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Sermon Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington

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BAXTER HOUSE & THE “JEWISH HOUSE”

During this past year, this wonderful, quaint, water front community of Port Washington witnessed the destruction of one of its oldest structures, a historic home known as the Baxter House; a 340 year old home. The community got involved to try to stop this from happening, but in the end they weren't successful, the house burned down and shortly thereafter was razed to the ground.

This isn't about who was right in that battle; I don't know what the buyer knew or didn't know, and that's not my point. I'm discussing it only to bring home an important lesson it teaches each of us.

I was saddened to see this landmark get destroyed. It is distressing to think about this: This home stood for 340 years! Think about what it witnessed... It stood proudly on Shore Road, way before Shore Road was part of the United States of America... I'm told George Washington and his men stayed in that house. It stood at a time before cars and trucks were to found on Shore Road... It was horse and buggies... It witnessed all these generations, proudly stood through all of it, and then suddenly it's gone... It's sad.

Friends, I speak to you today of another house – THE JEWISH HOUSE – the “building of Judaism” in your family goes back TEN TIMES 300 years – 3000! If you are sitting here today, it’s because for more than 3000 years (!) your family has been upholding your own “Jewish House” – observing Shabbat, kosher, Passover, prayers and Mikvah - without even one generation of interruption!

Now, think about how much history your “Jewish House” has witnessed, how many storms of history it managed to weather and remain intact. What has it not witnessed... Ancient civilizations, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans... world wars... the founding of the major religions of the world... the beginning of the common era... it’s seen it all, and stood strong and proud throughout all this time...

To illustrate how much history your Jewish House witnessed and has remained unchanged: If Pharaoh of ancient Egypt, or Julius Caesar of Rome, were to come to their countries today and ask for something, people wouldn’t even understand their language. There would be absolutely no connection between them and the modern day version of their countries.

Conversely, if Moses were to walk into this room and ask for a pair of tefillin, we’d know exactly what he’s talking about, and we’d pull out a pair immediately a minute... he’d immediately recognize the exact same square black boxes from back in the day...

If Joshua walked in and asked: “Anyone have a shofar”? Of course we do. Which type would you like....

If Miriam would have rushed in here yesterday just before the holiday began, asking: “oy, what time is candle lighting today?” We’d simply answer: 6:48...

This is an ancient landmark home which has been around for millennia, unchanged!

Suddenly, for the first time, it’s being threatened to be destroyed...
Not from without. The enemies from without could never destroy us, try as they might, time and again.

It’s the enemy from within. In the form of apathy, indifference assimilation, intermarriage, that threatens to destroy the ancient Jewish House.

It’s very painful!

As I watched the Baxter House saga play itself out, I realized its destruction didn’t come in a day. It was gradual. First there was minor neglect, with no one occupying the house; then little things started falling apart. A broken window, a dangling shutter, the gardening was neglected... Over time, after more neglect set in, it was eventually burned, and then finally razed all the way down to the foundation...

It’s the same with the Jewish House. The assimilation and intermarriage doesn’t (usually) happen in a vacuum, suddenly. First there’s some neglect, the Jewish House isn’t being “lived in” ... Hanging shutters and

broken windows can be found... various area of Jewish tradition which heretofore were strictly adhered to, are now being neglected or overlooked...

I must point out that no one can guarantee our children's choices of who they will marry, and intermarriage has become a challenge in families who are very traditional as well. Especially in today's and age of complete openness and freedom - which is a blessing, but a mixed blessing - bringing with it a whole new set of challenges...

However, we must do what we can, and often our actions do have significant impact on the outcome. The destruction of the Jewish House is gradual... Let's not wait until the Jewish House falls apart... until we receive the dreaded phone call from our kid: "mom, I'm bringing her home... it's either her or me". The phone call letting us know that they're marrying the non-Jewish girlfriend or boyfriend no matter what we say or do... And then we aren't left with any good choices... Let's keep a good eye on the upkeep of the Jewish House, with active observance of Shabbos, mezuzah, kosher, Shul attendance, etc. Hopefully, and with enough heartfelt prayers, we won't get that dreaded phone call.

