Looking Back, Thinking Ahead

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(Rabbi Marc D. Angel was honored at the dinner of the Sephardic Brotherhood of America, Sunday evening December 17, 2023. These are his comments on that occasion.)

One of my favorite Joha stories has him in his yard searching for his lost keys. His wife asks him: what are you looking for, Joha? He answers: I'm looking for my keys. His wife asks: where did you lose them? Joha answers: I lost them in the house somewhere. His wife asks: If you lost your keys in the house, why are you looking for them outside in the yard? Joha answers: because the light is much better out here in the sunshine!

Like many humorous stories, there is wisdom tucked inside. This Joha story reminds us of an eternal truth: you can't find your keys if you are looking in the wrong place. Extending the lesson, you can't find the keys to a happy and meaningful life if you are looking in all the wrong places. You have to know where to look, what values to choose, what ideals to uphold. You have to be able to distinguish between reality and illusion.

As we celebrate Sephardic tradition tonight, the first place we should search for keys is in our past. Centuries of our ancestors

maintained a remarkable faith, persistence, sense of humor, wit and wisdom. I've spent much of my adult life researching and writing about Sephardic civilization and I have found many keys to a strong, happy life.

Tonight I express my gratitude to parents, grandparents, relatives and friends who peopled the beautiful Sephardic family and community of my youth in Seattle. My grandparents Angel came to Seattle from Rhodes, my grandparents Romey came from Turkey…all in the early years of the 20th century. I was named after my maternal grandfather Marco (Mordechai) Romey.

I find keys to my life in the family and community in which I was raised. My Papoo Romey was a special influence on me. He was a barber, far from affluent, with no formal education. But he was a remarkable man. Every Friday night, after Shabbat dinner, he would sit at a card table near a window overlooking his back yard; and he would study the Torah portion of the week, as he sipped on a piping hot glass of tea with four teaspoons of sugar. He loved Torah; his faith in God was a mainstay of his life.

On many Shabbat afternoons I would walk with him from his home on 15th Avenue between Alder and Spruce Streets to Sephardic Bikur Holim on 20th and Fir. On the way, there was an empty lot on one of the corners with a dirt path running diagonally through it. It was a convenient short cut. But Papoo would never let us take that short cut. "We don't walk on dirt paths. We walk derekh hamelekh." Dignity, honor, kavod, self respect. To outsiders, he was an immigrant, a barber, a poor man. In his mind, he was from the aristocracy of the ancient tribe of Judah who had been exiled to Spain. He was a prince of Israel.

The past is a good place to search for keys. But the present is very important if we know where to look. When we see family and friends devoted to Torah and mitzvoth, we fill with joy and gratitude. When we see our Jewish faith and traditions live proudly and happily, we know that the keys of Judaism are in good hands.

When I left the pulpit rabbinate 16 years ago, after a wonderful tenure in a historic congregation, I established the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Our creed has been to foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judasim…much in the spirit of the Sephardic tradition. I have found many keys among devoted, idealistic, and faithful Jews trying to build a better future for our people and for society at large. My son, Rabbi Hayyim Angel, is the National Scholar of our Institute.

But when we search for keys, we also need to look into the future. Our Sephardic ancestors have bequeathed to us a tradition of faith, fortitude, optimism and joy. What will this tradition mean to our descendants 100 years from now, a time of post-ethnic Jewish peoplehood? That question is key to how we live our lives today.

We want our future generations to live strong, happy, beautiful Jewish lives. We want the Sephardic component of their lives to bring them inner poise, confidence, wisdom. The keys we bequeath to them are determined by us here and now. This is an awesome privilege and challenge.

Joha taught us not to look for keys in the wrong places. My Papoo taught us not to take short cuts, to live with dignity and ideals. These are foundational ideas for us now and for generations yet to come.

I am an optimist. I believe in a bright Jewish future, in a better future for all humanity. With all the problems we face these days, the words of the biblical prophet Amos are particularly poignant. “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord God, and I will send a famine to the land, not a famine for bread and not a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of God.”

Amen, ken yehi ratson!

Tags

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