

Yiskor Sermon 5778

Chabad of Port Washington

Judaism is a one on one relationship with G-d; it's personal!

Bob Dylan:

A Jewish secular family in S. Paul, Minnesota, was searching how to give themselves a meaningful Yom Kippur. To go to shul was out of the question. It was archaic, primitive and too religious. Even a Reform synagogue was out of the question. So how should they spend Yom Kippur?

As big fans of Bob Dylan, one of the greatest musicians and composers of our generation, they decided that for Yom Kippur they would go visit the home where Bob Dylan grew up. **Bob Dylan was raised in Hibbing, Minnesota, not far from where they lived.**

They had a younger daughter who was not so crazy about Bob Dylan. She decided she would skip the family outing on Yom Kippur; instead she went to synagogue—to the chabad center of S. Paul, Minnesota.

Her family scoffed at her. **We are going to visit one of the cultural icons of our generation, the home of man whose songs became anthems for the US civil rights and anti-war movements.** We will get to see the environment where he grew up so we can appreciate his contribution and music yet far deeper... **You are going to synagogue, for what? What will you find there?**

Well, listen to this. Off they went on Yom Kippur morning to Bob Dylan's childhood home, in Hibbing Minnesota. Off she went to pray at Chabad.

She walks in to the Chabad synagogue and who does she see sitting there and praying?

Bob Dylan!...

When Yom Kippur ended, her dad phoned her to tell her how much she missed out by declining this family tour. She deprived herself from the opportunity of walking on the very sand where Bob Dylan grew up as a child.

To which she responded to her father, who almost fainted: **You went to visit his childhood home, where he has not been for some 65 years! I was sitting in the same room... all day... praying with Bob Dylan!**

For me, this story captures what Judaism is facing today. All of us, especially our youth, are searching for the most exciting, transformative, novel, life-changing experience that will give their life a little dance. The options are never ending...

Every day our popular culture seems to invent new, creative options for a thrill... an endless smorgasboard of ways to experience life's joys... to make life special... much of which actually tend to leave us feeling quite empty...

Everyone's looking for Dylan's footsteps. But Bob Dylan himself is going to Shul...

What's "IN" and popular... may not be what's most valuable...

Onkelos was a member of the Roman royal family in the first century, nephew to Hadrian and heir apparent to the throne of Rome.

Upon reaching adulthood, Onkelos asked his uncle Hadrian for advice on what kind of venture to get involved in.

"Look for something that is undervalued. Something extremely cheap because people don't realize its true worth, but that in fact is very valuable. This way you can profit greatly and be very successful!"

Onkelos travelled and explored all the different life styles and ideas out there... eventually he came across **Judaism. It captured his imagination, his clear, strong mind and golden, pure heart.** He studied Torah with the greatest masters of the time, and converted to Judaism. Eventually, he went on to become one of the greatest scholars of his time. His Aramaic translation and commentary on the Bible is printed in almost every copy of the Torah (show the book).

His uncle later asked him why he had left his home and his religion, and a future seat on the throne of Rome, and embraced a religion of a small, persecuted people.

“I listened to your good advice,” Onkelos said. “You advised me to buy a material which is undervalued, but is in fact very valuable. I traveled throughout the world and I could not find anything more undervalued than Judaism. It has fewer customers than anything in the world, yet it is more priceless than the most valuable jewels in the royal treasury.

Joshua Bell

World famous Grammy winning violinist Joshua Bell had just played a concert to a sold out concert hall in Boston, where the cheapest seats were \$100... three days later, **Gene Weingarten of the Washington Post** asked **him to be part of a study... He asked Bell to play his violin in Washington DC’s Union Station subway station** during morning rush hour, on a cold January morning...

He played for 45 minutes... at the subway... with the best acoustics... on his \$4 million violin...

How many people you think stopped to listen?

SEVEN

Over a thousand commuters passed by. SEVEN PEOPLE stopped to listen.

Weingarten won a **Pulitzer prize** for his story.

Three days before people were paying big money for a decent seat...

Now you could have it for free.. your own personal concert with America’s greatest violinist...

And this is Washington D.C., lots of sophisticated people who know good music when they hear it...

I watched the YouTube... Sad... There he is, the master... Joshua Bell standing there a lonely figure in the corner being totally ignored... People were too busy to notice...

