

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777

I know we're not supposed to talk politics up here. It's a sacred place and politics are so - well - *UN*-sacred, especially lately. So, I hope you'll forgive me for talking about my pick for a great man for President, (pause) Shimon Peres, of blessed memory. He was a great man. In his inauguration address on July 15, 2007, Peres said, "My dream was not to be a president. My dream was to be a shepherd or a poet of the stars."

I want to talk a little bit about Shimon Peres this evening, partly because with his recent passing it's so relevant, partly because he lived such a long life and accomplished so much that he would almost always be relevant and partly because he said so many wise things that when you study his life, it's easy to see his younger influence as a boy as Talmud student with his grandfather as well as his once-quoted, later interests in becoming both a Shepherd and a poet to the stars.

What happened that made Shimon Peres, would-be shepherd or poet of the stars into Prime Minister and President of one of the greatest nations on earth as well as a Nobel Prize Laureate? And just *what is* a "poet of the stars"? Is it a personal poet to celebrities? Or is it something else? It sounds like something people imagine that rabbis do, at least if we do it well perhaps. Perhaps we aspire to be "Poets of the stars". Ah, to be able to lie out on the grass and gaze at the stars and make poetry!

Shimon Peres (formerly Szymon Perski) was born on August 21, 1923 in Vishnev, Poland. He immigrated to Israel with his family in 1934 and studied at the Geula Gymnasia high school in Tel Aviv and at the Ben Shemen agricultural school.

Somewhere along the way he went from Polish immigrant aspiring shepherd, and not really only aspiring shepherd, but actually attended agriculture school to learn how to be a shepherd, to later become a great and visionary man who helped a young nation of Israel grow quickly into being a great and respected nation.

What do you think it was that changed his path? The High Holy Days, demand we give thought to the path we're on, the path we might have taken and the path that still remains ahead of us.

What path are you on? Mostly, for this brief moment in time we are at this spot where our paths converge here this evening as we welcome 5777 at KKBE here in Charleston, SC. But we've all come from different places and backgrounds and our paths that brought us here are very different in length and scope. Some of us are blocks away from the place where we were born while others of us never

imagined our lives taking us to Charleston SC until recently. I'm in the latter category. The rest of us are somewhere in between and yet here we are, shoulder to shoulder with all sorts of Jews and our devoted loved ones that all ended up here tonight.

Although if there's such a thing as fate, I should have known. The signs were pointing me to the South all my life.

My Dad was born in Birmingham, AL. I was born in Cincinnati, OH not far from the border with Kentucky.

My rabbinical school student congregations/internships were in Lafayette, LA, Jackson, TN and Natchez, MS. While visiting my southern congregations I learned about everything from Kosher Cajun to matzah balls in gravy which is a real thing that was on the buffet for Passover in Natchez, MS.

While I was a student at Rabbinical school back in Cincinnati, I also worked as a docent for campus and congregational tours, so I get a little nostalgic when I run into a tour on our KKBE Charleston campus.

And while I grew up in St. Louis, MO I was always interested in Judaism in America and American history and I attended college at one of the sites for the famous Lincoln Douglas debates and now I'm at one of the places where Judaism in America all started.

It's especially nice to be at a historical spot and see that it is not just a relic, but it is a thriving part of Jewish life in the present, not just the past. Watching my own daughters earn a Jewish education in these walls along with so many of your daughters and sons gives me hope for their Jewish future.

While learning about the US and Judaism and Reform Judaism as a kid growing up in St. Louis, I was also taught much about Israel. I recall the first time I planted a tree in Israel, not with my own hands, but with the assistance of my Sunday school and the Jewish National Fund. Every week I would show up to Sunday school and purchase another stamp until I had filled my page which was my first memory of Jewish philanthropy as I completed the page and was issued the task of assigning the tree "in honor" or "in memory" of someone. I was an elementary school student when I learned that we Jews often dedicate things in honor of or in memory of and then we put a plaque on it - the wall, the bimah, the ark, so that future generations might appreciate from whence they came,. I recall riding in the car with my Dad and asking him if it would be appropriate to dedicate that first tree in memory of his aunt my Great Aunt Cecile, a woman I hardly knew, but knew she

had recently died and that my father grew up with her and my grandmother's other siblings and that she was special to him. All at once, that memory is my first experiment with Jewish philanthropy as I bought a tree in Israel and imagined where my aunt might be in heaven.

