

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel

Chabad of Port Washington

First day of Rosh Hashanah, 5776

CECIL the LION & Lion King II:

I'm going to teach you a new Yiddish word – akshan... It's a little like a nudnik... but not exactly. It means stubborn.

So the story is told of a "Rebbe" (Chassidic master) entered the synagogue on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and turned to three men standing in one side and said: Shana Tova. The three began arguing whom the Rebbe had in mind. So they went to the Rebbe and asked him who he had wished Shana Tova. "To the biggest akshan amongst you."

The first says: I went to a restaurant, when the waitress asked what I'd like for dinner I said: You figure it out.... Ok, she goes back to the kitchen and comes back 20 minutes later with an entrée. "No, that's not the one I had in mind, try again." Another 20 minutes pass, she brings back another delicious entrée. "No, still not the one." Rebbe, I tell you, I sat there for 5 hours while they brought entrée after entrée, but I didn't tell them what I wanted.

Second guy says: I come home very late one night, it's a freezing cold winter night, snow, icicles dripping from the roof. I knock on the door, my wife asks: Who's there? I say ME. Whose ME? I say ME... Rebbe, believe me, I stood out there all night long, but I didn't tell her my name...

Third guy: My tooth hurt, it had to be pulled out, so I go to the dentist. He says which tooth has to go? I say..... "You're the dentist... YOU figure it out..." He yanks out one tooth. Nope, wrong one... He yanks out another... NOPE, that's still not it... Rebbe, I tell you, he pulled out every one of my teeth... but I didn't tell him which one it was.

The Rebbe turns to the third guy: That's it, YOU'RE the one I said Shana tova to!

Moral – let's stubbornly pray and nudge G-d for a good year, like an akshan, like a child who asks again and again, and G-d will indeed grant us all a SHANA TOVA!

Speaking of dentists... one became quite infamous this year for killing one famous lion...

Q: Why are lions religious? A: Because they prey frequently, and prey as a family!

This July millions of people around the world followed the story of Cecil the Lion, a 13 year old Southwest African lion who lived in a National Park in Zimbabwe which was killed by American Dentist Walter Palmer.

I got nothing against dentists... we have some fantastic dentists in this room...

So Cecil was killed... The outrage was instant and international...

Because of the cruel way the lion was handled, first wounded with an arrow, then tracked, and approx. 40 hours later killed with a rifle.

The outrage was also because Cecil wasn't just another lion. He was a major attraction at the national park and was being studied and tracked by the University of Oxford.

Cecil was identifiable by his black-fringed mane and a GPS tracking collar. The lions in his pride had been studied by scientists for more than 10 years, and his movements had been followed for many years.

The entire world was discussing this outrage. How could someone kill such a majestic, beautiful creature, and that was being preserved and tracked for years and years, just to turn it into a trophy?

The Besht – one of the greatest mystics of all time, taught us the importance of personalizing every event and finding its lesson in our lives as Jews.

The lessons of this story literally jumped out at me off the page... or off the screen as it were:

We the Jewish people are often compared to a LION in scripture.

On his deathbed, our forefather Jacob says: “gur aryeh Yehuda...” he blesses his son Judah with the royalty, strength and stamina of a lion

Later on, the gentile prophet Bilaam says: “am klovi yokum v’kaari isnaso”, he blesses all of our people with the fearlessness and majesty of a lion...

In other words – THE CHOSEN PEOPLE!

We’re at times not comfortable with this notion...

At times we Jews become a bit uncomfortable with the notion of being chosen... It doesn’t sit well with our modern sensibilities...

So we try to get around it... we hesitate...

It’s like the Jew who has a son a truck driver...

If he has a son a doctor or a lawyer... he’s showing it off, see the pictures... my son the doctor...

But with the truck driver... you ask him I heard your son drives a truck...

Not exactly...

He CONTROLS a truck... the truck is moving, someone’s got to control it...

He’s a controller in the trucking business...

