

Shanah Tovah

This past July, Andrea, Maya and I took a trip to Freeman, South Dakota for the family reunion of Andrea's father's family. Because of this family connection, Andrea visited South Dakota at least a couple times in her youth. Maya and I on the other hand were excited to experience it all for the first time. As we planned our trip, I was particularly looking forward driving across the state, from Freeman to the Black Hills to see the iconic Mt. Rushmore monument. Once we arrived, it was an awe-inspiring moment to walk down the corridor of flags to the top of the Amphitheater, where you get the clearest view of the majestic sculpture, surrounded by the natural beauty of the Black Hills. And because we ventured to South Dakota during a particularly busy time of year, it was also amazing to see the number of people there to take in this very impressive work of art.

We left and I fully expected that Mt. Rushmore would be the most impressive thing we would see on our trip. And we set off to see the Crazy Horse monument. I knew at least part of Crazy Horse's story, but I didn't actually know what we were going to see, and because Maya was not terribly happy being in the car, I have to be honest, we almost didn't go. I am glad we did.

The Crazy Horse Memorial, which is still in progress, is of the Lakota warrior Chief Crazy Horse astride a stallion with his outstretched arm; his hand pointing out to the Black Hills.¹ It's taller than the Washington Monument and well over two football fields wide. The peak of the mountain is roughly one thousand feet taller than Mount Rushmore. At the moment, the only portion of the monument that is complete is Crazy Horse's face. But you can clearly see where they are making progress on his arm and on his horse's head. When all is said and done, the monument will be 641 ft long, 563 ft tall, the world's largest sculptural undertaking:

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2013/01/01/167988928/the-slow-carving-of-the-crazy-horse-monument>

and for perspective, all four of the presidents' faces of Mount Rushmore would fit in the space of Crazy Horse's head.

While these statistics are impressive in and of themselves, the awe I felt in this place wasn't simply because of the structure but also because of the meaning behind its creation. The vision for this memorial came from Chief Henry Standing Bear. In 1933, Chief standing Bear learned of a project to construct a monument to honor his cousin, Crazy Horse at the site where he was killed in Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Chief Standing Bear wrote a letter to the project leader, James Cook, explaining that he and many of his fellow Lakota leaders had formed the Crazy Horse Memorial Association and that they were promoting a carving of Crazy Horse in the sacred Paha Sapa, the Black Hills, which they thought was the only appropriate place for such a memorial.

In 1939, Chief Standing bear approached artist, Korczak Ziolkowski (Pronounced Kor-Chalk Jewel-Cow-ski) about constructing the memorial. Earlier that year one of Ziolkowski's sculptures took first prize at the New York World's fair, and Korczak was also known to have worked in the Black Hills helping to carve Mount Rushmore. Chief Standing Bear appealed to Korczak by saying, "*My fellow chiefs and I would like the white man to know that the red man has great heroes also.*" A few months later, Korczak met with tribal leaders and they began planning the monument. By 1947, after many years of research and a tour of military service during World War II, Ziolkowski returned to the Black Hills to choose a mountain. On June 3rd, 1948, the company set off the first blast of dynamite, and dedicated the memorial to the Native American people. Korczak committed the rest of his life to the project and worked tirelessly until he died at the monument site in 1982. His Wife, Ruth, his ten children, and even a few grandchildren have followed in Korczac's footsteps and are still working to fulfill the vision set forth by Korczak and Chief Standing Bear. So at this point, it has taken more than 84 years, and three generations of the Ziolkowski family

to keep this vision alive and despite the slow pace and uncertain process; the family feels that it is an honor to do this work.

The second reason this place felt so extraordinary to me is because, for those who have dedicated themselves to constructing the memorial statue, the statue itself isn't really the point. The mission and purpose of the Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation has always been to protect and preserve the culture, tradition and living heritage of North American Indians. As they explain, "the monument may well be the symbol, the impelling force," but the real endeavor is to "perpetuate the active memorial." This active memorial includes an adjacent campus that houses the Indian Museum of North America and the Native American Educational and Cultural Center, which acts as a repository for Native American artifacts, arts, and crafts, and provides educational and cultural programming to encourage harmony and reconciliation among all people and nations. In addition, they are in the process of establishing and operating the Indian University of North America, to provide quality education, including medical training to people from all native tribes.