The owner of the Baxter House complained things were very old, and on the verge of collapse. The response was, the preservation law allows the owner to rebuild any part of the house, so long as it's rebuilt exactly the same as it was before.

In preserving the Jewish House it's the same way –

We can rebuild anew, so long as it is identical to the old.

Meaning: Our children can live in modernity and embrace modernity; that's entirely fine. They can be "rebuilt" or "recast" in a modern way of existence. But so long as they are identical to what they were in terms of their Jewishness.

I'm always proud to say my kids are more American than I am. I'm the son of an immigrant father, I grew up in Brooklyn while they grew up in the suburbs. Certainly in terms of technology they're light-years ahead of me. Yet, at the same time, they are also more Jewish than I am, more involved in the Torah texts, and in prayer, and in their mitzvah observance. They see no conflict of total engagement in modern life and living a Torah life the way it's been practiced for millennia.

There's a young lady here today – Morgan Block – who runs marathons. A year or two ago she contacted me because she was planning to run a marathon just a few days after Yom Kippur, and the fasting was a problem so close to the running. And we worked out a solution that worked. Here's the beauty of this: As a proud modern American woman, she wasn't about to compromise on the marathon. She was also not about to compromise on Yom Kippur. To her they weren't in conflict, both values were important to her and she made it work.

Zach Klusky is another such example. Like my own kids, he's "more American than his parents, and yet also more Jewish than his parents" – thanks to his parents... He has been racing sailboats since the age of 6, and has competed on teams on various levels, ranging from local, to county, to state, recently making Team USA, and now there's talk about a possible Olympic involvement sometime soon. And yet, this kid hasn't

missed a day of wearing his Tefillin since his Bar Mitzvah... even while travelling abroad, and boarding with non-Jewish coaches in the UK. And when he walks in to Shul here he's always wearing his Tzitzis, which are hanging out of his pants...

It's no contradiction – the best example of this is Joe Lieberman, the Jew who came closest to the White House, just happens to be a Shabbos observant Jew. Clearly, his adherence to the timeless ideals of Judaism didn't stand in his way from fully achieving the American Dream!

It's been said that our parents and grandparents who came over as immigrants to this country were desperate to give their children what they didn't have... but they failed to give them what they did have... Perhaps they saw a conflict between giving their children the American Dream and Jewish tradition; perhaps they were afraid they'd be rejected by America. Thank G-d, today we see that America embraces us and doesn't expect us to shed our Jewishness to be welcomed into society. We, the next generation, ought to turn this tide around and offer up to our children a full dose of both values! Our Kids can handle both; we're selling them short and not realizing their potential.

Joke: A 5 year old girl is sitting on grandma's lap caressing grandma's face... feeling the wrinkles... She then caresses her own soft baby skin face... She says: Grandma, who made you? G-d made me, says grandma. And who made me? G-d made you too, says grandma. After a brief pause while caressing her own face the girl pipes up: Well, He's getting better at it...

The kids are better than us! They can handle a life of active Jewishness integrated into modernity. Let's not sell them short, let's give it to them.

THE ANTIQUE CAR

A few years back I was driving along Port Washington Blvd when I saw a really old car riding alongside of me. It was really old, and in mint condition. It grabbed my attention (I guess I like nice cars, like the next guy), so I tried to catch up to it to take a good look at it, but it kept moving away from me, I kept missing it at each traffic light. Finally, at the intersection of Searingtown Road and the Expressway I caught up to it, we were both side by side at the red light. I opened my window with excitement to inspect this beauty. I engaged the driver in conversation, asking what year, make and model it was, and marveling at the condition it was in.

“How much is it worth” – I couldn't resist the question...

He looked at me as if I just said something terrible, something sacrilegious...

“It doesn't have a price” ...

“What do you mean? Everything's got a price”.

“I'll NEVER sell it!”