Same thing with the chosen people thing... When the non-Jew says to us, often with admiration, "Oh so you're the chosen people, I read it in the Bible" ...

We sheepishly say... well, not really... we're a little chosen... you could also be chosen... we're all chosen...

You see, when the bestseller of history refers to us as the CHOSEN PEOPLE, it's not that we Jews are brighter, more energetic or talented than others. That's racist and should be rejected.

Rather, it is that to be a Jew is to be asked to give, to contribute, to make a difference. We were CHOSEN to help in the monumental task that has engaged Jews since the dawn of our history, to make the world a home for the Divine presence, a place of justice, compassion, human dignity and the sanctity of life. More than a privilege, our chosen-ness is a responsibility – a G-d given responsibility - Letakein Olam – to fix the world, to make the world better, kinder, gentler, a world befitting its great Creator...

We often play down the "Jewish" thing because we think we'll be more accepted into society. But it doesn't work that way. We can't hide it...

A Jew walks into an exclusive country club looking to join ...

They take one look at that punim... Hmmmm... Ok.

They give him an interview where he is asked a few questions:

What's your name? He offers some really Waspy name like: Hutchinson River Parkway the Third or something like that...

Where is your family from? Ireland of course (they're really from somewhere in Poland).

What's your Religion? My religion? Goy!

Can't hide it...

My dear friends: that same best seller refers to our nation as: Mamleches Kohanim, Royal princes... Every one of us is a prince... a princess...

Again, this is not about some kind of self-grandiose of being a supreme race...

Al-mighty G-d chose us as His royal family... to be Ohr Lagoyim, a light unto the nations... to lead the world in the direction of G-dliness and goodness... More than a privilege, it is a responsibility...

So the Torah calls us royalty... "Judah is an awesome lion" ...

And not just an ordinary lion

We've been preserved and monitored closely for thousands of years

We've been protected from countless poachers who would go any lengths to hunt us down

Our survival, against all odds, can safely be described as the eighth wonder of the world

No serious statistician or historian can find any rational explanation for why we're still here, why we keep on surviving... and thriving...

What's our secret? It's the GPS – "G-d's Protection & Security"

Like Cecil and his pride, we've been carrying the banner of Am Yisrael with pride... our every move tracked and monitored by Al-Mighty G-d Himself

We're a study... we're part of an important project affecting the entire world...

I want to talk to you about an international outrage... the attempt to turn this historic lion into a trophy...

Enemies wanting to make us into trophies:

I speak not so much about the enemies from without, the hunters of our people throughout history... Although it is true that the Nazis had a plan to do just that. After implementing the final solution, their plan was to create a great museum to memorialize a fascinating people called the Jews who are no longer... Heaven forbid...

Nothing would make them happier than holding up their trophy for the whole world to see... Look, the Lion of Judah, the heretofore believed untouchable kingdom of Abraham & Moses, we've got 'em... we've got the trophy...

But dear friends, please consider a challenge from a place much closer to home.

The inclination of many of us proud Jews to at times be more inspired by the ancient remains of an old synagogue than on attending a living breathing synagogue...

All summer long I'm receiving fascinating photos from many of you sharing with me interesting Jewish historic sites you've visited

An old shteeble

A mikvah from centuries or millennia ago, on Masada, or unearthed beneath someone's living room someplace in Israel

Remnants... artifacts... from destroyed Torah scrolls from communities devastated in the old world

I thank you for sharing these with me, please keep them coming...

I'm deeply inspired by the enthusiasm... the Jewish spirit comes through in every email or post...

I don't like it... I LOVE it...

When Jews identify with things Jewish, taking pride in our illustrious Jewish past...

I kvell... I see the Jewish spark shining, coming alive...

At the same time though, I can't help but say to myself... "but dear delicious yidelleh, dear beloved Port Washington Jew

If the Synagogue from 700 years ago is so precious to you... how about paying a visit to your own synagogue TODAY

The underground mikvah is very moving... it is evidence that Jewish women used the Mikvah all throughout our long history and in all kinds of circumstances... WOW heroic, powerful, awe inspiring... But what about using the MIKVAH TODAY!?

