

In preparing for this morning I was reminded of an old story. It begins with a rabbi who was helping his wife to clean up their house. During this time the rabbi came across a box he didn't recognize. His wife told him to leave it alone, it was personal.

One day, while she was out, curiosity got the better of the rabbi. He opened the box and inside he found 3 eggs and \$2000. When his wife came home the rabbi admitted that he had opened the box and asked her to explain the contents to him.

She told him, every time he had a bad sermon, she would put an egg in the box. The rabbi thought to himself, "in twenty years, only three bad sermons, that's not bad." His wife continued, "And every time I got a dozen eggs, I would sell them for a dollar."

In my recent searches of the Internet, I have found a plethora of jokes about rabbi's sermons. Or as the old saying goes, 'many a truth is told in jest', which means there must be some pretty terrible sermonizing going on out there, outside the walls of Har Sinai Congregation of course. Though given my experience at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, this is not all that surprising. At least in the more recent curriculum, sermon writing was not one of the core areas of study. So we rabbis often have to look to outside sources for assistance as we received little training in this area.

Speaking of which, in August a group of 'trans-denominational' rabbis gathered together on the West Coast for what was termed the "High Holy Days Seminar." This daylong seminar gathered together rabbis of all stripes with professional writers from Hollywood.

The goal of this seminar was to get clergy and writers in the same room trading ideas and evaluating sermons for the High Holy Days. One of my favorite quotes from

this event was from Reverend Cecil Murray, the legendary former pastor of Los Angeles' First American Methodist Episcopal Church who said, "If you hear the people snoring, you're violating the 11th commandment."¹

Which reminds me that not to long ago there was a story of a man who started to snore in synagogue. "Please stop your snoring," the shammes pleaded. "You're disturbing the others in the shul."

"Look, nudnick," the man said angrily, "I paid my annual dues and I'll do whatever I want."

"Yes, sir," replied the shammes. "But you are keeping everyone else awake."

The truth is an effective sermon requires more than just keeping congregants awake, or cute jokes, it also has to be inspirational.

To give away one of my secrets, one of my greatest sources of inspiration in recent years has been the Harry Potter series. As many of you already know, I like to incorporate themes from popular culture into my sermons, and because of this I owe a particular debt of gratitude to J.K. Rowling for her creation.

In her seven book series, which were later accompanied by eight movies, J.K. Rowling blended quite successfully the universal themes both ancient and modern of dark versus light, good versus evil. Mix in a little teenage angst, a magical world, and the end result... are sermons that practically write themselves.

So it was with great excitement that Joy and I went to see Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II this summer. This was the last of the Harry Potter movies and needless to say, we had been anticipating its arrival for months. Now as the parents of

¹ Forward.com "Rabbis Go Hollywood for High Holy Day Sermon Tips"

young children, movie going is not something Joy and I do all that often anymore. Aside from determining if the movie is worth seeing, we also now have to make the decision if it is worth paying babysitter money for. Add the two costs together, and movie going becomes a very expensive proposition indeed. Thus most of the time, we decide better to rent rather than go to the theater. Not to plug redbox, but we find we tend to have a much greater tolerance for \$1.00 movies than those we pay a lot more to see in the theater because our expectations are so much lower.

Of course Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II definitely met the criteria of being both worth our time and worth paying a babysitter. To this end, we went to the first showing at a local theater on a Wednesday morning since it happened to be my day off.

And then things started to go downhill from there. After paying too much money for the movie, we went inside and found out we were not in one of the stadium theaters, but instead in one of their little theaters. Not a problem ... still excited.

Then I noticed a tear in the screen ... not a problem, this is the only showing we can make and be back home in time to relieve the babysitter. And then the movie started. The picture was dark, the sound was muddled, and the rip in the screen drove me nuts. Oh well. We can always rent it in a few months. But again, after several previous disappointing movie going experiences, I really began to wonder if it was worth it at all.

Flash-forward a month. My in-laws are in town. Now we don't have to worry about paying for babysitting, and Joy and I decide to go out to dinner and a movie. This time we headed to Columbia. At the very last minute we decided to forgo dinner and the movie we planned to see, and instead we went to the IMAX 3D version of Harry Potter.