Last, but certainly not least, the more I learned about Chief Standing Bear, the more impressed I was with his vision and with his intuition as it related to the survival of his cultural heritage. In his early teenage years, Standing Bear became one of the first Native Americans to attend Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Carlisle was a school designed to assimilate Native Americans out of their indigenous ways, however, the most important lesson Standing Bear drew from this experience was that in order to best help his people, it would be necessary for him to learn the ways of the non-Native world. So, somewhat ironically, the school became the source of inspiration that Standing Bear would draw upon "to shape his enlightened understanding of cross-cultural relationships, as well as to find new ways of preserving his people's culture and history. It was at Carlisle that Standing Bear first began to develop and hone leadership skills like public speaking, reasoning, and writing. In

addition, while attending Carlisle, Standing Bear realized that because of the changing times, the battle for cultural survival was no longer to be waged with weapons, but with words and ideas. [T]his realization [was] a driving force behind much of his work and led him to become a strong proponent of education.”²

Chief Standing Bear knew that his people’s survival required fundamentally rethinking the way they engaged with the world. For example, the idea of erecting a monument of an honored individual in and of itself was a foreign idea to many Native Americans. Indeed, “some Native Americans believe the humble Chief Crazy Horse would have never wanted his image carved into a sacred mountain.” Ziolkowski recalled a conversation with Chief Standing Bear where the Chief explained that the Indian has a concept of honoring their great heroes that’s totally different from the white man’s.” Korczak explained that at first it was difficult for him to comprehend, but he came to understand that “the Indian uses the direct approach. He says: that man was my ancestor, and he was a great man, so we should honor him – I would not lie or cheat because I am his blood.” In this sense, a memorial to honor someone would seem superfluous but because of the greater mission behind this specific memorial, by beginning the building process for the statue, Chief Standing Bear put into motion the work which has enabled the tribes associated with the memorial to expand their opportunities through the educational services provided by funds raised by the one million people annually who visit the Crazy House Statue. In essence, Chief Standing Bear set into motion a radical transformation for his community.

Judaism as a religion is familiar with similar moments of radical transformation for the sake of continuity – when something fundamental changes so that all other aspects of your culture can survive. Perhaps the most extreme example in our people’s history comes just before the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E.

² <https://crazyhorsememorial.org/chief-henry-standing-bear-the-original-dreamer.html>

At the time, from outside the city walls, Jerusalem was under siege by the Roman armies. From within, Jewish zealots called Biryonim controlled Jerusalem with a heavy hand. No one really knows what the word Biryonim means, but there are theories that suggest that the term is borrowed from Greek and alludes to the fact that these people were “menacing figures who showed no obedience to authority.”³ They showed particular distain for the ancient rabbis, some of whom would have preferred to make peace with the Romans for the sake of preserving the Temple and the Jewish way of life. These zealots put a stranglehold on the city. They wouldn’t let food or aid come in, and they wouldn’t let anyone leave.

It just so happens that the leader of this zealot group was a man, who is known in rabbinic literature by the name Abba Sikkara, which means “father of murder,” was the nephew of the great sage Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. During this time of great duress, Rabban Yochanan asked for a secret meeting with his nephew. When Abba Sikkara arrived, Rabban Yochanan asked, “How long do you plan to hold the city in this way?” Abba Sikkara, who appeared to sympathize with his uncle, explained that if he tried to do anything differently, his followers would surely have him killed. Rabban Yochanan explained with real urgency that he needed to leave the city and asked Abba Sikkara how that might be possible.

Abba Sikkara said, “pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask about your welfare, and word will spread of your ailing condition. Then, find something putrid to bring into your bed so that people will think you are dead and then have your students come to take you out of the city to bury you. I will ensure that only your students will be allowed into your bedchamber so they won’t know you aren’t really dead. So Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, faked his own death and was carried out of the city in a coffin and his students brought him to the camp of the Roman General Vespasian.

³ Koren Talmud, Gittin 56a, pg. 315

With enough flattery, demonstrations of wisdom, and some really good timing, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai earned the good will of Vespasian. Before their time together concluded, Vespasian granted Rabban Yochanan one request. Rabban Yochanan famously said, “Give me Yavneh” a city on the coast of the Mediterranean, which became the new center of the Jewish world, and the home of Jewish scholarship and innovation.⁴

Rabban Yochanan knew that asking Rome to end its siege on Jerusalem would be futile, and had the foresight to plan for Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple. He knew that living Jewishly would have to fundamentally change in order for his tradition to survive. Rabban Yochanan insisted that the moment the Temple was destroyed, the word *avodah* - which had previously referred only to the sacrificial Temple service - was transformed. After the destruction of the temple, *avodah* referred to study and prayer, or the service of the heart and mind. Additionally, the home of Jewish life shifted from the Temple, Beit HaMikdash, to the houses of study, Beit HaMidrash.

