

EREV YOM KIPPUR: RECLAIMING TORAH FOR OUR DAYS

A few moments ago we stood before the open Ark on this holiest night of our Jewish new year. We removed the Torahs from the Ark, and brought them out with us, to remind us of their words, to honor their history. We stood with those Torahs, we connected through our prayers with Jews everywhere throughout the ages, and we asked God to forgive us for our sins.

Tonight I want to talk about those Torahs – about Torah – and its importance in keeping us together as a people. And I want to tell you a story. . . . We read in the Torah that the 10 Commandments, or in a larger sense, the entire Torah, was given to us on Mt. Sinai twice. The first time, in Exodus 20, there was great anticipation and preparation; the process took three days. And there was the noise of thunder, the flash of lightning – a veritable sound and light show! There was even the sound of the Shofar. Because of the sound of the Shofar, we associate this first revelation with Rosh Hashanah.

The second time was not as spectacular. The Israelites had sinned. In their fear and lack of faith, they had built a Golden Calf. Upon seeing the calf, Moses had smashed the tablets in anger; they lay shattered all around him. But God gave Moses – and the Israelites – a second chance. In Exodus 34 we find Moses making a second trip up that mountain, where he receives a second set of the 10 Commandments. The second trip is different – no sounds, no lightening, no one at all except Moses climbing the mountain in a lonely ascent to find God. It is here, in this chapter that God is described as El Rahum v'hanun: a loving, merciful God. Tradition teaches us that this

second revelation, the second giving of the 10 Commandments occurred on Yom Kippur. God gave the Israelites a second chance.

The Israelites placed the second tablets in the ark and carried them through the 40 years of wandering in the desert, bringing them to Eretz Yisrael and eventually depositing them in the ancient temple. Although we no longer have those actual tablets, we do have writings telling us of their journey and their final resting place. And – we have their teachings.

But what of the first set, those bits and pieces left on the desert sand? Our ancient rabbis asked the same questions and they tell us that the Israelites picked up the pieces, those broken bits of revelation, and placed them in the Ark along with the new, complete set. They carried those shattered shards along with them, the remains of the first placed in the ark next to the second, as a reminder, a reminder of their misdeeds, of God's anger and forgiveness, and of the fragility of their own faith in the face of doubt, crisis and challenge.

And now for the story. . . a true story. . .

Thousands of years later, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Rabbi Jacob Soetendorp led his congregation through their darkest hours during World War II. His words of comfort and inspired leadership are remembered with love and affection by the Dutch Jews, who lost more than half their population to the Germans. One day, shortly after the war, Rabbi Soetendorp was in his study one Friday afternoon preparing for Shabbat; his small son Avraham was sitting nearby, playing and watching him. Avraham, himself a distinguished retired rabbi today, has told the story I am about to share with you to many colleagues over the years.

There was a knock at the door and a stranger, not Jewish, entered holding a package. “I don’t know what this is,” said the stranger, “but I’m somehow sure it should belong to you, to a rabbi.” Slowly Rabbi Soetendorp opened the package. It contained little pieces of paper – at least that is what Avraham thought as he gazed from his corner of the study. Or perhaps they were shoe soles, he remembers having thought. They looked like leather inner soles; they were too thick to be paper.

But then his father paled. Trembling, he thanked the man and dismissed him. Come, he said to his son, holding the package very carefully, and leading his son into the sanctuary. Avraham realized then that his father was holding in his hands torn parchment fragments of a Torah scroll. Shocked and afraid, the small child could only ask, “Why, why?”

Rabbi Soetenborp didn’t answer him immediately, but opened the Ark and gently placed the fragments inside, next to the other Torahs. He, who had lived through the darkest chapter in our people’s history, still had the faith to keep those fragments for the future. Each generation must reclaim and redeem Torah for itself, he told his son. No matter what has happened to us, we must find a way to reclaim Torah. Every word, every piece is a part of our history.

Those parchment pieces remained in the Ark of Rabbi Soetendorp’s sanctuary, a testimony to the past and witness to one man’s enduring faith, a reminder to Rabbi Soetendorp and his congregation each time he opened the Ark to pray, and to teach Torah.