The video shows those few lonely individuals who stopped... they looked like they were outcasts, why would they stop...

But I don't think they really cared who else might be paying attention. They were in heaven... enjoying a personal one on one concert from one of the world's greatest musicians. Truly a taste of heaven...

And you know who else stopped?

Every last child!

Every time someone came by with a kid, it was as if it was scripted... the parents would keep on walking, the **kid would be tugging** at the parents in the direction of the music... only to be pulled away by mom or dad...

Dear friends, today is the day of the big, sold out concert. G-d is very popular today... Synagogues all over the world are packed out, everyone's trying to get a seat...

Joke - If I catch you praying

Man comes to shul Yom Kippur without ticket and the won't let him in. After pleading and giving an excuse that he absolutely **MUST** enter to give a quick message to his friend, the guard lets him in: “

OK, I'll let you go in... but if I catch you praying...”

Everyone's cramming to get in to be in the presence of the Maestro on the big day...

But G-d is not just in Shul... on the High Holidays.

And G-d is not just in Shul...

G-d is in our lives every day of the year... in our homes and businesses and our everyday lives...

The Maestro Himself, Master Creator and Director of the universe!

He's right there with us every day.

Inviting us to hear His music... the music of a life well lived...

Every mitzvah... prayer... moment of Torah study... is divine music.

Let's not be too busy to notice...

At times this music may seem undervalued...

So many people around us seem to just rush by... way too busy to stop and notice

Stopping to listen might be a bit lonely at times...

But so what... you've got your own personal one on one with the master... It's a taste of heaven... It makes for a life filled with meaning and purpose... It's priceless...

But it's difficult

You're thinking: Rabbi, I hear you, but human nature being what it is, we tend to go with the flow of what's IN. It's just the way it is... And this precious, priceless, heavenly Jewish thing... isn't exactly IN...

A woman showed up at shul a few weeks ago who I hadn't seen in a long time, maybe since last Yom Kippur. I immediately approached her:

Is everything ok?...

She said she came because there was something going on in her life and she needed some time alone... and with G-d.

Afterwards we chatted and she said she actually enjoyed it.

It was comforting, and liberating, to have some quiet time reflecting and connecting... **Rabbi, it really felt good...**

So I popped the million dollar question:

So why don't you indulge yourself... it feels good... I think you deserve this experience more often... treat yourself... Honestly, that's what people do with their free time – they explore things that make them feel good... go for it!

She gave me a pregnant pause:

This Jewish thing is really nice... But this is not Brooklyn you know, it's just not what people do on Saturdays... It's not in vogue... Look at me... I dress in vogue... You won't see me in the styles from last season...

This Judaism thing... let's face it, it's not exactly in vogue...

With all due respect rabbi, and you know I love you and everything else... but this stuff is not really IN...

It's tough to go it alone...

How do we get that type of independence... to stop and listen to the music... when it's just not the thing to do...

It's when we make Judaism personal

If Judaism is a religion, an institution, a club, with a set of rules and regulations, well, that club isn't so popular... why get involved...

Truth is Judaism isn't meant to be a religion at all... It's actually a personal relationship, one on one, with G-d.

It's personal!

It's a marriage!

We all know how special a marriage can be

Joke: How did marriage change life for you?

Before I got married I wasn't complete. Now... I'm finished

Joke: What did you do before you were married?

Whatever I wanted to!

Yes, marriage is a challenge, but it's also the greatest blessing.

I often say if I had my way every refrigerator in the country would have a magnet on it that reads:

"Nothing easy is good; nothing good is easy"

Of course marriage takes work to really make it succeed. But the rewards are extraordinary!

Same with Judaism, it's meant to be a loving relationship with G-d . takes commitment, but the rewards are endless.

When we discover this truth, tha Judaism is a love affair, a marriage, we become addicted...

King Solomon describes in his prophetic work Shir Hashirim - Song of Songs how one can fall in love with G-d... not unlike how one might fall in love with a woman that is the love of his life...

When you fall in love, you don't really need outside approval... Actually you really couldn't care less what people think...

You're in love!

Song of Songs, nominally a love story between lover and beloved...

A metaphor describing in graphic detail the love G-d has for each of us, His chosen bride... and the reciprocal love we can offer Him in return.