The theater was much larger. The picture was beautiful. The sound was spectacular. I found myself falling in love with going to the movies again. Of course there was a premium to be paid for this experience. But I have already vowed that the next movie we go out to see, will be one of equal caliber – “The Dark Knight Rises” anyone?

Up until that point, I was not willing to pay a premium to see a movie. I felt it would be a relatively similar experience no matter where I went, so why pay the additional surcharges when I could save money?

But as I have discovered, you often get what you pay for. And oftentimes the less you pay, the less pleased you are with the overall result. This notion is illustrated in a recent book *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*. In the book author Ellen Shell goes into great detail about how our constant drive for bargains actually has a negative effect both on the overall economy and on our personal happiness.

Perhaps there is no better example of this than the unique American creation of the outlet mall. Apparently “about 55 million Americans shop in at least one of the nation’s roughly three hundred outlet centers every year ... even more astonishing is the number of miles chalked up in this annual pilgrimage. The total distance that Americans travel to outlet malls each year equals 440,000 circumnavigations of the globe.”²

And more than that, “because the effort required to reach and shop at them is substantial, even extraordinary, the experience of going to the outlet is elevated in our minds to ‘special occasion’ status. A trip to the outlet mall is not passive, not simply a matter of popping in to pick up a few things. We have to work to get there

² Shell, Ellen Ruppel, *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*, Penguin Books, 2009 pg. 90

...Psychologically speaking, all this and more must be repaid in the form of purchases made.”³

Even if the majority of purchases are in fact, not really a bargain and the quality is oftentimes less than the brand names on their labels that are sold in the malls.

So we give up value and convenience for a perceived bargain that may in fact not be a *metsiah* at all. Often for items that we would just hang up in our closets and sometimes if ever actually wear.

I used to think I found value when I would buy my \$10 sunglasses at Target. And then every few months they would break, become too scratched up or simply disappear. But it was not big deal. They were only \$10. So I would then make my regular pilgrimage to buy another pair. Until one day, I achieved my dream. I bought a pair of Ray Bans. Now I should mention, I have coveted these ‘designer’ sunglasses since seeing Top Gun, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. Since purchasing these sunglasses, which I take very good care of and place in their case after every use, I haven’t had to buy another pair. Yet I have probably by this point saved money, because \$10 at a time does add up. When I told this story to my mother-in-law, she told me an aphorism of what her mother once told her that has stuck with me. She told me, “We were too poor to be able to afford cheap things.”

This is all a very round about way to get into a conversation about value. Not so much about our values, but instead about what do we value? What are the things we hold dear? What is important to us?

Obviously there are many tangible things we value. At a recent birthday

³ Ibid., pg. 91

celebration, the husband of the birthday girl proudly proclaimed how his wife and children were the second most important parts of his life, the first being his 60 inch 3D television. Of course he was saying it in jest, I hope, but we tend to value objects that come with a certain cost. For you guitar fans out there, I can honestly say I value my PRS Hollow Body I over my Epiphone. One is just a much nicer guitar than the other.

But these are things. Things come and go, or as the old saying goes, ‘you can’t take it with you.’ This of course is in stark contrast to the bumper sticker from not so long ago, “he who has the most toys when he dies, wins.”

However, as one who has officiated at my fair share of funerals, the one topic that never comes up is how many toys or how much stuff that person has collected. Instead their loved ones will, if they were good people, speak of their kindness, their generosity, their love of family and friends, their sense of humor, and the list goes on and on. So it would seem in a very real way the bumper sticker should read ‘he or she who has those to stand up and proclaim their goodness, wins.’

So if it is not stuff, what is it we should value? Family – to be sure. Friends, one can certainly hope so. Our tradition, definitely. And membership here in Har Sinai Congregation. One of the great values in being a member here is the idea of being in a community. It is admittedly, an intangible value. It is not something that we can point to on our shelves or fill our homes with, but it is perhaps one of the greatest of all things we can value. The ability to live freely and openly as Jews and non-Jews, in a community that encourages us, teaches us, and supports us. For it is a place where we can be simply Jewish.

Being a member of our community does have its benefits. Aside from the chance

to educate your children and grandchildren, it can also be the place to celebrate milestones and mourn losses.

But as many of you are very much aware, there are those who proclaim that synagogues are in crises. In a recent article in the Jewish Times, a question was raised that many only whispered in the past, but now some openly question the value of membership.

