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Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington**

Yiskor Sermon 5770

Jews: An Endangered Species

A drunk is on a New York Subway train. The trains in Manhattan are so busy, traveling in so many directions and this poor guy kept getting on the wrong train. Eventually, some nice stranger takes pity on him and manages to find out where he lives and he puts him on the right train to get him home. So the drunk staggers into the compartment, finds a seat, and, as fate would have it, whom does he sit right down next to? A Catholic Priest! And the priest looks at this drunk most disapprovingly, and says, "My good man. Don't you know that you are on the road to purgatory?!" And the drunk mutters under his breath: "Oh no! Wrong train again!" And he stumbles out.

So many of us keep changing trains in life. We stagger in and out, looking for the pathway to paradise, desperately seeking happiness and fulfillment. But it remains elusive. Yom Kippur is the time to look for the correct train to take us 'home', to our Father in Heaven; to a life filled with meaning.

Let's talk about the environment. Its become a real big issue. We at Chabad are helping the environment by recycling the jokes from last year... Plus we're going green; we now accept cash (I know I already said these last year).

How about Cash for Clunkers... that's exactly what Yom Kippur is all about. We offer up an accounting of our deeds of the past year, something like clunkers... in return G-d blesses us with a great year – CASH!

How about Endangered Species, that's become an important cause for Jews, and for good reason.

Lost in the woods, a hiker spends two days wandering around with no food. Finally, he spots a bald eagle, hits the bird with a big rock and eats it. A park ranger stumbles on the scene and arrests the man for killing an endangered species. In court, the hiker explains that he was on the edge of starvation and had no choice.

"Considering the circumstances, I find you not guilty," says the judge. "But I have to ask—what did the eagle taste like?"

"Well, Your Honor," the hiker replies, "not bad. But nothing compared to the spotted owl."

I submit to you today that a Jew is an Endangered Species... I am not happy to make this statement, but unfortunately I think it is the truth, and therefore deserves at least as much attention as we give to preserving endangered species out there.

As much as our enemies tried to destroy us they were unsuccessful. Today, we ourselves are assimilating ourselves out of existence... Intermarriage, assimilation, apathy, we're in danger...

In 2001 the NY Times reported on the Jewish population survey:

10 years ago we were 5.5 million, now 5.2 million. They later came back with a correction: We're not 5.2 million, but 6.7 million (thank G-d the 1 ½ million Jews that were lost, were found...)

So we've got 6.7 million... in this area I'm doing my share...

A rabbi meets a couple and asks them how many children they have?

"We aren't blessed with any yet."

"Let me write down your names and place a note in the Kotel for a blessing."

Five years later he meets the women again and asks, "So how is the family?"

"Well rabbi, we were blessed with 10 children; two sets of twins and two sets of triplets."

"Amazing! I would like to congratulate your husband. Where is he?"

"He is in Israel," she replies

"What is he doing there?"

"Looking for the note you placed in the wall!!"

The survey estimated 47% intermarriage... Here too the Times had a correction: it was actually only 42%. I must tell you I felt so much better; first I couldn't sleep, 47%; then when I heard only 42%... I slept like a baby...

We're an endangered species...

We're so worried about the spotted owl, the Giant Panda,

The Black Rhino, Green cheek parrot, big leaf mahogany...

I mean I like mahogany... but frankly I'm more concerned about human beings, and about my Jewish people... our people... our family...

As the Prime Minister said last week, so proudly: My People...

This is our people... our destiny...

Truth is I am not worried about the Jewish future, since Hashem promised Abraham. We are a miraculous people and we'll always be here. One of the greatest proofs of G-d's existence as far as I'm concerned is the miraculous survival of a tiny, persecuted wandering people, even while every mighty nation that ever came to power rose up, had its day, and then disappeared into the footnotes of history.

The future of our people is secure. The question though is will my family be a part of that future.

Population Study done by a team of PhD's shows future of Judaism in your family is directly commensurate to your Jewish observance.

