

Yom Kippur Sermon 5784

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Stopped at Kennedy Airport in New York in 1993, Gunther Tabbert spoke into a hidden mic recording him saying the following words:

“I can’t believe anybody cares about those events of so long ago.”

Günther Tabbert, a chief of German Police in Latvia during World War II, who helped direct the execution of all the Jews of Daugavpils, Latvia spoke these words as he was stopped at JFK trying to enter the United States exactly 30 years ago this month. Tabbert had been on trial in Germany in 1970 for war crimes. The court found that Tabbert had selected the site for a mass murder of ghetto Jews and had ordered his forces to dig a trench which later served as the death pit. Nevertheless, Tabbert was acquitted.

“I can’t believe anybody cares about those events of so long ago.” is the message that was reinforced by the German courts in his acquittal.

His words are so underwhelming. And so off base.

Tabbert was not talking about events. He was talking about the Holocaust. And so long ago was not so long ago. How ironic Tabbert was coming to of all places, this country. Where these events mattered and he was on a list of Nazis who had acted against Jews in World War II.

Everything Tabbert tried to destroy for Jewish community thrives here in the United States. Tabbert’s capture was one of the Nazis caught when the responsibility for capturing Nazis moved from the State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Services to the Department of Justice.

Up until the late 70’s, the responsibility for apprehending Nazis who were trying to come to visit or live in the United States was being handled by INS and the State Department and they did a dismal job. They lacked skilled professionals in this area. A minimal amount of effort and attention was devoted to this work. It was not until 1979, 34 years after World War II ended that the OSI, Office of Special Investigations was created and INS General Counsel David Crosland chose Martin Mendelsohn to head the new unit in the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. Coming from a civil rights background, Crosland would make the extra effort to see that, if possible, the head of this new unit involved in World War II persecution would be Jewish which Mendelsohn was. Heading the brand new OSI was to be a Jewish job.

How remarkable a commitment this was by the American government? To intentionally go out of their way to try to pick someone Jewish to head this new Office.

But in our thriving as an American Jewish community there is a grain of truth in Tabbert’s words, “I can’t believe anybody cares about those events of so long ago.”

What if we really don't care. Or at least headed that way of not caring.

Years after Tabbert tried to come to the USA, Prince Harry did so with far more success.

Settled in California among his achievements Prince Harry has had since coming to the United States is the publication of his autobiography SPARE. Harry wrote the book with ghostwriter J. R. Moehringer. For the most part working with the prince went well but there were moments when he was "exasperated" with Prince Harry. They had deep disagreement about one of the most grueling parts of the book, when Harry, gets captured by pretend terrorists as part of his military training.

The torture according to Moehringer was very real.

"He's hooded, dragged to an underground bunker, beaten, frozen, starved, stripped, forced into excruciating stress positions by captors. At last, they throw him against a wall, choke him, and scream insults into his face, culminating in a vile dig at—Princess Diana."

When over, Harry is apologized to for this bringing up of his mother seems out of bounds, even for a terrorist reenactment.

And here is where the ghostwriter wants the incident to end in the book.

"Harry always wanted to end this scene with a thing he said to his captors, a comeback that struck me as unnecessary, and somewhat inane. Good for Harry that he had the nerve, but ending with what he said would dilute the scene's meaning: that even at the most bizarre and peripheral moments of his life, his central tragedy intrudes"...

We never learn what Harry's comeback is but we learn from the ghostwriter that he is just a stenographer if Harry doesn't let the ghostwriter do his job.

After a long time fighting, Moehringer, the ghost writer explained to Harry why the line didn't belong, "[E]verything you just said is about you. You want the world to know that you did a good job, that you were smart. But, strange as it may seem, memoir isn't about you."
(<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/05/15/j-r-moehringer-ghostwriter-prince-harry-memoir-spare>)

"It isn't about you. "

In our thriving as an American Jewish community, what if we are like Harry as well, taking, "It isn't about you." as a hard pill to swallow.

After all, how could it not be about us?

If you had family in the United States before 1948 you have more American generations of Americans than Israelis have of Israeli generations. This American Jewish community is long-lasting, secure and comfortable like no other. The Hartman Institute's Yehuda Kurtzer see a downside that has arisen in this comfort. A "thinning out of Jewish identity".

Because we are so liberated as American Jews many of us dwell along the tightrope of the Nazi and the Prince. Either the space of Tabbert with no regard for the past. Or we dwell in the place of Prince Harry where our Judaism exists only at moments where it is about us.

We may be Jewish and mark Jewish events and celebrations in our lives but we do it in a way that is convenient and not covenantal. In our comfort we have created cocoons that have kept us from a deeper understanding of what being part of the Jewish people really means.

Journalist Martin Peretz in his book The Controversialist recounts this story that epitomizes this. He's at dinner with Jewish novelist Norman Mailer and Israeli ambassador Simcha Dinitz . It came up that Norman Mailer had never been to Israel. When the Israeli Ambassador asked Mailer why he had never been to Israel, the renowned Mailer answered he will go to Israel if they can produce another Entebbe, referring the 1976 hijacking where Prime Minister Netanyahu lost his brother.

All at dinner were stunned by Mailer's answer. Not only because another Entebbe assumes another hijacking. But also because as the offended Dinitz reminded him Israel goes through an Entebbe worth of terrorism daily. Peretz remembers, " It was a telling moment. Norman hadn't meant the joke offensively. In fact, Entebbe had all of Norman's favorite themes: Jewish manliness and Jewish power. But these were all abstractions to him. It's the difference between people in a state under constant, immediate threat and an American who gets to summer on the Cape." It was a blatant disregard for past events and a narcissistic expectation that Judaism was there for his enjoyment with no accountability on his part for the Jewish people. Norman Mailer in his brilliance had managed to both disregard events of the past and make it all about him at the same time. These attitudes could only arise here on this soil.