Alieza Salzberg, a fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem suggests that: “The historical veracity of this [Talmudic legend about Rabban Yochanan] is questionable, but the ... narrative encapsulates an important shift in the political and religious life of the Jewish people following the destruction of the Second Temple. The story of the founding of Yavneh represents the birth of rabbinic Judaism, a way of life focused on Torah and Jewish law, rather than [sacrificial] Temple worship or political sovereignty.

“From a distance of 2,000 years, it appears that this shift in priorities enabled the spiritual wealth of Israel to become migratory, based on Torah study [and prayer],

⁴ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jochanan-ben-zakkai/>

not on the location of an altar or a King's palace — Jerusalem to Yavneh, to the North of Israel, to Babylonia, and finally throughout the Diaspora.”⁵

On Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's deathbed it is recorded in the Talmud, that his students came before him and called him, “lamp of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer.” Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, explains that these titles were for Rabban Yochanan's life work which was the foundation of the future of the Jewish people.⁶

While Rabban Yochanan's quick thinking in an extremely high-stakes situation is admirable, Jewish tradition suggests that we shouldn't only think about our survival amidst times of distress. We are encouraged to be dreamers and visionaries simply for the sake of the generations that will follow us – an idea embodied in a story about a fascinating man called Choni the circle maker.⁷

Our sages taught: All the days of his life, the righteous man Choni was distressed over the meaning of the verse: “When God brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream (Psalms 126:1).” Choni would ask himself: “Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years?” (After the destruction of the first Temple in the year 586 B.C.E many Jews were exiled to Babylonia for 70 years before they were allowed to return to Israel and build a second Temple.)

One day while pondering the meaning of the psalm, Choni was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni said to him: “This tree, how many years will it take before it bears fruit?” The man replied: “seventy years.” Choni said to him: “Is it obvious to you that you will live another seventy years?” The man said: “I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.”

⁵ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/judaism-after-the-temple/>

⁶ Koren Talmud, Berachot 28b, pg. 186

⁷ Koren Talmud, Taanit 23a, pg. 133-134

Following this conversation, Choni sat down for a meal. Sleep overcame him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering carobs from the tree. Choni asked: “are you the man who planted this tree?” The man replied. I am his grandson. Choni, in a state of disbelief then realized that he had slept for seventy years.

This story, short as it is, is layered with complexity. First of all, we have Choni who seems possessed by this strange verse. And then our sages couple his pondering with a random gentleman planting a tree and then an epic seventy-year nap. But if you focus only the fact that Choni ultimately achieves what he thought was physically impossible, you miss what our sages are trying to teach us.

The real question Choni should have asked is, can a person really spend their entire life asleep? And in this metaphor what does it mean to be asleep? You see, according to rabbinic tradition, seventy years was the number of years of someone who lived a good, full life.⁸ Choni perhaps doesn’t know to ask the question because he seems to be the person who is both literally and figuratively asleep. Choni was the kind of guy who seemed keen on responding only to immediate need and expected instant gratification. In all of the stories preceding the story of Choni and his deep sleep, he serves as an intermediary between the people and God. The people always bring him a problem, like for example that it hasn’t rained for a month, and Choni prays to God, and God solves the problem. It seems funny that in each of these instances, Choni, who is always identified as a righteous individual, never notices the problem himself. He only reacts when it is brought to his attention.

On the other hand, it seems fairly obvious to me who the awake person in the story is. It’s the man planting the carob tree. Being awake in this context is not only responding to emergencies as they happen. It means, persisting in the fulfillment of your mission even when things seem really well off. For example, the man is planting

⁸ Pirkei Avot 5

trees even though the story tells us there is plenty of food – “I was born into a land with many carob trees.”

In a way the story suggests that the greatest risk to our survival as a people is not the dangers of war as was the case with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, but it becoming blind to the steps we need to take to secure our future – under all circumstances – peace, war, feast or famine.

A little more than a month ago, I had the opportunity to pre-screen, *Restoring Tomorrow*, the film that we showed prior to our Selichot service. The film begins with the assertion that “Historically, the percentage of Americans without religious affiliation has consistently been less than 10 percent.” As of 2012, the percentage of unaffiliated young Americans has risen above 30%. “In 2050, the percentage of the U.S. population attending houses of worship is forecast to be half of what it was in 1990.” The film goes on to ominously acknowledge that historic houses of worship are closing their doors all around the world, including many Jewish congregations in the United States, some of which have been around for more than a hundred years.

