

KN Family Service 2011- "In Your Wildest Dream"

A number of years ago, the Arizona Jewish Theatre Company's youth division, Curtain Call, sponsored a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In the program notes, each of the actors was given the opportunity to fill in the blank - "In my wildest dreams, I. . ." I invite you to imagine what your response might be, what is your wildest dream?, and I'll tell you how these young people responded and what I think we can all learn from their answers.

There were 21 respondents. Predictably, the most common response included the desire to find fame and fortune through acting. Although one would expect a group of young actors to especially have stars in their eyes, I think that their answers reflect our culture's emphasis on celebrity as an ultimate value. The instinct to worship is innate in human beings - there has never been a society that did not include a religious aspect. What distinguishes one society from another and one person from another is the object of that worship. It is up to us to decide whether we will put our faith in something inspiring and

enduring, or waste our affection on sports heroes, rock stars, and the pursuit of fame and fortune.

Who are the true heroes? Those who inspire us to be the best that we can be, who live lives worthy of imitation, who have a vision and are catalysts for change.

Heroes are not necessarily perfect people - this is one of the critical lessons we learn from the Bible. Even Moses and Miriam and King David made mistakes; this does not detract from their importance. There are heroes in our own congregation who devote themselves to acts of kindness and caring both within the Temple Chai community and in acts of *gemilut chesed* in the world.

One grand dream was to "achieve greatness in every way possible". And, lo and behold, the ways she mentioned did not include being a rock star or a professional athlete, but rather through education - learning, (again, in her words), "all I can about music, literature, photography, psychology, law, etc." Education has always been a fundamental Jewish value, and we pride ourselves at Temple Chai

on offering an extensive program of learning for all ages. The Rabbis ask, "Who is wise?" Their response - "The person who learns from everyone." Whoever we are and whatever our age, learning is part of our Jewish journey.

This same 13-year-old girl, in her wildest dream, next mentioned helping others. Acts of lovingkindness towards others, in our tradition, are rated even higher than tzedakah. We all can benefit from the loving concern of others.

Among these acts of gemilut khesed, lovingkindness, we learn that we should "receive all people with a cheerful expression". In this mitzva we can both give and receive, and it is especially important in the synagogue. I'd like to challenge each of you to find someone you don't know at the conclusion of this service, and introduce yourself to them. Greeting people you pass, particularly on a regular basis, with a warm "Hello" or "Good morning" establishes a human connection between those who otherwise might have no link at all.

Yaffa Eliach's remarkable *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* tells the story of a Hasidic rabbi who lived in Danzig in the 1930s. Each morning he used to take a stroll; taking care to fulfill Rabbi Yochanan's dictum, he would greet every man, woman, and child "with a warm smile and a cordial 'Good morning.'" Over the years, the rabbi became acquainted with many of his fellow townspeople, and would always greet them by their proper title and name. In the fields near the town, there was a farmer whom he used to pass. "Good morning, Herr Muller," he would greet him. "Good morning, Herr Rabbiner," the man would respond. When World War II erupted, the rabbi's walks stopped, while Herr Muller left his fields and joined the SS. After losing his family at the Treblinka death camp, the rabbi himself was deported to Auschwitz. One day a selection occurred during which all the Jewish inmates had to pass in front of a Nazi officer, who signaled some people to go to the left, to the gas chambers, and others to the right, to a life of slave labor. By this time the rabbi, who had long suffered from starvation and disease, already looked like a "walking skeleton." As the

line moved forward, the voice directing people to the right and to the left started to sound familiar. Soon the rabbi could see the face of the man who was sending people to life or death. As he stood in front of the officer, he heard himself saying, "Good morning, Herr Muller." "Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!" the man responded. "What are you doing here?" Saying nothing, the rabbi smiled faintly; seconds later, Herr Muller lifted his baton and signaled the rabbi to go to the right, to life. A day later he was transferred to a safer camp, and survived the war. The rabbi, Yaffa Eliach reports, "now in his eighties, told me in his gentle voice, 'This is the power of a good-morning greeting. A man must always greet his fellow man.'"

Material possessions were a very common desire - a yacht, a jet, private planes, pools and jacuzzis, cool cars and the biggest and best houses. Lots of money, of course, but one clever idealist dreamt that she would not need money because "there would be no costs." Two thousand years ago, our Rabbis pondered the question, "Who is rich?" Rabbi Tarfon had a very specific answer - "One who possesses 100

vineyards, 100 fields and 100 workers." Rabbi Ben Zoma had a more profound reply, "The person who is happy with what they have." This doesn't mean that we shouldn't enjoy the good with which we have been blessed. In fact the Rabbis suggest that we will be held accountable for all the permitted pleasures of the world which we did not enjoy. If God tells us that something is okay, then who are we to deprive ourselves? But it does suggest that the road to happiness does not lie in coveting the goods of others.

In contrast to those who wanted everything, one humble young lady had a very simple request, which read, in its entirety, "In my wildest dream, I would live in a house that never runs out of Very Cherry Jelly Bellys and Red Licorice." The sense of gratitude and appreciation which permeate such a request are quintessentially religious. We should also consider the need to say thank you to others many times during the day as a religious obligation, just as thanking God daily is part of Jewish life.

Many of the children mentioned the desire to live alone on a private island. There were 5 of these, although one did hope to have his brother with him.

One of the most important roles of Temple Chai is as a Beyt Knesset, a place where people get together and where people are truly there for each other in good times and in bad.

The story is told of a disciple who complains that he is depressed. He is sitting in front of a fire, talking with his rabbi, and the fire is just about to go out. There are only scattered embers in the fireplace. The rabbi takes the poker and stokes the embers in a heap. There is a burst of flame and new warmth from the fire. "Do you see what happened when I gathered the embers closer together?", the rabbi asks. "The fire came back to life." When the coals are separated from each other, there is little heat. But when they are close, they get warmth from each other and the fire is renewed. It's the same with people. When we are alone, our spirit is in danger of dying out. But when we huddle together, we get warmth and comfort from one

another, our hope is renewed. Jewish law demands that we intervene when we can be of assistance to another person. In addition, we will never grow as human beings if we live alone, with no friend willing to tell us when we're wrong and can do better.

The heart-breaker, with which I will conclude, was the dream of 9 year-old Grace. She wrote, "In my wildest dream, I would have my dad come back to life." Doesn't that just put it all in into perspective - yachts and planes, private islands fame and fortune? When all is said and done, beyond education and fame, material possessions, personal characteristics and world travel, none of it really matters if we can't share it with our loved ones. At this High Holiday season, let us all reach out to our family and friends, seeking to begin the new year in a spirit of peace and harmony, and may that peace and harmony spread from us to our community and to the world.

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