“30 Years From Now”

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Last week, I talked about my love for XM radio and how it unintentionally helped me find my High Holiday theme for this year. Rabbi Elliot Cosgove of “Righteous Radio” has this wonderful Sunday show on Judaism, religion and life. And he had an hour interview with Abraham Foxman, the incomparable leader of the ADL who recently retired as its national director.

In the interview, Rabbi Cosgove asked Foxman a lot of questions on his life’s work but then asked him what I thought was ***the*** most important question. He said: “Abe, what keeps you up at night? After years and years of fighting the good fight, looking at the world today, what are the things that you worry about after a half a century of combating anti-Semitism?”

That question has been on my mind all summer:

What keeps you up at night?

Last week, I talked about the macro issues, the larger issues that face Jews in Israel and Jews in America. In other words, what are the issues that worry me most about our people throughout the world and in America. Tonight and tomorrow, I am going to pour my heart out to you on what keeps me up on a personal level. What robs me of my sleep night after night and gives me no rest.

On the High Holidays, people are not looking for answers as much as looking for others who, like them, struggle with life.

Struggle with issues.

Worry about the future.

So tonight, I begin by asking: what keeps me up at night?

When I look out today, I see what keeps me up: the future of this community. Not this synagogue… but this community. In a mere thirty years, we have seen the demise and collapse of so much of our Jewish institutional life, not just here but around the country.

That causes me to lose sleep.

Think about the institutions and structure that have weakened, eroded or in some cases simply vanished in just a generation in Charleston: B’nai Brith. National Council of Jewish Women. Israel Bonds. Federation. Hadassah. These wonderful organizations, organizations that were the backbone of this and every Jewish community are fighting to survive. If they are still around, great people are behind them but fewer and fewer of these dedicated souls as the older generation is dying and the younger generation is uninvolved.

Closer to home, look at the erosion in the number of students in Sunday school, Hebrew school, and the number of active participants at services. And more broadly, I think of all the folks who used to be part of our community, active parts of our community who have passed on. I look at our memorial tablets and see who has left this community and how few people have replaced them at services, in leadership roles, in volunteer efforts.

Large families are a thing of the past. Couple have fewer children than their parents. The new generation is fewer, less engaged, more mobile and, thus, less connected not just to our community but most Jewish communities.

Let me read you something:

*“We are not a large community, we are an aging community…we are playing a numbers game and our numbers are dwindling; we are racing against a clock that is catching up to us mighty quick. At an American Jewish Committee conference, the main speaker discussed Jewish communities in the United States and when he got to West Virginia he said: ‘I am sad to report that there are no Jewish communities in West Virginia any longer.’*

*To paraphrase Mark Twain, rumors of our demise is greatly exaggerated. But will it prove prophetic? In this community, where so many of our friends go to Florida for the winter, where others just will not be able to get out because of the cold winter days, we need the next generation to step up. A Charleston synagogue with 20 in attendance on a Friday night or a Saturday morning may be proportionately better than 100 in a shul in Baltimore, but proportions means nothing if we are a dying congregation. And my friends, none of us want to be in a dying congregation. Yes, I am scared; I won’t deny it. But I am scared because I didn’t come here with my wife to build a resume for the future, I came to strengthen, rebuild, and grow a community.”*

That was me.

My first sermon to you back in Rosh Hashana f 1986. We have been together for quite a while and a lot of the concerns you expressed in the 70’s and I expressed in the 80’s are here, in full force and are clearly accelerating.

What keeps me up at night? I stay up at night thinking what will happen in 30 more years? What will this community look like?

If G-d blesses me with the same good health as my folks whom I am blessed to have here with us, I will be about their age. I can see myself acting, with your permission and my hope, as the rabbi here for a long while. I don’t know about 30 years, but even if you give 15-20 years, what kind of community will we even have by then?

Look around….who will even be here?

That keeps me up at night.

Because what I am doing is living the dream I have been pursuing since the first time I read about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one the greatest Conservative rabbis of the 20th century. I’ve wanted to serve as a rabbi in a community and be a leader for our people since shortly after my Bar Mitzvah. While researching careers, I wrote a 10th grade high school paper about Heschel, said the rabbinate is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I wanted to be a rabbi and help keep a Jewish community alive and vibrant. I even said I wanted to go to a small community and make a difference. Bring Judaism to the next generation; see to it that the next generation is as engaged as the previous one.

You know what keeps me up now? By that metric, I am an abject failure. This community is a shell of what it used to be, a tiny sliver of its glorious past. Fewer and fewer young families engaged and practicing Judaism, few homes observing the basic elements of kashrut, Jewish holidays, and Shabbat, fewer people engaged in Federated charitable giving, less interest in supporting Israel, going to daily services, involvement in community projects as a people, and assuming important leadership roles in our Jewish community.

And that, my friends, may be the good news.

I know that sounds depressing but imagine what the shul and the temple will look like 30 years from now? Who will be here to continue and maintain even what we have today?

That keeps me up at night.

That’s why even though you may think Steve’s idea of one location for both Temple and Synagogue, a new location, a Jewih Community Center of Chareston is uncomfortable or scary, it actually excites me; what he is suggesting deserves serious consideration and has my full throated support. This is what we’ve all been thinking and knowing for some time now. Steve is the first person to say it out loud, has a plan, and I am ready to follow him on this and work side by side.

Steve and I have been having these conversations all summer long (you see, it hasn’t all been about Iran!). We ***all*** need to be having this conversation because when else are we going to have it? In twenty years when we can’t do it? We have a different community today and it has and is going to continue to have different needs. And our responsibility and obligation is to get it ready for the next 30 years. Not just for us but for the next generation. We need a place that reflects where the community is today; not what we ideally want but can’t realistically attain but a reflection of both our needs today and the needs of those in the future.

