

Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023 Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE
The Gift of Shabbat
(First Night, Rosh Hashanah)

Thank you all for coming! Tonight begins, not only Rosh Hashanah, but also Shabbat and so I wanted to share some words that touch on both Shabbat and the Jewish New Year. In the mid-1990s, Rabbi Berkowitz, a Chabad Rabbi and a friend traveled to Alaska, to some of the very remote parts of the State in search of Jews. Like all Chabad emissaries Rabbi Berkowitz was inspired by the late and great Lubavitcher Rebbe's message to bring Judaism to all Jews, no matter where they lived. Through a pilot friend Rabbi Berkowitz and his friend secured a five day "buddy pass" on Alaskan Airlines and they traveled to Nome, Kotzebue, Bethel and Fairbanks. Everywhere they went they checked the local newspapers, went to the town halls, and spoke with the locals to find other Jews. One day they arrived in a small town in the Northwestern part of Alaska. The mayor told them that there were no Jews in the town but invited them to give a talk at the local elementary school about Judaism. The two men went and addressed the fourth through eighth-grade students and shared some basic Jewish teachings. The students performed a few Eskimo dances for them, and the Chabadniks performed a Chasidic dance.

Before they left the hall, figuring he had nothing to lose, Rabbi Berkowitz asked the students one final question: "Has any of you ever met a Jew?" One little girl raised her hand.

"Who did you meet?" asked the rabbi.

"My mother," the girl answered. "She's right there," pointing to the school's fifth grade teacher. After the assembly, the mother who was visibly moved by the presentation, came over to thank the rabbi for coming. She explained how she loved nature and moved to Alaska many years earlier, fell in love with a native-American and together they had this little girl. She said to Rabbi Berkowitz, "I must tell you that living here I don't know if my daughter will ever meet another Jew, let alone a rabbi again. Can you give my daughter a message that will help her be proud of her Jewish identity?"

The rabbi began to speak to the girl about the holiness of Shabbat - how Shabbat is our way of reminding the world that there is a G-d who not only created the world but Who continues to sustain it every day. He then went on to tell her that it is the Jewish mothers and daughters who usher in the Shabbat every week by lighting the candles. "They are the ones to bring peace and light into the world" he said. And then the rabbi asked the girl: "do you know where in the world the sun sets first?" The young girl knew her geography and confidently answered: "Probably New Zealand or Australia." "That's right", said the Rabbi. "Jewish mothers in New Zealand and Australia are the *first* ones to usher in Shabbat every week. And then Shabbat is ushered in with candles in Asia, then in Israel, in Europe, and then New York, Chicago, Seattle, Anchorage. And even then, there is still one part of the world where the sun has not yet set, where Shabbat has not yet been ushered in. Right here in the Yupik territory of Alaska where you live. And so, when mothers and daughters around the globe have welcomed the Shabbat, G-d and the Jewish people are still waiting for you, the last Jewish girl in the world, to light the Shabbat candles." And the rabbi went on to encouraged her to light the Shabbat candles every Friday before the sun sets.

Shabbos is such a gift! And probably the most famous song we sing on Shabbat, The Shalom Aleichem which derives from the following passage in the Talmud:

The Talmud tells us: *Two ministering angels accompany one home from synagogue on Friday night, one who is good and one who is evil. And when they come to his home and find the candle is lit, the table is set and his bed is made, the good angel says: 'may it be the will of G-d that it should be this way next Shabbat' and the evil angel, against his will, is forced to answer Amen. But if the angel comes home and does not find the home looking like this then the evil angel says: 'may it be the will of G-d that it should be this way next Shabbat and the good angel, against his will, is forced to answer Amen. (Shabbat 119b)*

But why are the angels looking for these specific items as a sign of our readiness for Shabbat? There are other ways to tell if Shabbat is ready, for example, are people dressed in their nice Shabbat clothes? What is it about a lit candle, a set table and a bed which is made?

These three items teach us something powerful not only about Shabbat, but about Rosh Hoshana and the new year we begin tonight.

The first item the angel looks for is a *ner daluk*, a lit candle. In Torah thought, a candle represents the soul. *Ki Ner Elokim nishmat ha'adam*; "for the candle of the Almighty is the soul of man", it says in the book of Proverbs. Why is a candle or a flame the symbol for the soul and why are the angels looking to see that our candles are lit? Because the angels representing Hashem want to know if our *ner*, if our soul is on fire? They want to know whether our passion for Judaism has been ignited in some way. Rabbi Berkowitz was trying to kindle this little's girl's excitement for a mitzvah about which she never heard; to make her feel a part of the Jewish cosmic role in bringing light to the world. What is something we're passionate about in Judaism? Or what is something that's new that we can become more passionate about in the coming year? I know that we might be thinking more in terms of just having a pleasant High Holiday experience, but if we want to grow from this experience, from the time spent in synagogue and from our Shabbat and holiday meals, it behooves us, as we enter the new year, to ask ourselves what we can get passionate about in the coming year.