I remember the look of pride and joy on my Dad's face when I asked him if we could dedicate my first tree to Aunt Ceil. Even though I was probably my 8 or nine at the time, I remember he looked at me like he suddenly realized I thought deeply about things, maybe for the first time. That would have been around 1978 or 1979 if memory serves.

Incidentally, as this was all coming together and I was thinking about Shimon Peres and Israel and trees and writing about it for tonight, I had to pause and plant another tree in Israel. In this digital age, one can still buy trees in Israel, but there are no stamps for kids to collect. Instead, you go to the website and put in all the information. I planted a tree in honor of KKBE on behalf of my family.

Anyway, that is part of the path that has led me from birth in Cincinnati, yes folks in full disclosure, I am literally "From Ohio" but I promise I'm one of the good guys. I'd love to tell you I'm from Cincinnati, Mississippi, but this is Rosh Hashanah after all and I'll be the first to step up and shatter the stereotype. I'm here. I'm from Ohio. And I'm proud. But I'm just as happy to acclimate to this beautiful community in Charleston. So, that is part of my journey from Cincinnati to Missouri to congregations sprinkled throughout the south to Charleston with lots of stuff in between that we can save for another time on the bimah.

A heck of a journey! And while I never imagined I'd be leading services at a historic congregation that traces its roots to prior to the American Revolution when I was a kid planting my first tree doing my first act of Jewish Philanthropy, here I am and I'm really happy that now our paths converge.

Where will we go from here, from this special place in space and time where our paths converge? This is the next logical question. Sometimes something has to happen. In the young life of Shimon Peres, he was still a kid in Palestine when he became active in the labor youth group though still studying wishing to become a shepherd. I can tell you, by the way, that it was my success in Jewish Youth Group, much like Charley, that eventually led me to the bimah. Peres continued his studies in agriculture and becoming a shepherd at the same time he was becoming a rising figure in the Labor political movement.

I know many here have had interesting paths. I'm guessing that few of us have entirely had the journey we imagined for ourselves when we were kids, but many

are still aspiring to some or all of that vision, perhaps with a few updates and upgrades along the way. And still some of us are on a completely different path than we once imagined for ourselves.

Where are you now? Are you happy with where you are? I'm guessing that a fair share of us return here every year because we are thankful for where we are "so to speak" and perhaps in equal measure, some of us are here praying that we might be somewhere much better, at least spiritually speaking a year from now even when we return to this sanctuary.

Some of us are bitter about something that happened to us and are hopeful that Rosh HaShanah might wash away some of the bitterness and replace it with relief. And some of us can't believe the extraordinary blessings we received in 5776 and are just here to acknowledge that we are grateful for the Power in the Universe that brought us those blessings. And, I'm guessing that most of us can identify with both ends of the spectrum and find ourselves somewhere in between.

In May of 2000, while in his late 70's Shimon Peres said to the *Jerusalem Post*, "At my age, after looking back, if I feel that I have to make a choice between being experienced and cynical or being curious and innocent, I prefer the second. It is much more appealing."

Again we learn from a man who was once a student of talmud, later became an aspiring shepherd and poet about how to live now and in the moment - so appropriately for Rosh HaShanah. We could be cynical and bitter about the past. Nearly everyone has their reasons. But we could also choose to be curious and hopeful as Shimon Peres was still deciding to do in the year 2000.

Rosh HaShanah reminds us that some of what becomes of us in 5777 will be pure luck, some is in God's proverbial hands, and entirely how we feel about what happens to us is up to us.

