

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

Shanah tovah! It's a privilege and honor to have been asked to offer some personal words as we begin another year. I hope that I prove worthy of the honor! I've always considered this podium "sacred space" and I have agonized over how best to use it tonight. Let me begin with some words of Prolog.

Everything in life needs to be put into proper perspective! Shortly after receiving the September issue of TOPICS, a long-time Temple member, a very good friend of ours for many years, called our home on Longboat Key to ask me if I was as excited as she that I had been asked to give the *Erev Rosh Hashanah* sermon. She also asked if I was feeling a bit nervous: after all, she said, "you haven't done this for a very long time!"

Point well taken: I haven't; so, we are about to face this together. You, the "listeners," will have to concentrate a bit more than usual: this is a different voice and a different style than many of you have grown accustomed to. And I, the "preacher," will have to choose my words carefully, not wanting to cause any irritation, and also make sure that I leave enough space between them, so that you'll be able to follow along without any verbal distraction. (Well, let me qualify that last comment: there could be one "verbal distraction," one over which I have very little control: for you who joined Temple Emanu-El after I retired in 2001, please be aware that you may, in the course of this sermon, hear another voice - coming from the pews - here in the front, a bit to my right: it was known to happen quite regularly during my rabbinate, and one never knows....!)

And, oh yes, and just to be completely "up front" with you, there was one more "comment" that came to me from another long-time Temple member, also a friend, who wanted me to know that she was "overjoyed" that, at long last, she would be able to take another "journey" with me during the High Holy Days. You see, I always believed that a sermon was not just a one-way street: it wasn't meant to be "me talking at you" and "you just sitting there"

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

listening; instead, for me at least, a High Holy Day sermon was akin to taking a journey together, to another place and time, with the hope that what we discovered, there, together, would allow us to return to the "real world," there to create new journeys to take, together, in the New Year.

This process began in the Spring when Rabbi Kaiserman and I first discussed the "possibilities" for sermon topics during these High Holy Days. Once we knew the "issues" he wanted to deal with we agreed that I would concentrate on a topic that would allow me to share my passion for Jewish survival. And so, tonight, as we begin, again, the annual journey from our yesterdays to our tomorrows, it is my intent to speak about the survival of species - not in generalities - but with the specific intent of insuring the survival of "our" species - the Jews of Eastern European descent - what we commonly refer to as Ashkenazic Jews. Once my topic area was determined, we arrived at a common overall theme; one that has been my own motivation as a Rabbi, found in the cautionary words of one of the greatest of all Rabbis, Hillel, who lived in Jerusalem during the Roman occupation and taught at the latter part of the 1st century BCE and into the first decade of the 1st century CE. He taught:

אם אין אני לי מי לי

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני

"And, if I am only for myself, what am I?"

ואם לא עכשיו עימתי

"And, if not now, when?"

Tonight, I want to focus our attention on the first part of Hillel's teaching אם אין אני לי מי לי - it is, for me, where everything about Jewish life and Jewish survival begins. Yes, it's true, we Jews have to see to the needs of others: social justice was, and remains, a lynchpin of my Jewish journey. And, yes, it's equally true, we

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

cannot put off until tomorrow what needs be done today: I am, and will always be, impatient when it comes to getting things done "yesterday!"

But, it is also true that for me, everything begins at home, with family. (Now, you may hear a snicker coming from the 3rd pew to my right - from that "voice" I cautioned you about earlier - and that "voice" is not entirely wrong in reacting to this last comment. The truth is, I was rarely home with my family - instead, I was here, or in the world outside these walls, working with other people's families, trying to fulfill Hillel's dictum.) And I know that having admitted this publicly, tonight, will not guarantee me atonement on *Yom Kippur*; my hope is that my atonement will come from the deeds I have done when I was not home! Deeds that remain the continuing passions of my life beyond the passion I have for my family and friends. Somehow, I hope that my passions will "rub off" on you and that the journeys we take in this New Year will see us walking side by side to fulfill them.

Allow me to spend just a moment on what will take place here tomorrow morning: as always, we will read the classic *Rosh Hashanah* Morning *Torah* portion known simply as the *Akaida* - the "binding of Isaac." In the course of my rabbinate I must have written at least a dozen sermons dealing with this tale of a father, blinded by an absolute faith in a God he could not see, who never-the-less was able to make that "leap of faith" that allowed him to plan for, and almost carry out, the slaying of his only child, the child of his old-age, until, at the very climax of the story as Abraham raised the knife as his son Isaac lay there, helpless, on the altar he helped his father build, an angel of God intervenes and, as they say, the rest is history.