According to this study which I hold in my hand, they have computed based on intermarriage and birth rates of various groups of Jews, to calculate the Jewishness of their families in the future.

The study is organized in 5 categories: secular, marginally affiliated, traditional, Shabbos observant, and Chassidic/Yeshiva. In each category they estimate what 100 Jews today will add up to in three generations. Here goes.

100 Jews today, in 3 generations, will be:

Secular – 7

Marginally affiliated – 10

Traditional – 29

Shabbos observant – 434

Chasidic black hat – 3,401

Dear friends, this is not about alarming us because I think there are things we can do about it... but its good to know the score.

A colleague of mine said not to discuss this, it's negative, might make people feel bad... I am talking about it because I intend to tell you what I think you can do about this. I think there are real solutions, within the reach of every single person in this room...

Besides, it's important to know the score so we can do something about it.

(Would you say – don't tell someone there's a train coming down the track towards them... and they'll be in trouble... I say – tell them: hey buddy, there's a train coming down the tracks... get off the tracks!!!)

When I decide how to raise my family and in which direction to take my life, let's take into account the future...

People prefer blue chip stocks because they know they pass the test of time. If I'm investing my hard earned resources in a business venture I think about what future it has. Our lives should have at least the same consideration as our money.

Choose a path with a secure future.

I always find it interesting how people suddenly get philosophical when discussing where they stand in terms of their Jewish observance, while when it comes to their investments they're not philosophical. They're practical. They choose the investments that work, which pass the test of time. It's very simple. Why should my life and my family's future be any different...? Why not choose your path and observance based on results, on which path will yield a Jewish future for my grandchildren and which will not...

Rabbi Martin Rozenberg, local reform rabbi, in trips to Israel would tell his people, when taking them to yeshivas where they're studying the fine print of the Talmud: This is the future of our people...

Think about these statistics: why do more religious families have such a strong Jewish future; it should be other way around. In less observant families things are made much easier, with much lower expectations Jewishly. That Should be more popular... yet, the religious, Chasidic communities seem to have an excellent retention rate of their children continuing their path of yiddishkeit (the occasional drop-out invariably gives birth to a movie or at least a new novel...) and the more secular have a harder time keeping the kids and grandkids in the fold... Go figure...

The answer is - Don't Lower the Jewish Bar

Today many good, well intentioned parents think that in order to guarantee their children grow up to be involved Jews, Judaism must be made as easy and undemanding as possible. It has to be an abridged version, more suitable to the attention span of a Twitter generation.

The only problem with this reasonable idea is that it has precisely the opposite effect parents expect.

To illustrate, let's consider three Jewish Holidays in the Bible, called the Pilgrimage Festivals, (the Shalosh Regalim. On these three holidays Jews in ancient times would make the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem.) The first is Passover, when we commemorate the Exodus, next is Shavuot, which recalls the day we received the Torah at Sinai, and finally Sukkot (Tabernacles), which commemorates the protective clouds of glory that sheltered us as we journeyed through the desert.

Let me ask you, which Holiday is most widely celebrated?

First is Passover, then Sukkot, then Shavuot.

Now, let me ask which is the most demanding Holiday?

Hands down it is Passover. Passover involves lengthy, exhausting preparations. The house must be thoroughly cleaned. The kitchen and utensils must be koshered, or you even may need to buy a new set.

What is the second most strenuous holiday? Sukkot. It involves constructing a sukkah, a hut with leaves for a roof, in which we eat for eight days of the festival. Sukkot also involves purchasing the Lulav and Etrog, the palm branch, and citron, as well as willow and myrtle leaves used in the festival services.

The least demanding of the festivals is Shavuot. What do we do? We eat cheesecake and there is an all night study session. However, both are customs and are not Biblical in origin.

Friends, the more demanding the festival, the more it is observed and celebrated.

This is strikingly evident when it comes to the most challenging day of the whole calendar, today, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Jews spend an entire day in the synagogue, fasting, praying, repenting, and listening to a barrage of painfully long sermons.