“Never! Why not?”

“It’s been in our family... since the beginning...” he said, as he sped off.

Dear friends,

Jewishness has been in our family since the beginning. Judaism isn’t something your family picked up someplace along the way, 100, 200, 500 or even 1000 years ago... If you’re sitting here today... Judaism has been in your family since the beginning! It’s not for sale, for any price!

A few months ago we celebrated the Bar Mitzvah of Sean Agin. His parents told me that all their four sets of grandparents were survivors; one escaped the Nazi camps; one grandmother left Poland in 1938 to get married in the US and never saw her parents again; one set of grandparents fled Russia because of the pogroms at the turn of the century. So, all of Sean’s great grandparents had to flee someone to be a Jew and stay alive, to be able to live life as a Jew.

So I turned to the boy, who loves baseball (and is a great pitcher) and I said:

Imagine if you were Jackie Robinson’s grandson and you had a chance to play baseball, would you pass it up for some other profession, or would you grab the bat and step up to the plate!? You wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to play the game that your grandfather had to fight

to play, now that you have the freedom to do so. The same is with living life as a Jew. Your grandparents had to hide, they had to pull the curtains and close the shutters to celebrate Passover and Shabbat, or to wear tefillin... You have complete freedom! Grab your tallis and step up to the plate, and swing for the fences!

As part of the debate on Baxter House numerous preservation laws were discussed. At one point the buyer suggested they would change the inside of the house while preserving the outside appearance. The Historic Landmark Preservation Law doesn't allow that though. The Baxter House must remain intact, both on the outside and on the inside.

Similarly in the preservation of our Jewish House, we need both Jewish pride and identity, as well as the detail observance of the mitzvahs and traditions. A general outwardly preservation isn't enough...

But you might be thinking – how could I embrace all of Judaism in one day... I simply can't live up to the standard being set here, to uphold the entire "Jewish House" for the next generation...

My dear friends, it need not be done in one day...

Think of your Jewish House as a fixer upper... a home that you live in but can't afford the time and expense to fix up at one time; so you

begin with one room. Now we'll redo the kitchen, maybe later the dining room, and then some bedrooms, etc. (In fact, I know a young couple living in a fixer upper here in Sands Point who are doing just that). The same is true spiritually: Let's build up our Jewish House room by room. Maybe this year it's the kitchen – we'll go kosher. Then maybe the dining room – we'll begin to celebrate beautiful Shabbat dinners each week. Then the study – we'll add some Torah study to our lives. Perhaps then the bedroom – Mikvah and family purity. It's not all or nothing and it needn't be in one day.

(Many of you recall the Drip Drop sermon from last year, encouraging us to take on Mitzvahs, one drop at a time. This is this year's version of that same theme: Let's build up the house room by room...)

Let's take a resolution now, while we are in Shul and inspired!

Wondering which mitzvah to take on next?

My wife tells people, when they ask which exercise it the best one: The one that you'll do!

Which mitzvah resolution should you take? The one that you'll keep... choose the mitzvah that you've been telling yourself that you're ready for, but you've just been postponing making a commitment to it. Now's the time!

The Seder Plate

Several years ago, there was a rabbi who was once doing some browsing in an antique store when he spotted something on a shelf that caught his eye. He took a closer look at the item to make sure that it really was what he thought it was. Upon closer examination, there was no mistaking it – it certainly was! He recognized this item because it was the centerpiece of a eulogy he had given a while back at the funeral for a simple, yet sweet and devout, man in his community named Sam Davidowitz.

What an awesome story that item had to tell – which I will share with you now.

In 1944, the Germans had taken over Sam's little town. The terror and persecution were underway. Then came the fateful day that they began rounding up all of the Jews for deportation. Some may have believed the big lie that they were just being transported to another site to be put to work, but Sam knew better. He knew what the round-ups and transports were really all about.

