

SHABBAT MATTOT 2014 - Slow down!!

Shabbat Shalom. So, to continue from where I left of last week, I found myself at home one night last week while my wife and her sister were out having fun. So what did I do? I sat down on the couch in my gym shorts and favorite old t-shirt—that one Sarah wishes I'd throw out already—and I turned on the television, hoping to find some sort of inspiration for this week's sermon. I sat there with a cup of tea waiting for the muse to hit me. There weren't any great sitcoms on, no interesting documentaries...the muse just wasn't in the air...This was at 9:30. By 11:30, I still had nothing. Too lazy to get off the couch, I decided to watch the first few minutes of The Tonight Show and then head upstairs for the evening. As I prepared to get off the couch, around midnight, it finally hit me. At that very moment, when I looked nothing like the man who should be standing at the pulpit, addressing hundreds of people about the issues of the day, about religion and Torah, I decided on the topic of this week's sermon...and at about 1:30a.m. I decided that it had been enough working for one night...

I recently came across a sermon written by my teacher and cousin, Rabbi Jack Riemer. In it he presents a theory...the theory is that what Jews are really looking for...is long services... He explains: Every evening we daven mincha/maariv--a very brief service--and not too many people attend. Each morning when we daven shacharit, a slight longer service, we have a nicer crowd. On Shabbat we start out with a very nice, consistent group of regulars, and the longer the service goes on, the more people come. And then, when we have the most people in the room, what do we do? We stop the service!! But here's the kicker... When do the *most* people come to shul? On Yom Kippur!! Which proves his theory--Jews are really looking for longer services.

Isn't that a strange phenomenon? Almost counter-cultural, even... The whole trend is to rush through learning, to rush through life, even to rush through entertainment...to live just as fast as we possibly can...

The reason that people, particularly younger people, complain that services are too long is not because services are actually any longer than they were in previous generations. It is because our sense of time has changed radically from what it was in previous generations.

We try to accomplish as much as possible in so little time. This trend is reflected in everything from the “latest and greatest” tech toys to be released to the newest books. Our smart phones and computers are designed to take up as little space as possible, while sporting chips that can process as much information as possible in as little time as possible...which gives us the opportunity to makes mistakes on fifteen different tasks, simultaneously!

Rabbi Riemer mentions an article that appeared in the Boston Globe a number of years ago about the change in our attention span that has occurred in recent years. For those of you who attended my first Lunch and Learn session back in March, you will recall the official name given to this diagnosis of shortened attention span by my teacher, Dr. Michael Isaacson, a noted composer and musicologist. Dr. Isaacson refers to this ailment as Z.D.S., short for Zitzfleish Deficiency Syndrome.

The point of the Globe article was that the newest trend in book publishing is books that take on important and complex subjects, but that do so in the minimum amount of pages. Perhaps, then, we can expect to see some of the following titles on the shelves of Barnes and Noble in the near future:

“A Tale of One City” by Charles Dickens...

Maybe “A Snapshot of the Artist as a Young Man” by James Joyce...

“The Rapid Fall of the Roman Empire” by Gibbons, perhaps?

A British publisher has put out “The Hundred Minute Bible”, which boils down the book into sixty-four pages by picking out what the publisher claims are the high points of the book. It cuts the Bible down from 780,000 words to about 20,000. I would guess you could finish reading the Book of Genesis in this publication in less time than it takes to drink your morning coffee!

The same is true for television. A commercial used to last a full minute, and now all advertisers are given are twenty seconds. Tell me, friends, what can one really say about a product and a brand in twenty seconds? It’s absurd! And yet, if we were to be subjected to watching a commercial that lasted a whole minute we would very likely switch channels.

So why mention this today? Don't worry, folks...I have an agenda! If you were to look at the "One Hundred Minute Bible" or any other condensed version of the Bible, you would very likely find that this week's parsha and next week's parsha--Mattot and Mas'ei, which are very often combined and read together--are either greatly cut down or are cut out altogether. There are a few incidents in this week's parsha, but they pale in comparison to the stories of Genesis or the saga of the Exodus and forty years following. Moses speaks, as he often does, and yet the material of his speech somehow seems less relevant than some of the orations he delivers throughout Deuteronomy. And so, these sections would perhaps rightfully be left out of a version of the Bible in which the editor was tasked with only including those most vital sections of the Torah. I spent a lot of time throughout the course of this week thinking about what I could possibly address in Mattot that would a) be relevant and meaningful, and b) frankly, make for a sermon as well-received as last week's. So after much thought, I wish to point out something that troubles me, and that surely troubles many modern Torah scholars.

There is a contradiction between last week's parsha and this week's parsha, particularly in how they relate to women. Last week, the daughters of Zelaphechad made an appeal to Moses. Their father died during the forty-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, and left no sons. Until this point in the Torah, only sons could inherit from their parents. Moses brought the appeal to God and God's response was that the women's appeal was just. They pleaded that should they not inherit their father's share in the Land, his name would be lost forever. These five women were given the right to own land and take on an inheritance by which they would carry on the name of their father.

