

“Struggling With Demons, Emerging With Hope”

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Union Temple

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For the kids in the 7th grade who have participated in our service this evening, there's something especially moving to me about your presence here, on this evening in particular. As you know, of course, today is Friday, November 22nd. For you, that may not have any special significance. But for me, and for many of your parents as well, that significance is all too deep. When I was in 7th grade, Friday November 22nd was, and will remain, one of the worst days of my life. It was the also worst day in the life of our country for so many Americans. At the time I was a student at JHS 104 on East 20th Street in Manhattan - now known as Simon Baruch Middle School. That day they were painting some of the classrooms, so we 7th graders were stuck down in the lunchroom for most of the day. So there we were spread out at the lunch tables for our class. Then, suddenly, at around 1 o'clock, a live news broadcast broke into our class discussion as the school piped it over the intercom. It was a news bulletin saying that President John F. Kennedy had been shot while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, TX, and that at that moment, as the announcer said, it was not yet known "whether the President is alive - or dead." There was indescribable shock and dismay. Some of my friends gasped and covered their mouths. Some of them, and our teachers as well, began to cry. But I myself went into a state of denial. I took it upon myself to comfort and reassure my friends. "Don't worry," I said, "he's the president - they'll pull him through." And I really believed that, because I couldn't let myself believe anything else. As we walked home, people were roaming the streets in Stuyvesant Town where I lived, either crying openly, or silent and ashen with shock. Yet somehow I still chose to block out the truth, and convince myself that whatever happened was really just a near miss, and that my hero, President Kennedy, would be just fine. But then when I got home and sat down on a chair in front of my bedroom window, I looked outside and saw that the flag on the flagpole had been lowered to half staff. At that moment - it hit me, as though a ton of bricks had just fallen on my head - this was really happening - and I began to cry hysterically. And for the next 4 days, my family and I sat glued to the television watching our whole world change before our eyes. Any of us in here who is old enough to have a glimmer of memory about that time, remembers exactly where they were at the moment they heard. One of the saddest days of our lives.

As I said, I grew up in Stuyvesant Town, near 20th Street in Manhattan, just off the FDR Drive. Most of the people I and my family knew and associated with were Jews - Democrats, Liberals, a number of Socialists, professionals, mostly

middle class families. So the death of this president was a nightmare beyond comprehension. But, as many of you also know, my husband Stephen did not grow up in the middle of New York City amongst a bunch of liberal Jews. On the contrary; he grew up in Columbus, GA, in the heart of the Bible Belt - Ku Klux Klan territory in the height of the Civil Rights Struggle of the early 1960's. Steve's dad Alfred, k"z was the rabbi of the only Reform synagogue in town. In the tradition of his teacher, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, k"z, Alfred was one of the lone voices of progressivism and morality, as he marched on the front lines of the Civil Rights struggle in Georgia, and in neighboring Alabama as well. On Friday, November 22nd of 1963, Steve was also in JHS - he was in the 8th grade. But when the announcement came over the intercom of his school, instead of shock, and gasps, and pain, a deafening unison cheer rose up from the students and teachers in his school - a school which was segregated by state law. And Steve, feeling about as alone and isolated as he ever had felt in his life, quietly slipped out of his classroom to go and seek out the two or three other kids who he knew would be feeling the same pain as he was - the two or three kids out of the hundreds of others who actually would be sorry that Kennedy was dead. It must have been absolutely awful for them. I can't even imagine.

You see, in the Deep South during the '60's, the Kennedys were utterly hated and despised, because of their position on civil rights and desegregation. To the kids in that JHS, and their parents, of course, the death of a Kennedy was a triumph - a victory - over those who believed that human beings deserved to be treated with respect, no matter what color they were. It was a victory for the Old South - for discrimination and racism and hatred. Kennedy was dead - and now it was time to rejoice.