That's Judaism!

It's not a religion

It's a love story!

When the sages compiled the 24 books of the Bible, they wanted to exclude the Song of Songs... after all it's metaphor, it's a love story... hardly fitting to be part of the Bible of G-d's holy nation.

But Rabbi Akiva, the greatest sage of them all, stood up and proclaimed:

Friends, you don't get it... If the other 23 books are Holy, Song of Songs is Holy of Holies!

It's the essence of it all!

This isn't a religion! It's a love story!

It's not about rules and regulations, good and evil, heaven and hell...

It's one on one

It's personal!

Shema

What is the most important phrase in Judaism?

The Shema

Notice how we cover our eyes when we recite it during prayer... We close out the whole world, it's just me and G-d. period.

The Amida is considered the central part of prayer. Notice how it is said in a whisper... For all the rest we say loudly, even singing, we're praying together as a group... when it comes to the Amida, the essence of prayer, it's a whisper... it's private... it's not for anyone else's ears... it's just between us...

But rabbi, what do you mean personal... look around the room, there are more than 700 people in the room... looks pretty communal to me...

True, and there's something special about praying together with other Jews

But prayer is not a group activity... we're gathered together to inspire and uplift each other... to help each of us connect one on one with G-d!

Two years ago Sara and I married off our oldest child, Ephraim. Words cannot describe how special that day was... anyone who has walked their child down to the chupah knows what I'm talking about... it's beyond words...

I remember the feeling I had, standing under the chupah with my son, on the grand front lawn of the Holy Law synagogue in Manchester, England, where my mechutan serves as Senior Rabbi... I'm surrounded by 400 people... including family and friends, and well-wishers... but the feeling I had inside was beyond description... beyond anything the others could have been experiencing...

Then I saw my Sara, my then bride of 25 years, walking down the stately stone stairs of the historic Shul, together with the bride and her mom... Our eyes met... **We understood each other...** Yes there were hundreds of people there sharing the moment... we were most grateful for that... but at the same time, in a sense we were alone, **it was just the two of us...**

That's Jewish prayer. Of course we pray in a group, it's much nicer, there's a spirit, an energy... but it's personal...

Together... we're each connecting, one on one... with our beloved... the One who loves us most... the love of our life

Eyes closed... we whisper... we tell Him what's really going on... it's nobody's business... it's just the two of us... we understand each other...

There's a well-known verse in that Book, the Song of Songs:

Any ledodi vdodi li

I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me

Many couples have this verse engraved into their wedding bands

It describes the love affair G-d seeks with each of us

My dear friends, let's make Judaism personal

When you put on your tefillin... It need not be just a ritual you do because that's the obligation

As you wrap your finger (show it), many customs have you reciting the words:

V'eirastich lee beemunah

I've betrothed you... through faith...

You can light your Shabbat candles as an ancient ritual, observed by your bubbies and their bubbies for 140 generations...

That's a pretty good reason to do it...

But there's more to it...

As you circle your hands around the flames (show it) and then bring them to cover your eyes

It's a romantic moment with your beloved...

What you're really saying is: Dearest G-d, thank you! Thank you for being there for me through the ups and downs of another week... **thank you for being the light of my life...**

Story: Scott Matty, a Jew who bought his first pair of tefillin 3 years ago at age 60, who has since been at shul each morning at 7am for minyan... I walk in on the day of a big snow storm... it's about 7:30, there's no one there except Scott... a lone figure sitting there in his regular seat, davening alone. I feel badly... I begin apologizing that no one else came, and that I was late... He looks at me: **"Rabbi's this is fine... It's just me and Hashem... It doesn't get better..."**

In the city of Krakow in Poland, in the old Jewish cemetery, just outside the cemetery gates, there's a lone grave that reads:

Here lies Yossele, the Holy Miser

Yossele lived in Krakow in the 17th century, he was a very wealthy man, the richest man in a town where most Jews were poor, beaten down by pogroms and by anti semitic landowners who didn't give them a chance. But Yossele was a miser! Every beggar would try once to knock on his door... He would welcome the beggar in with a smile, sit him down at the table and ask him to tell him his tale of woe. The beggar would share everything with him, how many children he had at home that he had to feed, how much money he earns and how much he really needs each week to feed and clothing for his family... Yossele would listen and would write everything down, name, address, details... Then suddenly he would go into some crazy rage and he would get up, grab the beggar by the collar, shlep him to the door and shout: What chutzpah! Do you think I'm going to give you of my hard earned money... are you out of your mind!? Never! Now get out of here and make sure you NEVER step foot NEAR my house ever again...

