

# **B'nai Jeshurun - Moskowitz Sanctuary**

## **Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 9-13-15 at 8 pm**

### **Rabbi Stephen Weiss**

*Gut Yom Tov and Gut Yor, Shana Tova.* It should be a good, sweet year for you and your family, for us as a congregation as we go into the year 5776. It has been my longstanding practice on the eve of Rosh Hashanah to abstain from delivering a heavy sermon -- we'll save that for tomorrow -- but to share a story that will put us in the mood for the holiday and help frame our thoughts as we approach these 10 Days of Repentance, to focus our hearts on the tasks that lie before us, and on seeking to derive meaning from the start of this new year.

So I want to share with you tonight one of my all-time favorite stories. There may be some of you who have heard me tell this story before; it's often connected to the Festival of Sukkot, sometimes told on Shabbat. Very appropriate for us to think about as we begin the new year.

It is a story about King Solomon and his trusted servant, Benaiah. Solomon, as you know, was the great king of Israel who was son of David. It was Solomon who built the great Temple that David longed to build, a house devoted to G-d. It was Solomon who expanded the empire; Solomon who, as you know, had many, many, many wives and also many horses. Solomon who, above all else, even more than the Holy Temple, even more than his many wives, was known for one thing, and that is that Solomon had great wisdom. He was, according to Jewish legend, the wisest man in all the world.

You've heard many stories of his wisdom, probably from your youth. The most famous, of course, is the story of the two women who were fighting over a baby they both claimed was theirs. Each woman said, I am the mother, this is my child, the other is trying to take him from me. The case reached Solomon when no one else was able to determine who the mother of this child truly was.

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After Solomon heard them both speak their piece and present their case, he deliberated over the decision for many days before calling the two women before him. Finally, he said to the two women, you both have presented an excellent case. There is no way for me to truly determine which one of you is the real mother. True wisdom demands only one verdict in this case. That is that we will divide the child, and each of you will get half. With that, he turned to his servants and told them to bring a sword.

One of the women said, fine, if I can't have the whole child, divide the child in half. But the other woman said, no. And she began to cry. If this is the only way, then give the other woman the child. In that moment, Solomon knew who the real mother was; it was the mother who cried, the mother who was willing to sacrifice, to give up her own child in order to save the child's life. To that mother, he presented the child.

There are so many other beautiful stories about Solomon's wisdom. Solomon, according to Jewish tradition, had one fault: he was proud of that wisdom. He was proud of his ability to discern.

Benaiah was Solomon's most faithful servant. He would do anything Solomon ever asked. If you asked Benaiah to do, he always delivered. He never failed in any task, ever. Solomon, in his great wisdom, had decided that Benaiah was truly wonderful for being so loyal and faithful, but a little too successful, and that he needed to learn a lesson in humility. Who better to teach it to him than Solomon?

Solomon thought, I will devise a task so difficult that even my faithful Benaiah cannot accomplish it. Then he will understand what it means to be humble. So he called Benaiah before him, and he said to Benaiah, Benaiah, I am sending you forth to the world. Travel where you must, seek out for me the object of my desire. What is it you desire, said Benaiah. What I desire, said Solomon, is the only object in the entire world that if you look upon it and you are sad, the object will make you happy. But if you look upon that object when you are happy, the object will make you sad.

Benaiah accepted the instructions and set out and travelled the world. He

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travelled through the wilderness of Africa and the jungles of Asia, to the far reaches of what would become Europe, looking, seeking that object that if you're sad it makes you happy, and if you're happy it makes you sad. He met so many people on the way, wise people, artisans, hunters and gatherers. Each he asked, where can I find this object that my master seeks? But no one could tell him, no one had ever heard of such an object.

After travelling the entire world, Benaiah gave up. He realized he was never going to find this object; such an object doesn't exist. And so he began to make his way back home. He found his way back to the Land of Israel, and then back to Judea, back to Jerusalem. As he was approaching the gates of Jerusalem, his heart was heavy as it had never been heavy before. He was so sad. His tears could fill an ocean. He had never in his life failed his king. How could he face Solomon without the one thing Solomon desired?

He walked through the gates of the city of Jerusalem, and passed through the marketplace that ran from the gates of the city to the gates of the palace. As he walked through the marketplace he passed by a jeweler's stand. There on the table, the glint of a ring caught his eye. He stopped to look at the ring, and saw that carved into the ring were three Hebrew letters: *gimmel-zayin-yud*. He was perplexed. What did that mean, *gimmel-zayin-yud*? That's not a Hebrew word.