But you know, it's an interesting thing. For the Kennedys themselves, this activism on behalf of civil rights was relatively newly-acquired. Remember - they had grown up in an atmosphere of incredible wealth, entitlement, and even arrogance. At the beginning of his run for the presidency in 1960, John F. Kennedy really wasn't all that interested in this movement that was gathering steam down south. But then the movement's leader, a Baptist preacher, named Martin Luther King, was arrested for defying a state order and put in jail in Alabama. In Kennedy's astute political understanding, and with the input of his equally as astute campaign manager, his younger brother Robert, he realized that he had to make a stand. While his rival, the then Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, ignored the plight of Dr. King, Kennedy picked up the phone and called Mrs. King, and Dr. King's colleagues of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to offer his sympathy and support, and ask if there was anything he could do to help. Many think that it was this phone call that helped to put Kennedy over the top in one of the closest elections in American history. But after his inauguration, came the Freedom Rides, and the killings of civil rights

workers, and arrests of people assembled to demonstrate, and the southern governors standing in the doorways of schools, prepared to block the entrance of black students. And with each passing month, Kennedy himself seemed to grow and evolve. He had arrived at a new level of understanding and empathy - for people who had been excluded and disadvantaged, and abused by our American society for too long - because of the color of their skin. As one who had to break the barrier of being the first Catholic president in a fundamentally white Protestant country, Kennedy had at least a taste of prejudice that almost denied him the presidency. (We Jews know something about that.)

In our Torah portion this Shabbat, we find our patriarch Jacob, in something of a similar position to Kennedy's. Alone at a river in the darkness at night, Jacob is forced to confront the demons of his past. Previously, Jacob had not been a terribly sympathetic character. After all - he ruthlessly tricked his older brother Esau into relinquishing the birthright and blessing that were rightfully his. Jacob stole from his brother through deceitful manipulation. But now here at the River Yavok, in deafening silence and darkness, he wrestles with his demons, and perhaps as well with the better side of the conscience which God has put within him, and within all of us. As dawn breaks, somehow Jacob is wounded - his hip wrenched from its socket. He emerges from this struggle with a limp, but ironically goes on to lead a more upright and admirable life. Through his struggles, he evolves into a better person. He becomes Israel, the one who struggles with God - and we all become his children as B'nei Yisrael.

Some 4½ years after the assassination of President Kennedy, I was a senior at Music & Art High School. It was June 6th, 1968, and now it was Robert Kennedy's turn to take up the mantle of leadership and assume the presidency so brutally stolen from his brother. Bobby Kennedy was bent with sorrow and had become a far more compassionate individual now. He had evolved into a champion of the poor and the disadvantaged - the outcasts of our society. He was their voice, and their hope - and the hope of so many of all of us. And then, it happened again, in a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles. Another gun, another assassination, another incomprehensible tragedy for our nation, and personally as well, for those of us who trusted him to lead our nation to a better place, and to inspire us all to be better people.

Now while you kids in the 7th grade cannot remember either John or Robert Kennedy, you certainly remember, I am sure, the late president's son, John Kennedy Jr., who was killed two years ago when his small plane went down off Martha's Vineyard, along with his wife and her sister. When this happened, I was despondent. Somehow this was just too much. I was pouring out my heart to a

close friend of mine who is Israeli. Even though this man was in America studying at the time of the Kennedy assassination, he never really understood the attachment that so many Americans seemed to have to the Kennedys, and now why the death of this young man was stirring up such deep sadness for so many of us. So this is a small part of what I told him:

After the relative blandness of the '50's, all of a sudden, a brilliant, dynamic, handsome, energetic man burst on the national stage of presidential politics. He had a young wife and little children. John and Jackie Kennedy brought panache to the White House. They were committed to the arts - and we as musicians benefitted greatly from their devotion and sophistication. But perhaps most important of all was that he could inspire us. He, like his younger brother Bobby after him, somehow communicated to so many of us the most important thing in life - not to lose the ability to hope - to hope - and to believe, in this hope, that if we work hard enough, we can achieve a better world. We can make this country even greater than it is, and in turn inspire the world to better than it is. In short, they made us believe that anything was possible.

So what are we left with now - now that the people who inspired such hope are gone - all of them taken from us in such ghastly ways. We are left with the knowledge that such hope is possible. We can learn from studying the political lives of the Kennedys that we too can evolve into better people. Like our father Jacob, we may have to struggle with the demons within us - with the distractions and temptations all around us - with the very real dangers that surround us in our world. But ultimately our struggles can lead us to a better place in life, and inspire us to work to make this a better country, and a better world. Don't ever lose that hope. Don't ever lose the will to fight against the demons. Don't ever lose your ability to grow and emerge stronger than before. And if you will promise yourselves to engage in this struggle and to cling to your hope, then all of us will promise to do the same. Then, like our father Jacob, we will truly become Israel - the one who struggled, and prevailed.