Years later when Rabbi Soetendorp died, his son Avraham found himself inexplicably drawn toward the Ark, and the torn fragments within. As

he entered the darkened, silent sanctuary, he discovered his brothers and sisters had gathered there. They all had come with the same idea. They took those pieces of Torah and placed them in the coffin with their father. Rabbi Soetendorp was buried with the Torah he had redeemed.

Avraham Soetendorp became a rabbi like his father. He recently retired from serving a liberal congregation in the Hague, Netherlands. What follows is one of those “truth is stranger than fiction” stories, a bit unbelievable, but those who know Avraham Soetendorp have confirmed it. A few years ago, on Erev Shavuot, Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp was preparing for Shavuot services. Shavuot, as you all know, is the holiday where we commemorate God’s revelation on Sinai; it is also called Matan Torah, the holiday of the giving of the Torah. Avraham was in the sanctuary, preparing his Torah reading. There was a knock on the door and a stranger entered. He had a package which had come into his possession; he wasn’t sure what it was but someone told him the letters were Hebrew and he wanted to give it to a rabbi. Slowly, Avraham opened it and before him were pieces of something slightly leathery, in various shapes, mainly oval.

Yes, they were torn fragments, pieces of Torah. Avraham knew what he had to do. . . .this was his reminder he could not rely on someone else, on generations past, he had to reclaim Torah for himself and for his generation. And so he took those fragments and placed them in the Ark, next to the other Torahs. As he stood there, alone, he remembered his father, and the lesson Jacob Soetendorp had taught the son: each person in some way must reclaim, revive, restore Torah to our lives.

Tonight we stood before the open ark. We heard the ancient prayer of Kol Nidre – the prayer that countless generations of Jews have heard before us, the prayer that unites all Israel tonight.

The prayers of Yom Kippur have a quiet, lonely sense to them. This holy day has no food, no joy. It is perhaps the day when we Jews are most alone with our thoughts, our prayers, our hopes for the future. It is a time of introspection, time to be alone with our God. As Rabbis Soetendorp, father and son, knew when they stood alone with those fragments in front of the ark, at times one must communicate alone with God – to remind oneself of one's deeds, lack of good deeds, need to improve, need to continue a strong faith in the face of crises and even tragedy.

But there is another lesson the rabbi Soetendorp, as well as Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our ancient teacher and leader, taught us through the torn and broken pieces. Jacob Soetendorp, after surviving the Holocaust and losing so many family members and fellow Jews, after receiving the torn Torah which might have symbolized the destruction of Jewry, but which he turned into a symbol of the life of the Jewish people and everlasting hope within the human heart – after placing those Torah fragments in his Ark as a constant reminder to keep his tradition alive, what did he do? Jacob Soetendorp went on with his erev Shabbat, Friday evening service, and went on with his life, teaching, leading his people.

Avraham Soetendorp was preparing for Shavuot many years later when he received a knock on his door. After placing his pieces in the Ark, he continued preparing for services, where he read the traditional section of Torah for Shavuot – that of God giving the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

And Moses our teacher? After the thunder and lightning, after the sound of the shofar. . . . the second time wasn't so spectacular. He climbed that mountain slowly, a lonely figure, and received the word of God once more. And not unlike the Rabbis Soetendorp, or you and me, and all Jews tonight, there he found a merciful, forgiving God who gave him and all Israel a second chance.

But then what did Moses do? He did not, could not stay up on that mountain. He descended and rejoined the people. He returned, and became one with them again to lead them onward, to be a part of them.

On this Yom Kippur, the most sanctified of all days, when we stand apart and alone with our God and ourselves, may we be reminded of the eternal teachings of our Torah; may we be worthy of a second chance in all our endeavors from our forgiving, merciful God and, at the close of the day when the gates are closed, may we rejoin our people, connecting and strengthening and participating reclaiming Torah for our generation and those to come. . . .to insure our survival throughout crises, challenges, and even the occasional lapse of faith. Amen