Yossele was despised by everyone in town. They wouldn't look at him or talk to him... the kids would spit at him as he walked by... he wouldn't get an Aliya at Shul... He was despised... for the miser that he was.

When Yossele died, no one shed a tear. No one showed up for his funeral. The burial society had his body brought by one lone man to the cemetery, and had **him buried OUTSIDE the cemetery under a tree...** He wasn't even worthy of a spot inside... the low life... good riddance...

About a week later, it's Thursday morning, the rabbi is sitting in his study, there's knock on the door, **it's Avremele the poor water carrier...** "Rabbi, could you help me with a few rubles... to help me make Shabbos for my family..." Sure, my good friend... here... but why today, I know for years, you never asked for help...

"Rabbi I don't make enough money to make ends meet, but **every Thursday morning there's an envelope under my broken door** with 5 rubles... exactly what I need. **On the envelope it says: In honor of Shabbos...** But today it wasn't there...

A few minutes later, **Yankel, the wood chopper**, came by with the same story, he needs some money... why suddenly? Every week for the past 10 years on Thursday morning there's always been an envelope with 2 rubles, exactly what I need to get me through the week... On the envelope it says: Lkovid Shabbos... One after another the people came knocking on the rabbi's door. The rabbi realized... Yosselle, the miser... was supporting half the town...

He was beside himself with grief... He gathered the people to the shul and declared it a communal day of fasting and prayer, to ask Yossele's holy soul for forgiveness for the way he was treated... All day they cried and prayed...

Towards evening, the rabbi, a great scholar and mystic, falls asleep in his exhaustion, right there on the bimah, and has a dream, he sees Yossele, his face is shining, it's radiant like the sun. He says Yossele... please forgive us, we feel terrible...

Yossele smiles and says, rabbi, tell the people to go home, why the tears, it's ok, it's the way I wanted it... **this world it's the world of lies... I didn't want anyone to know... The One who knows everything... He knew... That was enough for me...**

But we laughed at you, the children they spat at you... how could we... Rabbi, this is the way I wanted it... it's not your fault...

But Yossele, how could we be forgiven, no one came out to say goodbye to you... we sent you to your grave... to your final resting place... alone...

Yossele smiles: Alone? Believe me I wasn't alone... As I journeyed towards the heavenly gates...

...To my right was Abraham our Patriarch and Sarah our Matriarch, the masters of charity and hospitality...

...To my left Joseph who fed his people during hunger...

... Moses and Miriam in front of me leading the way with songs of joy...

... Behind me King David playing the harp as we went...

... All around us were countless lofty souls of my ancestors... my zeidehs and bubbehs... who came out to welcome me to the world of truth...

Rabbi, I wasn't alone at all... Ah... how delicious... ah how delightful... Now I'm home again, reunited with my beloved Father in Heaven...

In just a few moments we will observing yiskor

I can't think of a more personal prayer than Yiskor, our loved ones come to spend a few moments with us, those who don't say Yiskor leave the shul not to interfere...

Even the few hundred people that stay in shul, each will be having one on one personal time with their loved ones... sharing, talking, reminiscing,

catching up on what's going on with the family... Communal? Hardly... It's personal...

Dear friends, let's resolve that this year we will listen to our inner voice... of the neshama, the pintele yid

We'll listen to the tugging of the child within... pulling us in the direction of the music... the part of us that knows good music when she hears it...

Let's listen to the music of life... which makes life a taste of heaven...

From the Maestro Himself...

This year, let's make Judaism personal

Yes, we're part of a community... and that's a gift...

But at the same time... it's just the two of us... me and my G-d... you and your G-d... we understand each other... I am to my beloved... my beloved is to me... (PAUSE)

The New Year... is a time for renewal...

But not a renewal of religious commitment... of following the rules of the club...

We're renewing our vows! (PAUSE)

We're in LOVE!