There's a story of a young man named Abe. As Abe grew older and knew the time for him to have a career of his own was fast approaching he went to the marketplace to look at all the different kind of shops and crafts and skills and see what appealed to him most. In the end he made his decision and went back to the Jeweler and said before him, "I want to be a jeweler. Please, take me on as your apprentice!"

The jeweler considered the young man for a moment and then said, "Tell me, what did you dream of last night?"

Abe replied, "I dreamed I would make a lot of money."

The jeweler said back to Abe, "I'm not looking for an apprentice right now. Come back another day."

Abe was disappointed, but not completely discouraged. He returned to the shop the very next day and said, "I'm ready to be your apprentice now!"

Again the jeweler asked Abe, "What did you dream last night?" He said, "I dreamed I was a king and all my subjects bowed down to me."

The jeweler peered over his glasses and said, "Hey Joseph, I'm not in need of an apprentice at this time. Try again some other day."

Abe thought to himself, "My name's not Joseph." He left again discouraged and as he returned home passing through the market, he looked around at the various shops and businesses thinking that perhaps he was meant for some other career.

But that night in his dreams he saw himself in a jeweler's chair with a loupe in his eye (one of those special magnifying lenses) and he was bent over a watch open in the back with tiny parts and he was using tiny little tools to fix the watch and he actually remembered himself sweating as he completed his working so carefully to fix the delicate parts of the insides of the watch and placing the finished watch down on the table in front of him.

When Abe woke the next morning he nearly ran out of bed straight to the jeweler and as he approached he blurted out the contents of his dream.

"Now, you're ready to be a jeweler," he said. Keep dreaming those kinds of dreams and one day, with my help, you'll be a great jeweler.

Such stories make me wonder what a young Shimon Peres dreamt of. Was he dreaming of being a shepherd/poet of the stars or was he dreaming the dreams of leading a great nation.

Was he dreaming of what he might be paid? How deeply he would be respected by others? Or how his work might affect other people?

What are you dreaming of? Are you dreaming of winning lottery numbers and the mansion you'll build and the parties you'll be invited to?

Or do you dream of a career that helps you make a difference, build a family and a home and have enough money, time and energy left over to give and do acts of tzedakah? Or do you have some other dream about tomorrow and the next day?

Have you actually dreamed of your future? Did you wake up with an epiphany? Did you spend time on the analysts couch taking apart the dreams to figure out what you might do to heal your present and build your future? Have you considered the right time to live your dreams? Rosh HaShanah says there's no time like the present if you have the right dreams. And no, they don't have to be the kind of dreams you have when you're asleep; they can be the dreams you have when you're awake during the day. Abe dreamt at night. Shimon Peres shared the dreams of his youth as he imagined his future. It didn't turn out as he imagined.

Or did it?

After all, he was a shepherd of sorts. He was a shepherd of our people in Israel. In 1944 Peres helped lead a Palmakh delegation into the Negev Desert. The delegation and their mission had to be secret and was considered illegal by British Mandate Palestine authorities, but he was part of the team that sought out future areas of settlement for the Jewish people like a shepherd before Israel was declared a state. And in 1953 he was Director General of Israel's Ministry of Defense. He worked hard to build Israel's defense capabilities, but always with an eye toward peace much like a shepherd defends their flocks. And if you read his speeches and quotes he was a poet who aimed for the stars as an advocate and agent of peace and security in the Jewish homeland.

Finally, Shimon Peres said "Optimists and pessimists die the same way. They just live differently. I prefer to live as an optimist."

Perhaps most importantly, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur ask us how we prefer to live. How do you prefer to live? In the past? In the future? In the present? Do you prefer to live your dreams or help someone else live theirs? To be a watchmaker a shepherd, a musician, a poet or, dare I ask, a politician or a rabbi?

May year ahead be a year of joy and blessing, health and happiness, courage and curiosity to explore our dreams, may we write poetry about the stars and may our words inspire. May we increase the opportunities for our paths to converge and, like the great Prime Minister and President of Israel may we aspire to be creators of peace. Amen

L'Shanah Tovah