

**Rabbi Charles K. Briskin**  
***Sparking the Jewish Soul***  
**Yom Kippur Morning**  
**October 9, 2008 / 10 Tishrei 5769**

Earlier this year I created a page on Facebook, the popular social networking site. In its brief history Facebook has connected one hundred million people worldwide to one another and has made its 24-year-old founder, Mark Zuckerberg, a billionaire. Good work if you can find it. Over the past couple of months I've discovered some interesting things about Facebook. I can use it to connect with members of our community or to share news of my goings on. Most meaningful for me, however, is using it to reconnect with people from my past.

My high school youth group advisor found me on Facebook a couple of months ago. I've recently reconnected with a few formerly close friends from my home town, my high school youth group, and college. These friends were important to me during formative periods of my life, but as often happens, we moved away from each other and over time simply lost touch. Every now and then I'd think of them, but trying to track them down seemed daunting. Now, in some cases twenty years later, through a simple name search and click of a mouse, I've reconnected with many old friends. Each email exchange has brought back memories recalling the good times we shared together, reminding me of where I once was and where I am now. Most have no idea that I became a rabbi. We look at each other's online photos and realize that we look more or less the same, except we're a bit heavier, a little wrinkled around the eyes, and in some cases, but not mine, display a much thinner head of hair. Fifteen or twenty years is a long time not to be in touch but each of these Facebook exchanges has connected me to my past and has reminded me of important moments that shaped me. Each person is part of my history and Facebook has sparked something new inside of me.

It would be a stretch to compare my Facebook experience with our Torah portion for this Yom Kippur. But let me make one connection. Just as Facebook can connect individuals to one another and remind us of days long past, *Parashat Nitzavim* can connect individuals and our community to a heritage and a people that has existed for thirty-five hundred years. The difference is that *Nitzavim* will still be here long after Facebook becomes obsolete.

Our tradition teaches that we all stood together at Sinai, the past, present and future souls of all Jews, both those born into Judaism and those who chose Judaism later in life. All of us experienced God's Revelation at the base of the thundering and smoking mountain and our community today continues to live by the values we received millennia ago. This

concept of standing at Sinai is reinforced forty years later, at the end of the Israelites' wandering.

They are assembled on the shore of the Jordan River, preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses, speaks to the entire Israelite community, from the tribal heads and leaders to the woodchopper and the water *schlepper*, saying; “*Atem nitzavim hayom*—All of you stand here today. I establish this covenant with those of you here today, and those of you not here today.” Most of our rabbis interpret those who weren't there that day to mean the future generation of Jews. Our sages of the Rabbinic era, the great Medieval philosophers like Maimonides and Nahmanides; the Eastern European Hasidim like the Ba'al Shem Tov, and the Kotzker Rebbe; modern rabbis; current day activists; artists and scholars too numerous to name. We, too, who weren't there then in body, were there in spirit and today we are here. Moses' testimony to the Israelites that day was his last; He imparted his divinely inspired wisdom to his community, those whom he led faithfully for forty years, and in whose hands the future of the Israelites rested. Moses left a sacred legacy that will endure long after he dies.

Every time we read *Parashat Nitzavim*, we are participants in Moses' last lecture. Do you remember learning of the death of Randy Pausch earlier this summer? Professor Pausch was on the faculty of Carnegie Mellon University, where he taught computer science. A little over a year ago, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and was told that he would die within a few months. Carnegie Mellon has a lecture series where faculty members are invited to give a hypothetical “last talk” on things that matter most to them. Just about a year ago, Pausch was invited to give his “last lecture.” He was still in good physical shape, despite his growing tumors. He had a sparkle in his eye, was funny and disarming. He did pushups to show he was still in good shape. Pausch intended to share his life lessons with his students and colleagues.

What followed, however, was unexpected. Pausch was interviewed by Jeff Zaslow, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, who provided a link in his online article to YouTube, and thus was the Randy Pausch phenomenon born. His lecture has been viewed by hundreds of thousands, and a book born out of this lecture became a best seller. Pausch articulated his core values and shared life lessons, encouraging people to strive to fulfill their dreams. Pausch died this past July, well after the three to six months he was given after his diagnosis in the summer of 2007. But even in death, he remains very much alive in the hearts and souls of his family, his students and every person who was touched by his story and his sage advice for the future.

*Nitzavim*, the Torah portion we read this morning is Moses' “last lecture.” He knows that he will die soon and will not be granted entry into the Promised Land. The Israelites know it as well. So he has to prepare them for a future that will not include him, but will be imbued with his spirit and his life lessons.

