this bimah I say to you, “Throw your lot in with us and you’ll find the bounty of a community and the connection with The Eternal, The Almighty.” If not, you will lack grounding and be disconnected. This too, is the language of reward and punishment, it’s just the details that have changed. For the Torah, reward and punishment are immediate and concrete, for the Rabbis of the Talmud and today, reward and punishment may be delayed and more ephemeral – and the Torah doesn’t stop there.

While the Torah’s desire is to encourage us to join the system, it also asks both us and God to remember what our ancestors did. We must remember the sacrifices and commitments they made and the pains they went through. When the Torah says, “*V’zacharti et briti Yaakov, v’af et briti Yitzchak, v’af et briti Avraham,*” I have recalled the covenant I made with Jacob, the covenant I made with Isaac and the covenant I made with Abraham. The Torah is reminding God and us of the personal struggles and drives of those who came before us. We remember what our ancestors did, we remember the commitments they secured, we recall the sacrifices they made and how they left the land in which they were born for a land that was better. They left places where their religious ideals were unacceptable to go to a promised land, a land of religious freedom. This week’s parasha reminds us of their bravery compelled by ideals. In just one phrase, this week’s reading conjures up both the enthusiasm and the passion born of commitment to values. There is nothing more compelling than morals, standards, ethics, ideals and principles.

The same is true of our great country, the United States of America. It’s no accident that the Hebrew name for America is *Artzot haBrit*, the Land of the covenant. It was the mission of the founding fathers to unite the varied colonies in a single covenant with each other, so that together they could establish their own independence from Britain. The declaration of Independence states clearly, “That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.” When Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution urging Congress to declare independence from Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston once again changed the course of human civilization. Together they founded a nation on the principles of civil liberties and human rights, on freedom of religion and freedom of speech. They banded together to oppose tyranny with moral integrity and conscience-driven leadership. “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” Together they came to teach the world about heroism and patriotism so they could, as Thomas Jefferson once said, “Whenever any form of government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and establish a new government.”

Ever since the first World War, and in every war and attack since then, we have learned never to take for granted that America would be. We can disagree, depending on the side of the aisle we’re on, as to what America means but we should never demonize the other side thinking they don’t believe in the core values of America or its right to exist. No matter what we believe or become, there’s no question of the sacrifices our parents made to assure sure we could live in this great union. On June 6, 1944 our men stormed the beach at Normandy to defend those ideals. So many before and so many since gave their lives for those ideals. This weekend we remember these men and women. We thank them and we owe to

them this moment of silence and a commitment to those morals, standards, ethics, ideals and principles. Remember the covenant they made, “*V’zacharti et britam.*” We owe them, at the very least, a moment of silence and our deepest gratitude.

It’s easy to criticize America, however, there’s no question that we love our country. In conclusion, I’d like to read a letter that a member of our congregation wrote to his grandson and then shared with me.

*November 30, 1998*

*My Dearest Grandson Adam,*

*For some time I have wanted to tell you the story of the Army Sergeant’s jacket that I gave you. Yes, there is always a story and now when I am in the evening of my life, I don’t want it to go untold. When you are older, maybe we can walk back through the pages of time since it has been 55 years since I wore that jacket and I did so proudly.*

*1943 was a time when the world had gone mad. Our Jewish people were the recipients of Hitler’s wrath and 6 million of our brothers and sisters were destroyed. So, a seventeen year old boy wanted to do his part, enlisting, not waiting to be drafted. My Father of Blessed Memory signed for me and I was off to do something for this great country. I wanted so much to be a part of this tremendous effort to keep the world free. It was a time when patriotism was a virtue. I believed then, as I do now, that this is a great nation which has sheltered us and we must pay the price to preserve it. As you start your journey through life, do not forget that there is a debt that you owe to your parents, to the Jewish people and to this country. Remember that a life without meaning is not worth living. You must always try to make a difference!*

*The world has turned over many times since I stood on the plain at Fort Riley. I served in the horse cavalry and later as a tank commander. I did what I was asked to do and I hope I made some small difference. When I close my eyes sometimes I can hear the bugles call and their shrill notes still pierce my memory. I was a young boy, filled with the spirit of the times, some of which has never left me. Most of us preparing for the invasion of Japan are no longer with us. They have faded away but their banners are still held high.*

*I gave to you, my jacket, my love of this country and our Jewish people. If on some future day you catch a glimpse of this jacket, try to remember a young boy alone in this world but determined to do his best. You may not hear the bugles call but I give you the story and my love. For indeed, you will have to carry the Banners of the Future.*

*Love,*

*Grandfather*

And I add...God bless you and God bless America.