An ancient Torah behind a glass at the Jewish Museum is impressive... but what about NOW, being at shul with my family on Shabbat, or once a month for Family Shabbat, for me and my children to see an ACTUAL living breathing Torah, NOT behind a glass but up close and personal!

There's a powerful Jewish country song called "My Zeidie"... it tells how we wax poetic in reminiscing the Jewishness and the yiddishkeit of our Zeidies and Bubbies... the precious memories...

But the song then asks the painful question:

"But who will be the Zeidies of our Children, who will be the Bubbies of our children, who will be their zeidies and bubbies if not we..."

What will provide the evidence to our grandchildren in a hundred years that WE, HERE, NOW, used this MIKVAH and read from this TORAH?!

How will they have an illustrious Jewish past to look back to if we don't provide an illustrious Jewish present!

I need to re-emphasize, I'm NOT downplaying the importance of Jewish museums and of showing exposing our children to old synagogues.

I don't think it's unimportant, because it is important!

I'm only putting things into perspective and order of importance. (pause)

We took a family day trip this summer. First stop we see a beautiful exhibit of exotic stuffed animals... including an impressive mail lion... It was wonderful. We stood there for a long time admiring the exhibit. Quite fascinating... When do we get so close to these powerful, majestic beasts... Bear, tiger, the lion, impressive.

But on the very next stop of our trip, when we visited a zoo... and there it was, a living breathing powerful lion... AWESOME

The stuffed lion is impressive and interesting but it's no comparison to the real living thing

Same here... Seeing our ancient Jewish past is important and impressive.

Living vibrant Judaism in our daily lives – AWESOME!

Showing your kids the oldest Shul in the Southern Hemisphere is valuable

Walking with them hand in hand on a Shabbat morning to your local Shul to pray: PRICELESS

This is the Jewish legacy of our beloved Cecil –

Let's not allow a majestic, royal family to be turned into a mere trophy. That would be an international outrage...

My nephew visited Argentina, he sent photos of himself sitting playing with lions... he sent numerous photos with various poses

Everyone wondered how this was possible... were they wax figures? But they were real...

Turns out they were drugged...

How sad... a sleepy drugged lion

A lion isn't meant to be drugged, it's meant to be fully alive and well to do what lions do!

Alive... but sluggish and uninspired, isn't so bad if you're a turtle. If you're a lion, it's really sad.

As Jews, alive isn't enough... we gotta be fully actively engaged in our Judaism.

Dear friends, allow me to pull out a page from a sermon I delivered at this pulpit ten years ago, on Yom Kippur 2005, called The Lion King...

Remember the part when Simba is roaming around with his new found friends doing the Hakuna Matata... (Sing ...) No worries, problem free philosophy...

And instead of acting like a king, this lion is dancing around like he's some kind of wart-hog or something... When someone suggests that he's a king he goes: No, I'm no king. I'm the same guy... I'm just like you. Sound familiar? A neighbor says – you're the chosen people. Nah, it's really nothing... Don't pay attention to that... I'm the same guy... I'm just like you...

.....
But you're a King! Nah, that was a long time ago...

But we have a responsibility... Remember when Nala comes along and says – we need you. You're the king... We need you... You're our only hope... Everything's destroyed in Pride Rock, there's no food, no water, everyone will starve...

Like Simba, when we fail to take our place in the Circle of Life, everyone loses... We're not being humble... We're shirking our responsibility... We're not doing our job... Our non-Jewish neighbors are disappointed in us...

When the Torah tells us we are Royalty... a kingdom of princes – it's not just for us, to make us feel good, to boost our egos... It's for the whole world... We're all connected in the great circle of life... But we got to stand up and take our rightful place...

Rosh Hashanah is the when a Jew looks himself in the mirror and asks himself: What am I about? What is my life about? Have I gotten lost, was I farblonjet somewhere along the way? Who am I?