Going by the popular theory that the easier a Mitzvah, the more widely it is celebrated, one would expect the synagogue to be empty on Yom Kippur, and packed on the one day a year we eat cheesecake. The fact is, synagogues are more packed on Yom Kippur than on any other day of the year. Go figure.

This explains why, for two centuries, the Jewish families, even those with the best of intentions that have pursued the policy of making Judaism less demanding, to their great sadness, have found that their children preferred other ways of life.

But why is this so?

It is true in life that we value most what costs us most. The more

demanding the task, the greater commitment it evokes. We cherish most that for which we make sacrifices. Judaism survived two thousand years of dispersion, not because it was easy for the Jewish people to retain their faith, but because it was difficult, sometimes very difficult.

Last year (2008), two American teenagers published a book that became a best-seller. It had one of the most surprising titles I have seen in recent years. It is called:

Do Hard Things. The subtitle is A Teenage Rebellion against Low Expectations.

Isn't that fantastic? Teens telling us to expect more, that they are capable of more. So how do we tap into our children's inner strength and commitment?

The answer is to embrace, not avoid Judaism's demanding elements. Judaism, with its 613 Mitzvot and its vast literature, requires much study to master, and is about doing hard things.

(Don't worry... there are really only about 87 mitzvahs that are relevant today since we don't have the Holy Temple).

There's this Jewish private school on the Upper West Side, you know, all the kids get dropped off by a driver. The principal comes in one day to talk to the kids about current events. He says, "Let's take about something very relevant now. Who can tell me what the word 'economy' means?" One child raised his hand and says, "Economy? That's where the other people sit on the plane."

We teach our children to aim high. We need to teach them to aim high Jewishly as well. Some parents communicate the message to their children (either by their words or their deeds): "Remain Jewish"-- we're not asking much. We are talking about a small Judaism; it would be no hardship. We are not asking you to observe anything, to do anything, or even to believe anything. We are just asking you to be Jewish."

You would think these would be the kids most likely to remain Jewish...but it doesn't work that way. Because the child replies: That is exactly the problem. Why should I take Judaism seriously when it asks so little of me, when it has no content other than bagels and lox. When you show me a Judaism that which thinks enough of me, and takes me seriously enough to ask for my soul, then I'll be interested. I want to be guided, I want to have great demands made of me, and yet you offer me a diluted diet of "be a nice person" and singing "Hava nagila."

Today so many bright, sensitive, motivated, articulate young Jews are showing a great hunger for depth, for spiritual experiences and great causes.

And that is why they turn away from Judaism that asks so little of them. They devote themselves to those causes that make demands that move them and take over their lives with a quality of dedication they have been hungering for.

Story of "Why is this Rabbi Taking me so seriously" (Young man who became religious because of an encounter with the Rebbe on Simchat Torah who gave each child in his youth group his full attention and poured a cup of wine for blessings into his cup. His reaction was: Why is this Rabbi taking me so seriously? No one ever did...)Let's show our children that we take them seriously and they will take their Judaism seriously...

Friends, our Jewish teenagers today are of high quality and therefore they will rebel against low expectations. Many of us are familiar with how hard our Jewish young people work to succeed in school, to get into top colleges and graduate programs, and to excel in the fields of law, medicine, engineering, and many others.

How can we expect these same high achievers to get excited by a watered down, low-resistance version of Judaism? They deserve and want a Judaism that will move them. That will touch their souls. They want the courage to face darkness, the strength to survive life's setbacks, the confidence and clarity to overcome doubt, the compassion to feel another's pain as if it were their own.

Give it to them; and I promise you they will invest their life in it. They will become Jews who care, Jews who trace themselves back to Mount Sinai, and who allow that fact to shape their lives—and their children's and grandchildren's lives as well.

Our children know, the best things in life are difficult, and require sacrifice and commitment.

Think about marriage. If someone asked you about marriage, if they should get involved, you'd tell them "it's got to be one of the most difficult things in life, but I highly recommend it."