*Parashat Nitzavim* has been read annually for more than two thousand years. Every time I hear it I discover a new insight. Sometimes it is read before members of a congregation that continue to hear Moses speaking God's words as if they were there, gathered with all the people. Sometimes it is read before members of a congregation that do not hear God's voice with as much clarity. But the voice is there. And now and then when *Nitzavim* is read, one person in the congregation, previously unable to hear God's voice now hears it with perfect clarity. She hears these words and they spark something deep inside. The spark then kindles the wick that grows slowly into a flame that illuminates her Jewish soul.

Like most American Reform congregations, we read this Torah portion on Yom Kippur. But it's not the traditional portion for this day. Most of the Jewish world is reading a detailed account of the Yom Kippur sacrifice and the description of the scapegoat ritual, whereby all the sins of the community are placed upon a goat, before the goat is sent out into the wilderness. Our Reform rabbis, however, had difficulty with the traditional passage. Neither animal sacrifice nor transference of sin speaks to the sensibilities of modern Jews. So they replaced it with the verses we read this morning. Why? Because the message of *Nitzvaim* resonates more powerfully for us and it is important to share when our synagogues are full. Remember that those who come to the synagogue sporadically over the course of the year do gather on Yom Kippur. Now, don't get me wrong. I am thrilled you're here. I wonder, however, what is it about Yom Kippur that compels Jews who don't participate regularly in synagogue life during the year to come today? We take the day off from work, we fast and we deprive ourselves of all things pleasurable. It's much different from Friday night services where the service is shorter, the congregation is less formal, and the Oneg is certainly better.

I wish that demographic data could help me better understand; but it can't. A survey of the religious attitudes of Americans was published earlier this year.<sup>1</sup> It showed some surprising if not inconsistent results. Compared to almost every other major United States religious denomination, Jews rank at the bottom of every category that speaks to our personal relationship with God. Only 41 percent of Jews responded that they are "absolutely certain" there is a God. And only 31 percent say that religion is important in their lives. But, according to the 2000 National Jewish Population Study, another survey that studies ritual, cultural and demographic trends within the Jewish community, approximately 59 percent of Jews say they fast on Yom Kippur.

It's incongruous, isn't it? After all, a typical Friday night service at our congregation draws about sixty to seventy people while services on Yom Kippur attract three to four hundred. This disparity is common in every Reform synagogue I know of. I don't have an answer, but I recently came across an article by the Chicago based journalist George Hanus that shares an interesting idea. He explains the incongruity through the Yiddish

---

<sup>1</sup> 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

expression, “*dos pintelev Yid,*’ the indefinable special Jewish spark in every Jewish soul that can be re-ignited under the right circumstances.”<sup>2</sup>

For many, that spark is reignited at this time of year. We recall our childhood years, walking to the Orthodox *shul* in our neighborhood for *Shabbes* or “*Yom Kipper.*” We remember our mother making chopped liver, using the hand cranked meat grinder, or gefilte fish from scratch with the smell of boiled whitefish coating our clothing, and onions burning our eyes. We remember the feel of our father’s large rough hand wrapped tightly around ours leading us across a busy street up the steep stairs into the synagogue and the musty smell of the crowded sanctuary. We remember facets of our culture and tradition that our parents and grandparents taught us that perhaps don’t speak to us in quite the same way today. The Yiddish phrases, the foods, the elaborate holiday celebrations. Memories sparked at this time of year motivate us to come to the synagogue and participate in the living story of our people, trying perhaps to bring back those memories of a different time in our lives.

In *Parashat Nitzavim*, Moses tells the Israelite people, “Not with you alone do I make this covenant; but with those who stand here today, and those not here with us today.” As Hanus says, “every Jew has a “Jewish spark” because every Jewish soul,” and I would add to those born into Judaism, those too who choose Judaism and even those who simply live Judaism, “retains the subconscious memory of standing at Sinai and receiving Torah.”

The *pintelev Yid*, the spark in our souls is ignited here during these High Holy Days, when we pour our hearts and souls out to God, confessing our transgressions, asking for forgiveness, and returning to our true essence. We realize how meaningful being part of a holy congregation can be for us. Sometimes we discover the power of community as a word, a memory, or an indescribable feeling that sparks the deepest part of our soul and returns us to greater engagement in Jewish communal life.

I’ve noticed an interesting trend at our congregation. A surprisingly large number of our new members are older adults. We know that synagogues often attract young families when they are ready to enroll their children in Torah School. But those who haven’t been affiliated for some time, who aren’t here to educate their children, who presumably have established themselves through other social networks, join now, later in their lives. Why is that? What touches that *pintelev Yid*, that indefinable spark that motivates them to take that next step?

