



Seek peace and pursue it
Psalm 34



Rabbi Rackover's Reflections

Shavua Tov (A Good Week),

We had an excellent crowd at Hillel last night for the Avi Schaefer Multi Faith Shabbat. Nearly 40 guest from the Muslim and Catholic communities joined almost as many people from the Jewish community for learning prior to services. Each group presented for 15-20 minutes about the Sabbath in their faith and then we finished with the Muslim community holding their final prayer service of the day.

A significant number of students then stayed on and experienced Friday night services in their variations at Hillel. Dinner was packed and very special as we wanted to accommodate the Catholic community's observance of Lent and those in the Muslim community who keep Halal very strictly. We had fish for the first time in my nearly four years!

I'm very proud of our students and my colleagues and deeply in their debt for a really wonderful way to remember Avi and to teach something about what he brought to the world and our community.

Below please find my remarks from Friday night dinner. (I speak/spoke without notes so this is a recording of those remarks that I've made this evening as Shabbat ended.)

Friday February 24, 2012

I want to thank everyone for coming tonight, joining us for this multi-faith Shabbat in honor of the memory of Avi Schaefer. On the Jewish calendar the second anniversary of his passing was just two days ago. We have come together with the help of an initiative from the Avi Schaefer foundation and Hillel to have multi-faith Shabbatot across the world.

Avi was a student here at Brown for a little more than one semester. Originally from California he and his brother decided to make aliyah, to move to Israel. While there he had to serve in the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces. His role in that context was very special. He worked as a negotiator in hostage situations. Imagine, a person your age, a student, who is trained and executes in this very important role.

After he finished his service he moved here to study at Brown and this spirit of conversation and 'negotiation' was part of who he was. He reached out to people in different communities of faith or politics and tried, with them, to overcome the challenge of difference.

Before I begin my remarks I want to mention something else. Today as we sit here together, Muslims, Catholics, Jews and people of other faiths as well, there is terrible violence in Syria.

Earlier today there was a riot on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem wherein nearly a dozen Israelis and an equal amount of Palestinians were injured. There is even the report of one death. And we are sitting here in peace and calm and this is going on around the world.

This afternoon I tweeted about these two unfortunate scenes and mentioned that as this is going on in the world there were 'sneaker riots' in the U.S. Apparently Nike has released a shoe in anticipation of the NBA All Star game and Foot Locker has had to suspend sales due to rioting in more than one location. There is a meme I've been hearing, "First-World Problems." I think this is the epitome of that.

So let's recognize that we are in a privileged situation where we are being educated, prepared to move into the broader world and let us not forget this moment where we all sit together, people of different ideals and faiths and enjoy each other. Carry it with you.

All around the world Jewish people gather on a weekly basis to listen to a Torah portion, a parsha. This is a selection from the Five Books of Moses. It is read in all synagogues around the world, we are, as it were, all on the same page.

This week's reading is called Terumah. It's about the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable Temple that the Hebrews built for their sojourn in the desert.

So let me ask you, if you want to build a Tabernacle in the desert where do you get the supplies? You can't go to Home Depot... You need people to give gifts: wood and fabric and metals all the simplest stuff has to be procured so you can shape the Tabernacle.

So the verse at the very beginning of the reading, the verse that gives us the name of the reading is as follows:

Exodus 25:1,2

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me terumah; you shall accept terumah for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. (NJPS)

So before we unpack the word terumah I want to introduce another few words.

In English a word we often use for giving is charity. Ever consider where that word comes from? It comes from Latin and if we were to think of it having a root it would be 'care' – we give charity because we care.

How about in Hebrew? People often use the word tzedakah. What is the root of that word?

It comes from the word tzedek; which does not have anything to do with caring, it means justice. Giving away money to help is an expression of justice. Balancing the scales as it were.

In Arabic I discovered two words.

The first:

Sadaqah (صدقة)

charity; voluntary alms above the amount for zakat.

So the Hebrew and Arabic are nearly identical.

The second word:

Zakāt زكاة "that which purifies" or "alms", one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is the giving of a fixed portion of one's wealth to charity, generally to the poor and needy.

This word is reminiscent of the Hebrew word zakh to be pure. (Used for olive oil, for example.)

So we have three different ideas:

1) I do it because I care

2) I do it because it is just

3) I do it because it will fix me, make me better

Each of these is important and critical to our development as people and to our ability to help other people.

So let me ask you, those of you who know some Hebrew, what is the root of the word terumah?

It means to elevate. To lift is l'harim. But in the context of this weeks reading it means to take something mundane and make it higher.

So let me tell you that is what I felt when I was around Avi. My last private moment with him was our attempt to get a TV onto a rack so we could roll it around Hillel. This wasn't a particularly exciting thing but I remember it, it was not mundane.

Avi, somehow, had the ability to raise things up. To raise people up.

You know we are all sitting here and eating and I want you to turn around. What could be more mundane than those bussing bins. Ugly grey bins lined up on a table. When Avi got here he saw that the kitchen staff were coming in and clearing up all of the tables. He asked why isn't it possible for each of us to help a little bit? To carry our own plates over and scrape them off? Why aren't we composting the waste?

Simple. Boring. But elevated.



Seek peace and pursue it
Psalm 34



Avi elevated us. That is his legacy. To help us recognize in ourselves and in each other that we can raise up, even the simplest, but especially the most precious – the other.

Thank you all for coming, I bless us all that in the coming year you remember Avi and that when we assemble again in 12 months that you can say that you've helped change the world because he no longer can.

Rabbi Mordechai (Michael) Rackover