So he sought out the jeweler and said, what is the meaning of this ring? The jeweler said to him, *gimmel-zayin-yud*, those three letters, they stand for three Hebrew words: *gam zeh ya'avov*. This too will pass. *Gam zeh ya'avov*.

Benaiah looked at the ring. His sadness lifted. His heart was full of song. A smile broke forth on his face. This was it, he had found it! Here he had gone off to search the entire world, and the treasure that he sought was right here in his own backyard. This ring, this ring that was inscribed with the words *gam zeh ya'avov*, this too will pass.

He paid the jeweler for the ring and he rushed off to the palace. When his presence was announced, King Solomon invited him into his chamber. Solomon was

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feeling very happy indeed, because he knew that Benaiah had failed. There was no such object that if you were sad would make you happy, but if you were happy it would make you sad. With a big smile on his face, he welcomed Benaiah graciously and said, what do you have for me? And Benaiah said, I have this. And he placed it into Solomon's hand.

Solomon picked up the ring and he looked at it quizzically. *Gimmel-zayin-yud*, that's what you brought me? A ring that says *gimmel-zayin-yud*? What does that mean? Benaiah said, it stands for *gam zeh ya'avur*, this too will pass. With those words, the smile vanished from Solomon's face and his eyes welled up with tears. Because he understood he had been defeated. He had been defeated. Benaiah was wiser than he, for he had found the only object in the world that if you're happy makes you sad, and if you're sad makes you happy. It had brought joy to Benaiah and sadness to King Solomon.

*Gam zeh ya'avur*. This too will pass. The reminder that nothing in this world is permanent, that everything always changes.

In Yiddish we have another metaphor for this same idea. We say, the wheel turns. Have any of you heard that expression, the wheel turns? Picture a waterwheel of a mill in motion, constantly being turned by the forces of the river. Picture yourself on that waterwheel. At one moment you may be at the bottom of that wheel; life is hard and poses many challenges. How many of us have felt at the bottom of that waterwheel during the course of this past year, pulled under the current as the wheel moves downward, by illness, by the loss of a loved one, by the loss of a job, economic crisis, family strain, personal struggles.

How many times in this past year have we felt at the bottom of that wheel as a people, as we recognize the growing struggle against anti-Semitism, which continues to raise its head. The anti-Zionism growing on college campuses, the struggles to defend the State of Israel. The harsh realities of seeking peace with the Palestinians. The crises we see unfolding around the world, increasing military tensions, unending flow of refugees. How many ways in the past year have we felt at the bottom of that wheel,

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stuck, stuck in a place of darkness and pain, feeling a total sense of despair, feeling that things could never change.

When we are at the bottom of that wheel, when we are facing crisis in our lives, it is easy to slip into despair and to give up. But the message of the ring is never ever lose hope. *Gam zeh ya'avov*, this too will pass, the wheel will turn and again we will be back at the top. At one moment we are poor, at one moment we are struggling, at one moment we are grieving, and the next moment we are successful and celebrating the blessings in our life. It happens. We think it won't happen. In the moment of our darkness, we think it won't happen. But it does. Don't give up hope.

As Israelis say at the new year, out with the curses, in with the blessings. I pray that will be the case for each of you, for each of us, that this year the wheel will turn. However difficult the challenges were that you faced this past year, may they come to an end. May you find blessing and joy in the coming year.

But oh, when we are at the top of that wheel, in the same way we tend to assume we will stay there too, that life will always be good, that we will always have what we desire, that we'll always have prosperity and joy and blessing, that the relationships in our life will always be there; it is far too easy for us to become accustomed to all the good in our lives and to forget that it will not last forever, to forget that it doesn't just happen, that we have to make it happen, that we have to tend to it and care for it, that we have to pay attention to our relationships and nurture them. That we have to work hard at our job to be successful, that we have to make our lives be a blessing.

So rather than appreciate and make the most of G-d's gifts while we have them, human nature lets us too often take them for granted. But then the wheel turns again, and they are gone. Nothing lasts forever. So kiss your wife and hug your children, and thank G-d for the blessings in your life, and share them with others while you can, because that's why G-d gave them to you. Work for them and nurture them, because *gam zeh ya'avov*, this too will pass.

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Just as my prayer for you is that in the coming year the wheel should turn and you should experience the good, so too my prayer for you is that you will never lose sight of how precious the gift of the good is, that you will never take it for granted.

*Gam zeh ya'avov*, this too will pass, the wheel turns. A reminder to us of two of the most important things in life: hope and gratitude. Hope and gratitude. May those two qualities guide us as we move together into the new year. Shana Tova.