A little girl and a little boy were at day care. The girl approaches the boy and says, "Hey Tommy, wanna play house?" He says, "Sure! What do you want me to do?"

The girl replies, "I want you to communicate your thoughts."

"Communicate my thoughts?" said a bewildered Tommy. "I have no idea what that means."

The little girl smirks and says, "Perfect. You can be the husband."

A man with a gun goes into a bank and demands their money.

Once he is given the money, he turns to a customer and asks, 'Did you see me rob this bank?' the man replied, 'Yes sir, I did.'

The robber then shot him in the temple, killing him instantly.

He then turned to a couple standing next and asked the man, 'Did you see me rob this bank?'

The man replied, 'No sir, I didn't, but my wife did.'

So marriage is challenging... If you tell them its easy, you're setting them up for failure. It's not easy, it takes commitment and sacrifice to share your life and space with another person. But its well worth the sacrifice...

So what's the solution? Do I think everyone in this room is suddenly going to become religious, Shomer Shabbos?

I think there is a practical solution within the reach of each of us.

Animals that are endangered are often marked in a special way so that they can be tracked and watched to see their patterns and to ensure their future.

I believe every one of us needs to 'mark' ourselves with a mitzvah that we embrace completely, something with which we 'mark' ourselves, it becomes part of who we are, it's not negotiable.

Remember on the chart, the Shabbos observant, "frum", column had a promise of a positive future? I suggest that we take small steps, that each year we each choose one new mitzvah to embrace. But that mitzvah must be with a real commitment. In that one mitzvah we are "frum" – observant. If we chose tefillin, or Shabbat candles, then we never miss! Never! It's serious.

We're telling our children, yes we're not there yet in terms of full observance, and quick radical changes never work. But that doesn't mean we're not serious... and that we don't take Judaism seriously... The new mitzvah we embrace each year is taken on with serious commitment. It is our duty, we absolutely commit to it.

In that mitzvah you're shomer shabbos...

And we must add a new mitzvah each year, choose any mitzvah. The Rebbe made a mitzvah campaign highlighting 10 important mitzvahs with which to start. He understood it needs to be gradual, and that it's not all or nothing.

Wondering if Yeshiva education is for you? That's the only way to be assured your children's future involvement in Jewishness. I know it's expensive, and it's a bold step. However, what don't we do for our children. If I don't want to play Russian Roulette with whether my children will identify as Jews, marry Jewish, and walk a path of morality and wholesomeness, I believe there is only one answer... Yeshiva day school education.

A couple came to my office to discuss their need for more spirituality in their lives. I suggested they begin with putting up mezuzahs on all their doors, and by celebrating Shabbat with her lighting the candles, he making the Kiddush and a Shabbat dinner at home with 2 challahs and a delicious meal with the family. They agreed. (Shmuly already visited their home to take care of the mezuzahs...) As they're about to leave the husband asks: We have 2 teenage boys who are beginning to question their faith and

often are not sure where they stand in terms of Judaism. We're going to be making some real changes in our home Jewishly. How should we explain it to the children? Is there a way we can explain to them the philosophy behind these customs, the candles, the kiddush, Shabbat dinner?

I looked at them and said: Don't worry about philosophical explanations. Just make sure the dinner is delicious...

Besides, I said, the same way the 2 of you (both very intelligent people) agreed to take on these mitzvahs without any philosophical arguments, because somehow to a Jew a mitzvah makes sense... we feel right here in our kishkas... Surely there are detailed in depth explanations to all of it, but we didn't go there. I simply made these suggestions and it made perfect sense to you. You feel a need for spiritual nourishment, so mitzvahs make perfect sense there... (just like if someone is hungry... they go ahead and eat, without the need to fully understand how the body reacts to the food and how it provides nutrition...) your children are no different. Give them a taste of a mitzvah. They're Jewish too; it'll talk to them the same way it talks to you... Don't push them, give them some time, make it delicious, and make it natural, they'll come to love it...

Let's think about our future...