Entitled, “Another Approach,”⁴ the tag line is “some Jews question the high cost of synagogue membership and High Holiday attendance.” The article then goes on to list all the free options for services out there, not of course listing all the other great High Holy Day values to be found at the many wonderful congregations in our community.

It would seem the JT is arguing free is better. But free rarely leads to commitment. Just ask all those online newspapers who now want to charge for what was once free. Unless their name is the New York Times, almost all these other endeavors have petered out. These ‘free’ or ‘cheap’ congregations may provide decent Jewish experiences but experience tells us they are not likely to be sustainable in the long wrong, and certainly not for nearly 170 years.

One may also ask, without a commitment, what connection do these congregants have to their free institutions? And even more importantly do these organizations have any commitment to their membership? One can honestly wonder, is there really value to be found in free?

Of course in their pursuit of free, the JT interviewed people who do bring up criticisms that are fair and valid to a point. The cost of membership is high. And some

⁴ Jewish Times, Sept. 23, 2011, “Another Approach” by Simone Ellin.

do openly wonder why the pay if they only go twice a year.

There are those who believe that congregations should just be around when they need them. Yet every organization has certain fixed costs be it in facility, maintenance, and staffing. If everyone stops supporting their organizations, eventually there will no longer be a building or a rabbi or a congregation. As it says in the Mishnah, “Im ayn kemach, ayn Torah, without sustenance, there is no Torah.”

Thus the only way to continue as a congregation is to strive to be a place where you, the members find both meaning, and value. The reality is, we tend to support that which we value. What we as leaders are asking, and what you may be wondering is how do we find value in our congregation. You are clearly here; therefore there is hopefully something or many somethings you value about your experiences with Har Sinai Congregation. And we would love to hear more about them.

These conversations are not about the money. Yes we need financial support to be a viable congregation, but that is only the means to the end. The end was and is all about being able to be a strong community.

We are working very hard and are committed to making Har Sinai Congregation more than just a religious institution. We are, as always, striving to make it a home, a place of personal fulfillment, and so much more. For example we are working to make our congregation a place where we can achieve personal and professional fulfillment. One of our goals for this coming year is to become a place where you can make professional connections with others in similar fields. From those in medicine, to law, and real estate to those in the service industry to academics and the auto industry. This is a congregation filled with many who have lots of professional skills and talents we could

all benefit from and network with.

We also want to be a place where we can learn and develop skills related to the Jewish experience like cooking brisket or developing greater appreciation for that most Jewish of all beverages, scotch. We want to a place where we can encounter more than we would in our every day lives, like art, which gracefully adorns our walls and will be changing throughout the year as we continue to develop partnerships with local artists.

We want Har Sinai Congregation to be a place that challenges your assumptions about life be it through sermons, adult learning, comedy, or even music. And through all of these endeavors, Har Sinai Congregation can be a place that gives you value.

But we can't do it without you. Our resources and our staff are very limited. Yet we are striving to do more with less than in previous generations. What we need from you is your continued to commitment to the congregation be it in our ongoing fundraising campaigns, volunteering, or simply telling your friends about this wonderful, energetic, innovative, and fun environment, and then bringing them with you. You are our greatest ambassadors.

In these times, as Ellen Shell argues in her book, "We can set our own standard for quality and stick to it... We can enforce sustainability, minimize disposability, and insist on transparency. We can rekindle our acquaintance with craftsmanship. We can chose to buy or not, choose to bargain or not, and choose to follow our hearts or not, unencumbered by the anxiety that someone somewhere is getting a 'better deal.'"⁵ In this current economic climate people are much more cognizant than in recent memory of how they choose to spend their time and their money. They want to make sure they are

⁵ Cheap pgs. 231-232

getting value for their efforts.

We are here to proclaim there is value to living a Jewish life and there is value to being a member of our historic and modern congregation.

Our goal here at Har Sinai Congregation is for it to be a community where you can be Simply Jewish. Our goal here at Har Sinai Congregation is for it to be a community where you find value. Our goal here at Har Sinai Congregation is to continue to be a light unto all those who want a Jewish place to call home. We are proud to extend our hand, please take it and either join us or continue along with us on this most sacred of journeys. There are many wonderful experiences to be shared, and it wouldn't be the same without you.

L'shana Tova