Every person has a story. I am blessed to hear many stories from our members of how their *pintelev Yid* was ignited. I think of one of our newer members. She first came to Temple Beth El two years ago. She was born and raised as a Jew, married a non-Jewish man, and raised her children in his Catholic faith. She held on to some cultural and family

---

<sup>2</sup> *Dos Pintelev Yid*, by George D. Hanus in World Jewish Digest, September 2008.

traditions, but was not involved with synagogue life for all those years. Fast forward three decades; her children are now grown, and she is divorced. Yet this spark inside of her inspired her to enroll in our Introduction to Judaism class. Since that time, her flame has grown as she has become a regular part of our worship and learning communities, has taken on leadership roles on our Board of Education, and even recently became an adult *bat mitzvah*. All of this began when that *pintele Yid*, that small spark was ignited.

I think too of another new member. He was raised as a nominally affiliated Christian, practiced Buddhism very seriously for many years, then discovered that his maternal grandmother was Jewish. That discovery inspired him to explore his Jewish roots more closely. He has studied here at Temple Beth El and at other places as well. He has deepened his connection to his latent Jewish roots which are now exposed because of that discovery. This is what Hanus means; we all have that "*pintele Yid*" that indefinable spark; if the circumstances are right, it can become a brightly burning flame that signifies a newfound commitment to our Jewish community and heritage.

Those here today and those not with us today, still retain that "*pintele Yid*." What will ignite it for you this year? What experience will inspire you to say, "I am going to explore Judaism a bit more deeply this year?" Even though as a percentage, Jews formally affiliate and participate in much smaller numbers than Christians, a new generation is finding its way back to Jewish communal life. Many are finding their way through reinvigorated congregations that are doing a better job of speaking to the contemporary needs of our current generation of spiritual seekers. Others, especially young adults are attracted to new and innovative organizations, especially those that blend a passion for social justice with a deep commitment to Judaism. Look at American Jewish World Service, Jewish World Watch, the Progressive Jewish Alliance and Jewish Funds for Justice, for example. Over 100,000 young adults have participated in Taglit-Birthright, a free, ten-day Israel experience for first-time visitors. Most who have gone will tell you, perhaps not in these words because they don't speak Yiddish, how this trip sparked their *pintele Yid* and has remained alit since their return.

How the *pintele Yid* is sparked; this is our perpetual challenge as a Jewish community. We never know when we are going to reach that person who yearns for a meaningful encounter with our tradition, people and culture. So not only must we provide many pathways, so too must we be on the lookout for the burning embers that will touch the soul and transform the spark into flames, just as it did with the two people I mentioned before. When it is ignited, we must be caretakers of the flame, attending to it perpetually, to keep it burning always.

*Parashat Nitzavim* addresses those physically there with Moses and the Israelites, and the souls of all who will come afterwards. The text also affirms that living by the precepts of our tradition isn't too hard. They don't reside in the heavens, nor across the sea. Rather they are close to everyone, in our hearts and in our mouths to do and live by. The manner

in which each person chooses to affirm his or her Judaism is deeply personal. Many will continue to find that supporting the synagogue, and knowing that we will be here for them when they need us, is comforting. Some will be attracted to that new class or program, or will try a new type of service that will spark something in them, and inspire them to engage with greater frequency and intensity. *Dos pintele Yid* is there, waiting for the right moment to be touched.

Shortly after Moses completes his last lecture to the Israelites, he ascends Mount Nebo, looking out into the Promised Land before God takes his last breath. Moses dies knowing that he has prepared the Israelites well to enter into the Promised Land with faith and confidence to become a great people. Every synagogue and Jewish communal institution that exists today is part of that legacy left when Moses completed his work on our behalf. We were there. We are here. And we need to do our part to perpetuate that legacy for those who will come after us. Temple Beth El is one small piece of that lasting legacy. Throughout our eighty four years we have sparked the souls of thousands. I pray that we will continue to be the catalyst for thousands more in the next eighty years.

We hear Moses' voice beckoning to us, all of us, from the family that has been part of our community for fifty years, to the family that joined last week; from those who have led us ably through the years to those who have benefited from everything that our congregation offers; from the families whose generous gifts of money support us, to the families whose generous gifts of time enable us to do our work better and stronger. We were all there; we will continue to be here today and tomorrow.

*Parashat Nitzavim* is enduring. *Nitzavim* connects us to our people and our heritage. My prayer is that our lines of connection to one another will continue to be strengthened through our engagement in synagogue and Jewish communal life. My prayer is that we will use our resources to maintain our people and our institutions, while creating new avenues for both individual and collective growth.

My prayer is that we will all have a moment when our *pintele yid*, our Jewish spark embedded in our soul, will ignite and cast a shining, far-reaching light onto all.

Amen