Famous Book "From Good to Great" most successful CEO's are those who think about the greater good of the company, of their mission, it's not about them. No one would say this in the animal kingdom (in fact until 30 years ago no one would dream this is true among humans either...) isn't that telling...

It's the way G-d wired us humans up, that deep down in our heart of hearts there's a bigger picture, a sense of mission and purpose...

Let's do the same with our family's Jewish future.

It's known that the idea of grandchildren or grandparents is a uniquely human phenomenon. Animals know their young, but not their young's young. Humans have a sense of history, a sense of connection to generations past and future. It's human to be concerned about the destiny of my family, of my people...

Columbia business school professor taught: Make your business "BUS READY" – when you get hit by a bus things should go on...

If the business world is realizing the key to success to be seeing the bigger, our mission, our purpose, our future and destiny, how much more so as Jews... it's always been about our collective destiny... a Jew's life is about the future of his people...

No need for sudden huge changes in your home. From Good to Great doesn't recommend drastic changes, just small but meaningful steps in the right direction.

Choose that mitzvah today....

Make your family BUS READY!!!

There is a story in a Yiddish book from the Middle Ages about a mother bird that was walking down the forest road with three baby birds, when the little family came to a stream. The stream was too deep for the baby birds to walk across and too far for them to go around. So the mother bird asked the first baby bird:

"If I pick you up and carry you across the stream, how will you repay me?"

The baby bird answered:

"At the next stream we come to, I'll pick you up and carry you across."

The mother said: "That's a silly answer. You're too small to carry me across." She asked the same question of the second fledgling, and it answered:

"When I'm grown up, I'll carry you across streams."

The mother bird shook her head and said: "Even when you're grown up, I won't need you to get across streams." Then she turned to the third bird who answered:

"Someday I'll be a mother bird and I'll have babies of my own, and I'll do all the things for them that you've done for me."

And that, of course, is the correct answer.

We are here because our parents and grandparents gave us Yiddishkeit. Let's do the same for our children... Let's do for them what our parents did for us...

Every person in this room has a very real sense of Jewish identity, that's why you're here... We have our grandparents to thank for that identity. It is because of their commitment to Jewish observance, to Shabbat, Kosher and Yeshiva education, that you and I are here today... Let's do the same for our children... Let's pass along that same passion for yiddishkeit through role-modeling an active observance of Mitzvahs.

Yizkor service

We are about to recite the Yizkor service, during which we remember members of our family who are no longer here. We think of it as an act of kindness for the souls of the departed, something we do for them. But it also is a prayer that our loved ones will teach us something about immortality.

Our being here today testifies to the fact that they knew how to defy death, in a sense. It is because of their influence on us that we are in the synagogue and that we pray. They carried us on their back. And we ask them to teach us to do the same for our children.

The Chazan (Cantor) of Cracow was famous throughout Poland. People would come from far and wide to listen to him sing and lead the service. Ironically, his father was deaf. The Shabbat after his father's passing, to the surprise of the congregation, he asked to lead the service. He sang with a great amount of emotion, he sang, he laughed, he cried... The people were puzzled. "You're still in the middle of Shiva... what's the celebration?"

"Don't you understand? This is the first time my father heard me sing..."

The souls of our loved ones are looking down. They are watching, cheering us on saying, "Fill your home with real, living Judaism. Be an example for your children. Show them how seriously you take the

traditions of our people.... How seriously you take them and their identity as Jews... Don't lower the bar."

Friends, our children want an exciting Judaism, one that teaches them how to live wisely, courageously, compassionately; a Judaism that is demanding;

Introduce them to the Judaism of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Rabbi Akiba and Judah the Maccabee, of Queen Esther and Deborah; tell them they are wearing the same tefillin worn by Moses and king David; they are lighting the same Shabbat candle as our Matriarchs Sarah and Rachel lit... Give them the gift of a Judaism that is timeless; the Judaism that was practiced by our grandparents and their grandparents for three thousand years... a Judaism that is vibrant, alive and fulfilling; a Judaism that is forever.