He knew that the Nazis had their designs on erasing every trace of the Jewish people and their heritage. But he was determined to stage his own little act of defiance. He was going to leave something behind as a reminder and memento of Jewish freedom and independence. He knew that if he was caught doing what he was about to - he would pay with his life; but he had to do it. Even if he himself would not survive, perhaps someone else would discover it one day as an enduring symbol of Jewish faith and perseverance.

He wished he could have hidden much more – a Torah scroll or some candlesticks perhaps – but he had very little time and very little space for hiding too many objects of value. What item did he choose to hide? It was the elegant silver Passover Seder plate – with exquisite etchings and designs – that had been passed on to him by his late father. As he buried the beautiful relic in his special hiding place in the cellar, he wondered whether he would ever see it again.

From that day forward – from the boxcars to the selection lines; from the starvation to the beatings; from the bitter cold to the grueling hard labor and sadistic marches – not a day went by that Sam’s mind did not return to his Seder Plate in its special hiding place. Would he ever see it again – touch it, polish it and tell its story?

Incredibly enough, Sam did survive. As a matter of fact, as he would one day confide to his rabbi, there were many times that he felt he didn’t have the will or the strength to go on anymore and was ready to give up – just end it all and join the members of his family and friends who perished. But then --- he would think of his beloved Seder Plate waiting for him in that cellar. He fixated on it. He felt it was his sacred duty to stay alive and go back to retrieve that Seder Plate, and ensure its continuous passage through the generations. He had to. He had to go back to his roots and uncover his own symbol of survival.

Indeed, the day came that Sam was a free man. His hobbled legs were no match for his soaring spirits as he came back to his hometown and quietly let himself into the cellar of his old home. He retrieved his beloved Seder Plate and lived to celebrate dozens of Passovers with it until his recent death.

That was the story of the magnificent Seder Plate which this rabbi shared at Sam’s funeral. And there he was on a Sunday afternoon staring at that very centerpiece of Sam’s dreams -- sitting on a dusty shelf in a nondescript antique store.

“Where did you get this?” the rabbi asked the storeowner. “How did you come to have this?”

“Oh, it was part of an estate sale,” said the dealer. Apparently, the deceased was religious but his children aren’t – so they don’t really have any need or use for ‘items like these’. Do you like it? 150 bucks and it is yours!”

The rabbi could feel his body trembling as he counted out the 150 dollars to save Sam’s Seder Plate – this time not from the Nazis, but from the apathy of those who knew not and cared not for its value. As he walked down the street clutching Sam’s beloved treasure, he couldn’t help but weep. He wept not only for his friend Sam, but for all those whose families did not understand that to discard and dismember our links with the past is to be guilty of an insidious form of murder—the murder of memory.

When the rabbi came back to his office, he placed the Seder table atop the credenza and continued to stare at it for several moments. While still eyeing the tarnished but majestic piece, he picked up the phone and made some calls. He jotted down some information and was out the door – with the Seder Plate tucked under his arm. Twenty minutes later, he walked up the steps to a stately home in an affluent part of town. His knock was answered by a friendly 11 year old boy who introduced himself as Danny – the young man he had spoken to on the phone. The boy showed the rabbi into the living room where his mother sat waiting. The Rabbi gently placed the Seder Plate on the coffee table and proceeded to once again tell the story of Sam’s awesome Seder plate – this time with even greater passion and emotion than the last.

Two years later, Danny Davidowitz, celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. The following Passover he read from the Haggadah — as his grandfather’s

Seder Plate gleamed brightly in the center of the table – and as his parents, brothers and sisters joined in. Sam’s Seder Plate had found its way home once again.

Yiskor – when our loved ones join us from the world of truth, let’s tell them we’re gonna hold onto the “Seder Plate”... we’re gonna pass it on to our children and grandchildren... it’s a priceless family heirloom... it’s been in our family since the beginning... it’s absolutely not for sale! It’s carried us and given us identity and hope and meaning throughout all the generations. Even as we embrace the new world, we hold onto the old classic... our timeless family treasure... our precious Jewish House!
Thank you and Shana Tova!