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Charleston, West Virginia

“Leaving Your Comfort Zone”

I guarantee you, you will *think* you know where this sermon is going after the first few sentences. And you will say, “Oh, here he goes again…”

But, you will be wrong.

You have NO idea where I am going with this but you will. And hopefully, if you follow my advice, you and I believe this congregation are going to grow in ways unimaginable this year.

Here goes.

In March of 2010, I did something I kept saying I needed to do, but never did. I went to the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, DC. As a person deeply interested in all things Israel, I had been urged by fellow congregants, begged by our AIPAC synagogue initiative director to go, even offered subsidies by AIPAC to go.

Never went.

Not because of any major issues I had with AIPAC though I will admit. at the time, at the time I really didn’t understand a) the bi-partisan nature of the group and b) the importance of what they do. I just never wanted to go because I never really felt comfortable stepping away from the comfort level of just being a rabbi in Charleston.

Prior to that trip to DC in 2010, I figures I had saved the synagogue over $20,000 since I never used any of the convention money I was offered by the shul down through the years to attend rabbinic conferences and summits. That is something else I never went to. I just didn’t want to reach out beyond this area. I was comfortable where I was. I am simply a rabbi in a nice little community, doing good work in a place that I felt deeply privileged to serve and call home.

Yes, I really wanted to do more to help the US/Israel relationship but I wasn’t comfortable going beyond this safe world I had enveloping me.

That trip, of course, became a pivotal movement in my life. Now, just a few short years later, I am seeing and doing things I never thought I would. I have grown in ways I never thought I would and I am at a level that I never thought possible just 5 years ago.

Now let me pause because I am guessing you are thinking that I am inviting you to join us for the AIPAC Policy Conference March 1-3rd in Washington, D.C. No. Oh I will next Sunday when we welcome Dr. Rosalyn Artis of FMU when she comes to this community to speak about her recent American Israel Education Foundation Trip. Absolutely. I think those are three of most important days on my annual calendar and if you want to really help Israel, I cannot say enough about it.

But that is not why I brought it up. I know that is why you thought I did, but that is not why I started this way. The sermon today is not about Israel; it is about growth and about you personally and how our community can grow. I bring this up because as I was on the plane this summer going to Israel with a U.S. Senator about to meet the Prime Minister of Israel and the Prime Minister of the State of Israel, I turned to Marilyn and told her: “you know, none of this would have happened if I stayed in my comfort zone. If I had decided not to go to Washington back in 2010. Because that decision to do something out of my element led to a whole bunch of things. I got engaged more fully, then I was asked to help reach out to the White House, twice, and then learn how to develop closer ties to our members of Congress, began going to DC more often than Hilton Head.

And then I realized that almost every area that has seen my life change dramatically and for the better is when I left my comfort zone and ventured out into an area I wasn’t sure I should try.

Every time.

From deciding it was alright early on in Charleston to attend Christian services which led to greater understanding and tolerance and a desire to do interfaith work, to reaching out to my Muslim colleagues and attending the mosque, to deciding to say yes to an innovative ways to try to have both a traditional service and modernity to creatively looking at Bar or Bat Mitzvah…every time. Every time, I left my comfort zone, my life changed in ways I never would have imagined.

I want you to think for a moment about Yom Kippur. We pray all day, we fast, we refrain from wearing leather, we wear white after Labor Day. Why do we do all this? What is the purpose of fasting? If all it is to inflict pain and suffering on ourselves, I frankly feel we could find something a lot more productive to do with our time. I mean why would G-d and why would significant and meaningful religion ask us to do completely insignificant and utterly non meaningful things.

Why do we fast? I think Yom Kippur is a day that teaches us how to learn to leave our comfort zone. If all you are doing today is just to fast because you are supposed, I want to try to think of it differently. Maybe fasting and denying yourself certain comfort for 24 hours is to train you to leave the mundane everyday routine and teach yourself that you can leave your comfort zone, you can grow, you can be more than animal, even more than human. An animal lives to eat, a Jew eats to live and a person who want to be more says no to certain desires, is willing to step out of routine and say yes to being more than they thought possible. On Yom Kippur, we learn we can leave our comfort zone and teach ourselves that as we begin a new year, we don’t have to be the same person we used to be.

My friends, I don’t know about you but I hear from more and more people of their frustrations about life, their unhappiness, their feelings that they are in a rut,that life is just passing them by. That they wish things could change.

And yet, for many people I talk to, their problem are often self-fulfilling. They feel that way because the reason their lives are the way they are is because the continue to do the same thing in the same manner with the same people over and over again expecting different results. But when you offer them a chance to try something different, they are afraid to leave their comfort zone, afraid of what may happen, afraid of the unknown.