What keeps me up at night is we are not thinking about getting this community ready for the next 30 years. We need to stop thinking of Temple and Synagogue but a 21st century Jewish Center for Charleston, for all of West Virginia. A more modern, more compact, more inviting, more unified, more reflective of our Jewish community needs is what would best serve Charleston. A place that can provide tradition and modernity, cultural and spiritual expressions, services for all expressions of Judaism: reform, conservative, orthodox, where classes become available to West Virginians all over and beyond the state through state of the art technology, a place where people can gather for coffee and study Judaism, talk about being Jewish, be Jewish, where the entire community learns and gathers together, where the entire state sees this as the most important address for Jewish life in West Virginia, where we can bring through technology speakers on a wide range of issues.

A community center- more inviting and more reflective of whom we are today.

Something we can’t do in this building. Or at the Temple. And certainly not separately.

At least not for long.

I started by asking what keeps me up at night. Let me tell you what will keep me up all night for the next decade, but in a good way. When we are building a place where we could touch the community at large in extraordinary ways, where people from all over know this is the address for Jewish life in West Virginia. Where Christians come to hear what we are learning, where people all around the country will come back to have their child bar or bat mitzvahed here as they are starting to do now because they still connect their Jewishness to our community and we will have the ability to connect with them. Where seekers can experience Judaism and are welcomed at classes, where in one part of the center we have a service going on that fully includes everyone and in another area a place for a real traditional shul, (mechitza and all) because we are the center of Jewish expression. Where everyone can feel welcome. A place where you can walk in and be active on different levels.

A place that reflects that reality is something worth trying because that future seems to be a lot more exciting and vibrant than the future I am seeing.

B’nai Jacob is not about a building but about building and maintaining Judaism and Jewish life…and that is created by the people of this community not a particular structure that has served us well.

What Steve is suggesting is hard but you know sometimes, challenges are okay. Far from keeping me up at night, such a project would excite me to no end. Far from keeping me up at night, it would excite me and give us all a chance to take a page from and follow our Christian brothers and sisters: having a little faith and a trust in G-d.

Many of you, all of you, are among the most dedicated, the most loyal, the most engaged members of our shul, our community, and our people. You, like me, have devoted time, money, energy and you don’t want to consider a different location and a different place to house Jewish life.

But hear me out.

Our responsibility is not just to a building but to do everything we can to make a Jewish future possible. What is keeping me up at night is that realization that after so many years, what kind of a future do we have here? What possible sign is there to think that when I am gone, you’re gone, this generation is gone, will this place not go the way of Bluefield, Parkersburg, Clarksburg?

That keeps me up.

But I never forget the words of a great man some of you remember – Morris Steiger. Morris was one of the pillar of our community, our president when Rabbi Cooper first came to Charleston in 1932. He was sitting in minyan with me one evening shortly after I came to Charleston. It was an oppressively hot day and we were both at shul. After hearing Morris’ bitter cough which said to me his time on earth was limited, I sat with him and shared with him then what was keeping me up at night: my fears for this community. And he said, “You know, when I was a young man saying kaddish for my father, I used to come to shul and I remember some of the old guys sitting at shul before services began just like we are and reminiscing about the past and worrying about the future. They were saying how once they pass on, who will keep it going? Well here you and I are and you know, the community is still going. We as a people ebb and flow.”

But then he told me, “Nevertheless, we always have to anticipate what the next generation needs.” He then told me of the outcry when he and a few others suggested that they needed to move out of the old B’nai Jacob on Court and Lee. People knew they needed a new building reflecting the needs of, at that time, a growing community. And yet, they said: We can’t! We don’t need a new building. Let the next generation worry about it. This is fine for us. We won’t be able to pay for it now. We just came out of the depression. Money was tight. Do we really need a new building?

Morris said to me that every generation needs to stop wringing their hands and figuring out instead how to keep a community going as best as we can for the next generation.

Steve is on to something. This is our moment.

We live our days thinking we can go back to the past; we can’t. And we live as if we think we can ignore the realities of the future. We see the demographics and patterns; we can’t totally predict the future but neither can we change a lot of that. But we can learn to place our trust in G-d, believe in the power of responsibility, and do everything we can to make this community the best possible one for this generation and have it ready for the next. We can, each of us, realize a Jewish community was here for us and we need to make sure it is here for the next, not an old building but a community center ready for the next generation.

And it is up to us to do everything we can to have a Jewish community that can work for the next generation. I hope I never get to the point where I say: “You know, I have done enough. It is now someone else’s turn.”

I would hope that as long as I am needed, I want to be there. I want to keep things going.

After last year’s sermon, I started realizing that while retirement is not only desirable but inevitable, I hope and pray to be a part of this community and West Virginia for as long as I am needed. I want to be here. Not because of an inflated sense of self-worth and not because I am the best person to lead because one day my thinking will not be able to carry the banner to the future. But I owe this community so much. I, like you, care for this Jewish community and I know how important this Jewish community is to our state.

I think of all the people that remember Charleston for the significance this community played in their lives. Think of all those who have come to our community seeking guidance. Celebrating life-cycle events. Raising their children. All the Jewish events. Speakers on Israel. Christians who have learned about our heritage.

I want a community to be here for the next generation. And I know you do, too.

And though we don’t know what the future will be, we do know that this community has been here for people in the past, is a critical part of our lives in the present, and it is up to us to not fear the future but to make sure it is there for the next generation as it has been for us.

I ask you to think tonight about what you have heard and I hope and pray you will extend your hand like I will. I will give him and this project my all. Join Steve in this idea as we all try to prepare for that brighter future together.

Amen