In the course of writing those sermons - brilliant ones, if I say so myself - it is only in recent months that I "discovered" a theory that I had never before considered - but one that has great relevance to what I want us to consider tonight. Abraham, the father of the

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

Jewish people, who's offspring God promised to make "more numerous than the sands of the sea and the stars in the heavens"- Abraham, the iconoclast who left family and homeland to go in search of a God he could "hear" in his mind but could not see with his eyes - Abraham, through whom Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace their beginnings - he could have, he would have - if not distracted by that angel's voice calling his name aloud: *Avraham, Avraham!* - he could have single-handedly cut off, forever, the progeny his son would eventually produce and erase from human consciousness the history of a People that continues to exist in a world that has tried to eradicate us.

It is this "piece of the puzzle" that I never saw during all the years that I was privileged to "think out loud" in front of my congregation. Even in 1975, when a genetic disease named Tay-Sachs was labelled a Jewish Genetic Disease, and Rabbis were urged to counsel young couples contemplating marriage to be tested to see if either or both of them carried this mutation, and I began requiring each couple who asked me to officiate at their marriage to be tested or find another Rabbi - even, then, I never saw it. In fact, it is only in these last months, when my Rabbi asked me to preach tonight's sermon and to deal with this topic that both he and I are passionate about, that I suddenly realized how it all fit in with the *Akaida*.

Abraham's "potential" actions could have cut our people off at the very beginning of our journey; today, Jewish Genetic Disease holds that same potential threat - not for all Jews in the world - but for the great majority of our people. There is, quite obviously, nothing I can do about Abraham's actions: had I been there, perhaps! - but I was not - and, had he been allowed to carry it through to the end - I wouldn't be here either - and neither would any of you! Commenting on Abraham's action can - and has - inspired passion in me. Working to educate the Jewish community - Rabbinic and Lay - to the threat of Jewish Genetic Disease requires a similar passion. From those early beginnings in 1975 to this dawn of another year, the passion in me has grown stronger: tonight, I seek

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

to recruit all of you to join me in this task for I cannot do it alone - I need your strength and your inspiration. For, even when we are, by nature, passionate and impatient, we still need new "sources" of inspiration to motivate us.

With this, then, as my motivation - let me share my passion for our survival as Ashkenazic Jews. Let me offer some statistics to put all of this in perspective. The world's total Jewish population is less than 1/4 of 1 percent - or, to say it differently - 1 of every 400 human beings on this Planet is Jewish! The best "estimates" from the most recent world population studies indicate that there are somewhere between 16-18 million Jews in the world - and 80% of us are Ashkenazic Jews. That means that there are somewhere between 12.8 - 14.4 million Ashkenazic Jews in the world today. And, since we also know that 20% - or 1 in every 5 Ashkenazic Jews - is a carrier of 1 or more mutations for any of the 11 Jewish Genetic Diseases that we know about and have the ability to test for - we also know that between 2.5 - 2.8 million Ashkenazic Jews are carrying one or more of those 11 mutations. Or, think of it this way: Of those of us sitting in this Sanctuary tonight - let's say 600-700 for purposes of example - 120-140 of us is a carrier of 1 or more of Jewish Genetic Diseases.

Now, should you decide to "take a quick peek" at your neighbor - sitting next to you, behind you, in front of you - you will have no way of knowing that anyone of them is a carrier. The only way one can tell, by cursory physical examination, is if the person they see actually has a specific genetic disease and then, only if that particular disease has outward physical markers. In the 30 years of my journey as this Temple's Rabbi, I had the privilege to teach, and to celebrate "life-cycle" moments with, and then, later on in their lives, but when they were still rather young, the sad obligation to accompany their families during the funerals and mourning periods for my students - whose lives were compromised, every day, by a genetic disease they inherited from unsuspecting parents who, in their day, could not have been tested to determine if they were

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

carriers because no tests existed - nor did the knowledge - until 1975 - that such diseases even existed within the Ashkenazic Jewish community.

So, let me put this as "plainly" as I know how: Those of us who were born free of these diseases are just "damn lucky!" Our parents couldn't have known the possibilities. And those of our children who were born free of those diseases are also "damn lucky" because we, their parents, didn't have a clue! How could we have? No one knew to tell us.

But now we do know that these 11 autosomal recessive Jewish genetic diseases do exist and, with that knowledge, comes the responsibility to act to insure the survival not just of our own families - especially those generations that will yet be born - but the survival of the entire Ashkenazic community. How many of us have children old enough - but not yet - married? How many of us have children who are newly married but not yet ready to begin to create their own family? And how many of us are already grandparents - with healthy grandchildren free of any of these diseases - who, along with our children have merely assumed that "everything is AOK!" But do we know what will happen with the next pregnancy? Or the next?