This week, women are mentioned in a different context. Mattot begins with Moses telling the heads of the tribes, the *mattot*, the laws governing the annulment of vows. We know that the rabbis greatly discourage Jews from taking oaths or vows--they address the issue in many volumes of commentaries and halacha. We even begin the prayers of the holiest day of our year with a legal formula that dissolves not only all vows we have already made, but even those which we will make in the future. But there is a section of this dissertation devoted to women. And in that section, women are treated as property of their fathers or husbands. How, you ask? The Torah states that the man who is essentially responsible for, who is the proprietor of a

particular woman, will be the one to determine which of the vows she makes or oaths she takes will stand. She loses her self-governance for such matters.

Now I know I could get into trouble for this, but I want to bring it up anyway. Last week, when the five daughters of Zelaphechad were given such autonomy, such responsibility, and were shown such great respect, the answer came from God to Moses. We get the quote in the Torah--no guessing. But look at the first verse of our parsha: *Vayedaber Moshe el rashei ha-mattot livnei Yisrael lemor, zeh hadavar asher tzivah Adonai...* "Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel, saying: this is the thing that the Lord has commanded". Usually, when God commands something, the verse will read something *Vayomer Adonai el Moshe Lemor, Daber el B'nai Yisrael...*, "And spoke to Moses saying, Say this to the people of Israel..." But here, the Biblical narrator shows us that Moses takes it upon himself to share something with the tribal leaders, using the pretext that it came from God.

A traditional reader of this text will tell you that "*of course* it came from God!" But I'm not so sure. By this time, Moses had already elected a new leader--it's very fresh, in fact. He has also led for nearly half a century and has surely developed his own views about what is and is not appropriate in many situations. In short, it is very clear from the text that Moses says that God says this, but the Torah never says that God says this.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a reform rabbi who is a scholar of many religions, finds this particularly problematic. He says that "Moses is using God to excuse his own misogynist bias." God can be co-opted, and here, like a politician, Moses co-opts God. Rabbi Shapiro further teaches that Moses spoke to the "heads" of the tribes; their heads, not their hearts. Because in our hearts we know that demeaning women, young and old is wrong. Because in our hearts we know that placing women below men on the hierarchy of Judaism is wrong. In shifting the authorship of the text from God to Moses, Rabbi Shapiro reinforces one of our most basic moral understandings: anything that degrades other human beings does not come from God.

As a liberal, halachic movement, we embrace the full participation of women in ritual and spiritual life. There are no longer boundaries in the vast majority of conservative congregations that bar women from fully immersing themselves in the life of the community. And yet, the Torah—the most central text to Jews around the world—shows its own uncertainty of how to

incorporate women into communal life by virtue of these to contradictory passages, just a few chapters apart from each other.

I am not looking to cause discomfort through my use of biblical criticism, though I know that reading the Bible in this way can sometimes be uncomfortable. I had a professor by the name of Zev Garber, a great scholar of Biblical Criticism, who made it a point in the first class to make every Jew, every Christian and Catholic, and every Muslim in the room extremely uncomfortable by analyzing a very important Biblical passage through the lens of biblical criticism in a way that was contrary to everything we believed to be holy, sacred and true. I am not looking to make Moses less of a leader because he had to bring God into the conversation in order to convey an idea that troubles us today. Perhaps God *did* say that. Perhaps at that time, in that part of the world, such a way of thinking was culturally appropriate and thus acceptable. But we also know that the Torah does not waste words, that if we study deep enough and struggle enough with the text, everything can be found in it. And every part of our own struggles is reflected in the text.

The point is that if we go through life rushing past the things that seem unimportant at first glance, be it a small painting in the corner of a museum gallery or a section of Torah that seems irrelevant to our lives, we miss the opportunity to stretch ourselves--to grow ourselves--and that is not good. Had we been reading from the 100 Minute Bible this morning, we would have missed the opportunity to reflect on the struggle of integrating women into Jewish life. And that is a struggle that, for many communities, is not yet over—just beginning even.

The synagogue is a special place; this synagogue in particular. Shul should be a place where we learn to master the art of slow reading. We come here because we believe that time is sacred. We come here to mark holy moments. And therefore we should use our time in the synagogue to study the wisdom of the ages and to learn how to live with depth and with purpose.

The same is true for our prayer music. The whole week, if we even have time to listen to music, we pick that music which is familiar. We like to sing along, to participate in the artistry. But in doing so all the time we also lose the ability to grow. There are many composers and cantors and musicians who have contributed so much to Jewish music, particularly in the past 200 years. And when we open ourselves up to hearing unfamiliar renditions and really pay

attention, we see that there are so many ways to understand the beauty of a text. A word is given more import in this arrangement than in that one; a different mood is discovered by this German composer than by that Israeli composer. This cantor felt that the essence of a particular prayer can be found in these two words, while in a different verse another cantor found something else particularly moving or relevant and gave us that understanding through a harmonic change or beautiful melisma. But if all we do is look to sing along, or listen to what is familiar, we miss something--just as we do by glossing over the seemingly less interesting or less important parts of the Torah.

So let us study the whole Torah--including even Mattot, as we have today, and let us live more slowly, less frantically. For the great lessons in life sometimes come not when we go chasing after them, but when we sit still and let them come to us.

I thank you for allowing me the privilege these past two Shabbatot to share my Torah with you, just as I thank you for allowing me the honor to lead you in prayer each week. May we be blessed with many more weeks together, in good health and in good spirits. Shabbat Shalom.