I remember a few years ago, a beloved MJEer Heather Conn decided to champion the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim (visiting the ill). She was already visiting patients in the hospital herself and then organized MJE visits. On November 12th we will holding our Annual Blood Drive and this year will be adding a Food packaging opportunity to feed the poor. Or maybe, this is the year we start becoming more careful about the way we speak, to take on to be more careful about *lashon hara* or getting more active in support of Israel. Defending Israel when she is maligned or making sure we plan a trip to Israel this year or consider coming w/ MJE next summer! Or maybe it's Shabbat. If you're new to it starting w/ candles or Kiddush on Friday night. If that's already part of your routine, then maybe move on to being cognizant of the melachot, the 39 labors from which we refrain on the Sabbath. I would, of course, encourage you take advantage of MJE's awesome Friday night and Saturday morning services every weekend.

That's one thing the angels are looking for: that our souls are ignited and alive with Judaism.

The second item the angel looks for is a set table. Lighting candles may help get us started on the weekends, but we also need a set table - we need the right tools to infuse meaning and purpose in our daily existence. It is no accident that the great Rav Yosef Karo, author of the Code of Jewish law, called his famous work the “Shulchan Aruch” or literally the “set table”. He wrote this four-volume treatise on Jewish Law in the 1500’s so we could know the relevant laws and practices for all aspects of our existence. The four parts are:

- *Yoreh Deah*: deals with our diet and all laws of Kashrut
- *Even Ha’ezer* deals with marriage and laws of sexual intimacy
- *Choshen Mishpat*: torts, commercial and property law
- *Ohr Hachayim*: laws of Shabbat, Prayer and the Holidays

As the noted author and philosopher Dayan Grunfeld pointed out: three out of the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch deal with the three basic cravings or instincts we have in life: Food, Sex and Power. Only one of the four sections, *Ohr Hachayim*, deals with what we consider the “religious” component to Judaism because Torah is there to infuse meaning and inspiration into *every* aspect of who we are and what we do.

How knowledgeable are we in these areas? Has our Judaism been relegated to a bunch of ceremonies and rituals, or do we *also* consult our Torah when it comes to real life issues with our families and our significant others? Are we aware Judaism has much to say on matters of sexuality, or ethics in the workplace, about the best way to date or stay in a committed relationship? Beginning after the holidays I will be beginning a series called: “What Judaism Has to Say” on Wednesday nights.

Finally, the angels look for a made bed. In the language of our sages the bed is often a metaphor for a person’s death, and more specifically for a person’s legacy. Jacob our forefather was the only one of the Patriarchs who is described as having a *mitaso sheleimah*, a “complete bed” - because all of his children followed in his ways after he passed. Will our children follow our ways after we are gone? Will we have left the next generation with something powerful enough that they will continue it on their own? Will they value Judaism, and like you, come to synagogue on the High Holidays? Will they light Shabbat candles or support the State of Israel? Will our children and grandchildren remain Jewish at all? Much depends on what we do and the kind of decisions we make.

My teacher Rabbi Shlomo Riskin said that when he became a rabbi, at his Ordination Dinner, his teacher, the late and great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik spoke of the concept of *smicha* or ordination. He said the word *smicha* literally means “laying of the hands” – it’s where the rabbi places his hands on the head or the shoulders of his student like the first rabbi, Moses did to his disciple Joshua, and in this way confers upon his student the authority to give rabbinic direction and halachik guidance to others. The word “lismoch” means to lean but the question is: who really leans on whom? You’d think the student who is receiving ordination is leaning on his teacher, on past generations of teachers whose tradition is being passed to him all the way from Sinai, but the Rav said: “if you ever see an older man with his hands [upon] a younger man, who is leaning on whom? Generally, it’s the older man leaning on the younger man!” The Rav looked at his students and he said: “you’re not leaning on me; I am the one who is leaning on you. Whatever I’ve learned and expounded, whatever new approach, insight, or interpretation I have formulated, will die with me unless it lives through you”.

You hold the key to the future of the Jewish people. The power of Jewish continuity does not lay with us rabbis. It will die with us unless it lives through you. I can present how beautiful and compelling a life of Torah is but ultimately you must decide what you want to do with it. You must decide whether your home will be lit with Shabbat candles, whether your soul will be excited about something Jewish. You must decide whether you'll have a *set table* - whether you will study and apply Jewish values and teachings to your everyday life. It's for you to decide. If you do, you will create a *mitaso sheleimah* - a complete bed, a legacy and a way of life that will live beyond you. A spiritual path and a perspective on life that you can bequeath to your children and they to theirs. Tonight, as we begin the Jewish New Year, as we pray for a good and healthy year to come, let us embrace our Judaism and ensure that the light of Torah burns brightly for many years to come. In that merit may we all be blessed with a year of good health, sweetness, meaning and peace.

Shanah Tova and thank you for joining!