And the resounding answer that Rosh Hashanah gives each of us: You know who you are?

You're Mufasa's boy!!!

You're royalty... Stand up and do your job!

And you do your job by acting like royalty...

Remember when Simba's two new friends first bring him into their trio and they introduce him to their food menu.... He's not thrilled... He's used to eating like a lion... But they say to him: If you live with us – eat like us...

No, you don't eat like them. You eat like a king... a special royal menu for princes and princesses... It's called kosher...

You take your prince aside and teach 'em a lesson... on how to continue the chain of royalty... it's called Yeshiva, a good Jewish day school education...

You marry like royalty – to a fellow prince or princess, together with whom you will bring to the world the next generation of kings...

And then take your little royal cubs... and lift them up proudly for the whole world to see them... with their yarmulkahs and their tzitzis hanging... pick up your little kinderlach bring them over to the mezuzah to give it a kiss... carry them over to put some coins in the tzedakah pushka...

And when you lift your eyes heavenward in prayer, you don't accept that what you're seeing is just some fireflies stuck on the inky black backdrop up there. Even if you don't understand it fully, you know that there's something greater... that there's a plan... and a purpose... and an afterlife... You know that your loved ones are out there... the great kings of the past...

And whenever you feel alone – just remember... look up at the stars... those kings will always be there for you...

You're a special chosen people... You're a king... Me a king? Nah, maybe a long time ago – maybe my father was the king... I'm not my father...

Sound familiar? What Simba said is what all of us say. We are all very proud of our illustrious Jewish past, our zeidies and bubbies from back in the old country who lived like Jews, who looked like Jews...

Everyone has pictures of their ancestors who were rabbis, gabbais, sofers (scribes) and observant Jews.

We proudly tell people about these special Jews who came before us... But then when it comes to ourselves, we suddenly look at ourselves totally differently... We're not like them... We're part of modernity...

This is the most powerful moment of the film, the part where I choked up: when the baboon says to Simba: You're father's alive... And he stares into the water and sees his royal reflection... and he says that's not my father, just my reflection... No – he says: Look hard... You see, he lives in you...

Mufasa appears in a fiery image from heaven... (how I wish there was a kosher way of projecting that scene right here in shul – with Mufasa in the fiery image – and his booming voice in surround sound):

“Simba – you have forgotten who you are and so you forgotten me... Remember who you are...

Remember... You are more than what you have become... You must return and take your place in the circle of life... Remember... Remember...

Today – on this awesome day of Rosh Hashanah Day of Rememberence 2015 - 5776...our parents look down at us from the stars... along with their parents and their parents... Today – at this very moment - the great kings of the past – Abraham Isaac Jacob... Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah... Moses & Miriam... Queen Esther... Deborah the Prophetess... Hillel & Rabbi Akiva... Rashi & Maimonidies...

The Baal Shem Tov... The millions who have come before us who lived and died for their Jewishness... Today... and every day... all these great kings of the past look down at us... Yes, us... You're thinking – who? Me?? These great historic figures are looking at me? But I'm so small and insignificant... Why would they look at me... Friends, because you are them... You are the kings of today... Look into your eyes... Look into your Jewish heart and soul... your neshomo... your sparkling G-dly soul within... Look hard... You'll see your ancestors... You carry their souls within your's...

You carry their destiny within you...

They live within you... Now it's all up to you... You're our only hope...

Now it's up to you and me... The destiny and purpose of all the great kings of the past is now in our hands.

This is no time for false humility... This is a time to stand up and be counted... To take responsibility for the continuity of our people... To ensure that the "kingdom of priests" isn't turned into a trophy, a relic of an illustrious past... By living an illustrious Jewish present... By stepping up the level of Judaism in our homes, in our families, starting today...

Friends, that's our story... Let us remember who we are and what we are part of. Don't forget - You're Mufasa's boy. The future of our people is in our hands... The destiny of all our ancestors in our hands... Let's not let them down...

Let's make them proud...