As Rabbinic Advisor to the Jewish Genetic Disease Consortium, I spend my days - and sometimes my nights - speaking with Rabbis, Physicians and young couples - from all over North America - listening, sometimes, to horror stories from new parents who discovered, after the fact, that their child has a life-threatening or life-altering disease - and, at other times, offering counsel to young women, still pregnant, who have just been told that their "amnio" shows that there is a Jewish genetic mutation affecting their fetus. You may never have heard of these diseases before tonight - but now, with the brochure you discovered at your seat and with a better understanding of the reality that exists within our genetic code, I hope that you will embrace your responsibilities as an

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

Ashkenazic Jew and that you will become “proactive” within your family, and among your friends. Log on to our JGDC website: it has up-to-date information and provides links to the website of each of the individual Genetic Disease organizations.

Through our Medical Grand Rounds Program, the JGDC is the sole provider of educational programs to Doctors and Hospitals and, in this last year, we have added a Rabbinic Grand Rounds Program where I sit with groups of my rabbinic colleagues and, first educate them, and then demand, of them, the same passionate response that I make to every couple who asks me to officiate at their wedding: “Be tested, or find another Rabbi!” In 2009 we also marked the beginnings of a program within the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where student Rabbis and Cantors are offered training in the area of Jewish Genetic Diseases in preparation for their pre-marital counseling.

And, just to underscore the urgency and the passion for this work, Sheila and I have just returned from a trip to Paris to celebrate our 48th wedding anniversary but, as in those days when I was still “working,” there was still time for us to meet with the Liberal and Conservative Rabbis of Paris, where I presented a seminar on “Jewish Genetic Disease and the *Halachah*.”

Of all the fundraising that we do in the JGDC and within our affiliates, I am quite proud of the financial support of several Temple Emanu-El families who, year after year, support our fundraising activities. And, while I don’t believe in “listing names,” I would be remiss if I didn’t publicly acknowledge the major support of the Evelyn and Martin Bernstein Family Foundation for underwriting first the Pilot Program and then the National Roll-out of the Medical Grand Rounds Program. Their act of *tz’dakah* has had a major impact on the American Medical community and has increased the chances of survival for the generations of the Ashkenazic Jewish community. They have fulfilled Hillel’s demand!

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

Judaism teaches us that God created a Universe with meaning and order, a Universe where every part of creation is of inherent worth. And God declared the "goodness" of creation long before any other living creature even knew of our existence in the cosmic order of things; indeed, the Universe and the Planet Earth have goodness independent of our species. Nothing, not one single species, even species we humans might consider "unnecessary" like gnats, fleas and mosquitos; nothing was created in vain, for all species are a valued part of creation.

Like all other species, our survival as humans comes from proper use of the world around us. And yet, we have abilities and responsibilities unique to our human species. And, what is true for the entire human species, is also true for our Ashkenazic Jewish species. We need to find ways to survive; it's been hard enough to have survived the brutality of the "external" dictators and demonic minds of our history; how much the more so, the "internal" demons that are ours by virtue of our genetic makeup. We may not be able to control the evil of other human minds - but we can absolutely control the internal mechanisms that seek to do us in! The power rests with each of us and the survival imperative is clear: act, now, that our generations might survive!

We in the Jewish Genetic Disease Consortium and our affiliates need each of you to become our partner in this work. Ours is, quite simply, a collective Jewish responsibility; no other species in the world has a responsibility for what happens to us. **אם אין אני לי** - **מי לי** - If we do not act - if our survival is not important to us - who, then, will act on our behalf. No angel will suddenly swoop down to call out our name in the moment before we act to procreate. It is we who must learn to hear the inner voice that demands that we become proactive for our own survival. *Rosh Hashanah* presents us with a chance to begin the journey all over again - to put aside the unwitting mistakes of the past and create a new order for living.

"SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES: THE ASHKENAZIC JEWISH SPECIES"

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 - Temple Emanu-El of West Essex

Rabbi Emeritus Peter E. Kasdan

And, if we want, one day, to have our grandchildren look deep into our eyes...and, through those eyes, into our *n'shamah*, into our soul...and to have them ask us, innocently: "Grandpa, grandma, what did you do for the survival of the Jewish People?...and, if we want to respond to their innocent question with words that are both truthful and meaningful, then we better begin to use the opportunities this New Year presents to us today for, until today, we have waited far too long. May we begin to see the fragility of human life, to sense the inherent divinity in all of God's creations, to experience God's Presence in our midst in unique moments that somehow allow us to grow beyond ourselves.

kein y'hee ration - may our New Year allow our dreams to be fulfilled!
Amein!