After educating the viewer about this bleak reality, the movie’s director, Aaron Wolf, goes on to chronicle the restoration and revitalization of the Wilshire Blvd Temple in East Los Angeles, the synagogue where he grew up, and where his Grandfather, Alfred Wolf once served as Rabbi. The synagogue was originally built in 1929, funded in large part by the contributions of Hollywood moguls. By 2004, the building was suffering from significantly deferred maintenance. Rabbi Steve Leder, the congregation’s senior rabbi explains, “The building was very badly damaged with water, asbestos and lead. The stained glass windows were coming out. The lighting was bad. There was no air conditioning, no heat, and no handicap access. Pieces of the dome, ten pound pieces of plaster were falling from the ceiling.” He exclaimed, “It [was] an embarrassment. We took our eye off the ball.”

To address these issues, the congregation began a capital campaign. During the initial planning phase, there were members of the congregation's leadership who thought it would be worthwhile just to fix the sanctuary. That project, they assumed would cost roughly \$30 million. Rabbi Leder argued against that idea, saying "it would be a total waste of \$30 million because you will have a beautiful room that is empty almost all the time instead of a falling apart room that is empty almost all of the time." As beautiful as the sanctuary is, he argued that renovating only the sanctuary would be like buying cut flowers in a vase; they would be beautiful while they lasted, but then it would fade and die.

Rabbi Leder had a keen awareness that the project had to be more than simply renovating the building, the undertaking also had to include re-engaging the Jewish community in the sacred work of building Jews. While it is named the Wilshire Blvd temple, the congregation actually has three campuses, each of which Rabbi Leder views as an individual factory, design for building Jews. In the film, Rabbi Leder explained that there was a moment in 2004 when he realized that the main factory, the Wilshire Blvd campus, had lost its ability to perform this most vital function. He came to this stark realization when at the beginning of the 2004 school year, Rabbi Leder learned that in a congregation of two thousand families, there wasn't a single kindergarten student registered for religious school at the Wilshire Blvd. campus. He said it hit him like a wall of cold water. He thought that they were dying at the roots – this main historical campus was a "factory here that is completely ill suited to build Jews."

While I would not have used a factory as a metaphor to describe a synagogue, I deeply appreciate the message that Rabbi Leder was trying to communicate. Our synagogues are not simply buildings that people enter into and leave unchanged. They should be places that help create and maintain the Jewish people. They should

be spaces from which engaged congregants go out into the world to make it a better place.

For the Wilshire Blvd Temple, jump starting this sacred work involved creating a new space – a completely restored sanctuary, a new preschool, a new kindergarten through six grade center; parking for 500 cars, and perhaps most importantly the construction of a tikkun olam center – an edifice specifically dedicated to the sacred work of repairing the world.

In the film, Rabbi Leder explains his motivation for spearheading the creation of this robust center for Jewish life – to be a good ancestor. Rabbi Leder acknowledges that while we are living we don't often think of ourselves as ancestors but that "Treating your house of worship with dignity and respect and imbuing it with your resources, financial, creative, emotional, spiritual resources is [in essence] being a good ancestor" by building for the future.

Rabbi Leder's congregation was, in essence experiencing an existential crisis, similar in nature to the crisis faced by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai when the second Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem. For their Wilshire Blvd community to survive, they needed a radical transformation for the sake of continuity. A place that historically was known for its gorgeous, palatial sanctuary, will hopefully now be known for the congregation's devotion to the work of tikkun olam and helping those in need in their community.

We at Congregation Beth Israel I think are living in the world of Choni the circle maker and the man planting the carob tree. While we are facing no existential crisis, we still need to ask ourselves the most important question, what do we have to plant to be good ancestors for those of our descendants who will be here seventy years from now? The people who gathered to form Congregation Beth Israel in 1876 were good ancestors. The people who had the foresight to build here on Shoal Creek beginning in 1957 were good ancestors. The people who invested in our education

building so that we have wonderful, very functional classrooms were being good ancestors.

The question I present to you today is, what seeds can we plant today that our children and grandchildren will be able to harvest after we are gone.

It is my hope and prayer that this sermon sounds a lot like a shofar and stirs us from our seventy-year sleep. And, may we remain awake to the needs of our synagogue community. May this High Holiday season give us the strength for the long road ahead as we strive in the coming year to become the best ancestors we can be.

Shanah Tovah!