But let me tell you, that is the only way you can grow as a person and as a Jew. I have grown each time I decided to do something I wanted to do but I was afraid to. How many of you have thought you wanted to do more to help the US/Israel relationship, but then when someone invited you come to Policy Conference, come to an event, you hesitated. You said: Uh, I know I should but maybe, next year.

How many of you have said you really need to learn more about our traditions, then seen we are offering a class in the Torah or the Talmud, said you really need to go but were afraid of who was going to be there, would they ask you read, how many keep saying to themselves I know they need help to make the minyan and I know I could change my schedule just one morning ( it won’t kill me) but don’t, heard us offer to try to create an ongoing participatory service on a Sunday or a Shabbat where men and women would daven and lead together and you hesitated. How many learned how to read a Torah portion, lead a service when they were bar or bat mitzvahed and could do it again but just don’t. Who could step up and try to learn to read a haftara, prepare a Torah section but don’t want to leave their comfort zone.

I have been talking throughout the High Holidays about our future. Rosh Hashana was about the way things are. Last night was about what do we need to do. Today is the way to get there. We can successfully diagnose where we are and recognize the challenges. We can also figure out strategies for how to learn to recreate Traditional Judaism for a Modern World. But if we cannot learn to get out of our comfort zones, break out of the way we always do things, we will never build an institution ready for the next generation.

Outside one’s comfort zone. We are a people whose very DNA starts with leaving our comfort zone. Abraham at the age of 75 is told to leave his land, the place of his birth, the land of his fathers and go to a land G-d will show him.

And he did.

That is my role model. Not Moses. Not Joseph. Abraham. The first Jew in our tradition who when asked to try something completely out of the ordinary decided to give it a shot.

And he created a nation.

That is who we descend from and that is how we grow both as individuals and as a community.

You see what we do at B’nai Jacob. Can you imagine what this place would be in the next few years if people took to heart what I am saying and decided to really leave their comfort zone. If a couple of men decided to get up just a few minutes earlier and make the morning minyan. If just a handful of men and women would say: I want to learn how to daven, rabbi. We accept your invitation. And will help organize an adult class to meet with the goal of next year at this time having not one but two Shabbat services going on at the same time, a traditional and a contemporary, two Sunday morning worship service, traditional and contemporary. If one or two people would say: I have never been in a kosher kitchen, and I am not comfortable but I want to give an oneg, I want to help put on casual Shabbat evening dinners once a month. If a few people would leave their comfort zone and say to friends who are always asking them about Judaism, not to “call the rabbi, he is a nice guy and loves to answer questions” but “Hey, he has a Torah class. I keep saying I need to go. Want to join me this coming Tuesday?”

Leaving your comfort zone.

You know one of few statements I don’t know what to do with is when someone tells me ‘But, I am comfortable where I am. I don’t think I want to do more. I think I am doing just enough” I don’t know what to do with that because I pray I never get to that point. I never want to be comfortable. Comfortable is for when we are resting in eternal sleep. Comfortable is Shabbat. But for six days, I am here to do more, learn more, help more and, as result, be more than I was the year before. I will never forget the greatest phrase I ever heard at a eulogy. I have used it on occasion because it is so good. And what a epithet. A rabbi once spoke about an individual who every year pushed himself to ever greater involvement, who took up new endeavors, took classes, volunteered well into his late eighties. The rabbi said at his passing: He died climbing.

I love that. And as much as I love the beach, is there not a more perfect metaphor for a congregation and her congregants in West Virginia. We need to leave the comfort of the ledge we are on and climb higher.

I am not the same person nor the same rabbi I was nearly 30 years ago and I hope it is because I am better. And if I am, it has been because I climb, I leave my comfort zones.

Funny, I penned those last paragraphs at the Corner Bakery on 6th and H, just off the Red Line in Chinatown the day I was lobbying on the Hill for Israel. I wrote that thinking here I am on the week before my busiest time Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur spending a day lobbying for Israel. What am I, nuts? For someone who likes to be prepared spending the week before Rosh Hashana with my sermons not finished in Washington. That is insanity. That is about as much outside my comfort zone as it gets.

But you know, that is not going to be the last time – I hope not. I hope and pray G-d continues to give me opportunities to do things, experience life in ways I never thought I ever would. I pray that G-d will see to it that those chances are available, those moments when the voice in me that likes to say “no, I am good. I am doing enough. I know I should, but I can’t” is overwhelmed by the shout in my head that declare: leave your comfort zone.

Abraham heard that nearly 4000 years ago. That shout still resonates in our hearts if we are willing to listen. I invite you to become uncomfortable this year. Uncomfortable as you are, lacking food, sitting in shul. Help us by learning to leave your comfort zone and try to help us get to where we need to be as a congregation.

Amen