The irony we live out is that the freedom as American Jews permits us to wrestle and question and ever wander away from Judaism. As time passes on, we are forgetting our period of dependence on God in the wilderness that takes up the bulk of the Torah. We today feel comfortable and strong and so it is easy to forget the Pharaohs and the Nazis. But if we walk away too far, we become like the Egyptians. Our greatest problem as a strong, comfortable Jewish community lies in the words of Israeli Philosopher Micah Goodman. He writes, "Moses cautions the people that the greatest danger that threatens those who fled Egypt is that they will one day make their land into another Egypt." (The Last Words of Moses Hardcover – June 15, 2023 by Micah Goodman)

How do we battle these impulses and others that pull us away from our Judaism. Its not easy. It takes work. Real work. The work of a job. A Jewish job.

To better clarify what our Jewish job is, I went to the person who has perhaps the most Jewish job of 2023. Not a rabbi or a cantor or a Temple President or a Jewish Organization CEO. No. I would argue the most Jewish job today is held by Alan Poland.

He is our Jewish community's Security Director. His work is part of SCN, Secure Community Network, a national network that empowers individuals and organizations to establish "increasing the safety and security of Jewish communities throughout North America". I feel lucky we have him here and also sad that he has to be here. But he does.

So I asked him in light of his incredibly important Jewish job, in his view, what was our Jewish job? “Be alert, aware and informed of what is going on in the Jewish world and share your knowledge with others”.

It has become apparent from the time of Moses until today, there will always be people who will make it their job to destroy Judaism and increase suffering. Ever since the modern-day state of Israel was founded, there was a commitment that the Jewish state would not have to rely on any other nation. For a Jew around the world that translates into an understanding that it is utterly necessary for each Jew, wherever they are to take it upon themselves to create a Jewish life that demonstrates a reliability for the Jews around the world.

If the American government can prioritize catching Nazis and recalibrate when necessary to do a better job at that work, we can certainly help Alan Poland with his job. But a warning. Make sure you understand that work Alan Poland asks you to do is HIS whole job. But just a part of your job. If you only nurture the segment of Judaism that sits in the hands of those who hate us it is like letting your enemy raise your child.

And it the nurturing of parenthood that rounds out our understanding of the other part of our Jewish Job, that Alan Poland doesn't tell you, but I do. It is nurturing your Judaism.

And the path to that part of your job lies in the Machzor high holiday prayerbook in your hands. And in one single word in that book. Avinu. Our parent.

This image of Gd, Avinu in our liturgy, as a parent needs to be understood anew at this critical moment in time in order to enable us, the American Jew to do our job.

In parenting, according to scholar Mara Benjamin, there is both obligation and choice. As a parent raising a child, you must nurture the child in concrete specific ways. Feeding, bathing and caring for a baby are true obligations that the baby can't provide for themselves. We all were a baby at one time and know that. At the same time which food, where to bathe and cloth or disposable diapers are among the myriad of choices our parents are given. Benjamin asks us to understand “Judaism's religious discourse of obligation” is nursing our Judaism through obligation and choice.

That makes it dependent on each individual Jew obligated to nurture Judaism for the entire Jewish people.

Moses teaches us the very same lesson. As Micah Goodman writes, “He refashions national memory in a way that puts him on the sidelines, as if he had never been the dominant figure in the life of the nation. Moses minimizes his own role in the drama of the Exodus from Egypt and the wilderness journey...” to empower all Jews in all times.(The Last Words of Moses, by Micah Goodman, 2023.) That sense of peoplehood, Moses needs the Jewish people to understand, should dominate every individual's Judaism.

And here's where your office lies. In that space between Avinu and Malkeinu. If you come to understand anew that you are the parent, the Avinu of Judaism and your job is of nurture and protection, then you will help your family remember the history of the lands they fled from, help Alan Poland better protect the Jewish community and help this synagogue be a flourishing

place. I promise you if you become the Parent of Your Judaism, you will feel the pull of Malkeinu, Our Gd. And like parenting, there are hard times and there are beautiful times and everything in between. Our job in Judaism is to parent it all. Being the Avinu so we can embrace the Malkeinu.

We must do that work that Alan Poland asks us to do in order to battle the anti-Semitism in the world. But if we only focus on that, we will come to hate our Jewish job because it will be defined by others and not by us. If we only deal with the beautiful times that Judaism brings to us, we are like Norman Mailer, viewing Judaism as a spectator sport and not a job at all.

And if you forget how to do your job, here's some words from a pro in his job that may help. Thirty years ago, when Tom Hanks was filming "Forrest Gump", they were filming the familiar park bench scenes of the movie. It was hot and uncomfortable in Savannah, Georgia and after 27 days of shooting, Tom Hanks had enough of the brutal shooting conditions and blew up at Robert Zemeckis the director. "Bob, man, I don't think anybody's going to care." After Bob calmed him down and reminded him that it takes constant work and effort and heart and soul to know what's good. And then Hanks remembered the advice from Spencer Tracy, the Hollywood star of the 1940's that Hanks heard when he was 20 years old and just coming up as an actor. That advice. "Learn the lines. Hit the mark. Tell the truth"

Embrace the Avinu and the Malkeinu will feel so much closer and make the payoff of our Jewish job the most meaningful work we can do. The only thing that stands between "learning the lines, hitting the mark and telling the truth" about our Jewish job is us. Let's get to work. Shana Tova.