

Rabbi Fox's Message for Temple Beth Shalom's  
Sivan/Tammuz 5768 (July 2008) Newsletter

Our Future Unfolds in Our Past

How many of us used to sit in history class, year after year, and stare at the clock, watching the minute arm tick its way inevitably toward the oasis of lunch period or, even better, the closing bell of the day while we listened to the monotoned teacher (himself or herself seemingly ancient) tell us about some ancient dead people that we knew absolutely mattered not one bit to the richness of our lives? Perhaps many of us can remember such an experience more than we'd like to admit.

That being said, I offer you this personal note: Something happened for me shortly after my Bar Mitzvah, however, that completely transformed my view of history. Already with ground made fertile for an interest in history by a young man trying to rediscover the short life of his deceased father, something happened to me when I stood on the Bima and read from the Haftarah. Simply put: I no longer viewed Judasim as someone else's. Prior to that moment, I viewed Judaism essentially as a land through which I traveled as a stranger, but it was not mine. After my Bar Mitzvah, however, my Jewish heritage became a central part of my very being. Add to this a brand new Hebrew School course on *Bereishit* (Genesis) that began a couple of months later, and now I was seeing the world of MY ancestors come to life.

That perspective allowed (and allows) me to see the 17<sup>th</sup> of *Tammuz*, the day that we mourn the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem before the fall of the Temple there (which we observe this month), as a day of mourning for me. It was not just some other person's family who was killed, it was mine. It was not just some nameless, faceless person's community who suffered the loss of nearly one million of its members, it was mine. It was not someone else's ancestors who were forced to flee their homes in terror, never to return, it was mine. For me, my ancestors' experiences – both terrible and tremendous – are fountains of wisdom from which I may drink to help guide me well in my life and in the lives that will follow after me.

Let's face it: In the life of a Jew, philosopher and man of letters George Santayana's often mis-attributed and misquoted aphorism, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," cannot be more true. We all know that patterns exist in the historical timeline of Jewish lives and Judaism – whether it is as victims of pillaging or exile or general oppression, as well as overcoming adversity, excelling despite outside limitations, and an abiding faith in our purposeful future as a people. No matter what the patterns, or lack thereof, we must pay attention to our past so that we may understand from where we come. If not, we cannot know the safest path to tread toward who we will become.

All of this may seem very heavy, and for the most part it is: I take the matter of wisdom and the transmission of knowledge and values and faith, very seriously. Sometimes, however, we need a guide along the way to help us find our footing, especially over the more difficult parts of our journey. I am honored to be that guide for you and so it is a joyous thing for me to know that I will remain your guide for another two years. Let's discover the past together just as we chart our course in the future.

And as we think about our connection with our ancestors, may we all take strength in knowing that a part of our ancestors' values, hopes, and faith survive in us and in our dedication to our Jewish lives.

Rabbi Gerald R. Fox

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