

Tazria – Metzora 5769 Bruce and Religion

Shabbat Shalom.

One of the joys of being married is learning from your partner. I am particularly blessed to learn from my wonderful wife on many levels; even something simple like music. Sharon opened me up to bands like the Indigo Girls and I shared my love of classic rock and roll. Bands like the Allman Brothers came onto her radar and then her play lists. We were both big fans of Bruce Springsteen, but we never made it to a show when we lived in New York and our last concert was before kids in 1999. So when I heard Bruce was coming to Boston, I knew I had to get us to the show.

The first, challenge was getting tickets. I had not done this in a while, and wasn't even sure how it works these days. I called in as soon as the tickets went on sale, and tried to get them through the internet, but even though I was doing this right at the opening time, I could only get the worst seats behind the stage. Still, I figured I should grab them. Little did I know just last week you could go online and get great seats at the same price. Go figure.

The second challenge as a little more personal. The date of the concert was during the *omer*, a time of mourning when some Jews do not shave (see my short-lived beard) and when Jews traditionally avoid hearing live music. But there is a liberal Conservative Movement *teshuvah* that says after *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day)

one can stop observing the *omer*. And since I really owed this to my wife -- and our seats were not that good anyway -- I figured I should take the liberal position this time.

So, on Wednesday night, April 22, we went.

It was something else – three hours of music, song and a tremendous feeling of joy. Bruce and his band put on an incredible show with a wide assortment of musical styles, vibrant energy and passion, and a deep sense of connection to him and his band. For us, this feeling was fostered by a few special facts. Sharon, a major Sopranos fan (she's a therapist, after all, and could not resist the whole therapy angle of the show) felt close to Bruce's right hand man, Steven Vad Zandt, who played Tony Soprano's right hand man on the show. And he played wonderfully. To add to the experience, a band member proposed and got engaged on stage, and it was magnificent to be there for that event.

So many of Bruce's songs are about justice and people and life that the concert made me think about religion. While Bruce grew up Catholic, I found myself thinking about ancient Judaism, and specifically the service in the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. I started to see similarities between the concert experience and the ancient practices in the *Beit Hamikdash*.

Here's how it breaks down:

Bruce – *Kohen Hagadol*, the High Priest
E Street Band – other priests

Roadies – Levites

Bruce's son Evan, a freshman at Boston College who played drums for a few numbers – the high priest's son
His guitar – like the Ark of old or the Torah over the last 2000 years

Smoke machine – smoke on the altar

People eating and drinking – the community eating the *korbanot*, the sacrifices

People swept away by song – a moment of religious ecstasy

The challenge of getting there and parking or taking the T -
- the difficult trek to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage

Buying souvenirs – buying souvenirs

Now, I could go on and on, but I want to focus on three critical areas of similarity and one fundamental difference.

First, the feeling of hope and optimism. After one of his opening songs, Bruce gave a mini-sermon how we were going to build a house of hope from a house of fear, moving from hate to love, from anger to happiness, from sadness to joy. This resonated so strongly with this week's *haftarah* of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones being brought back to life, and with where we are now on the calendar, between *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* (Israel's Independence Day).

Our rabbis loved to play with words to help people make the sometimes quite subtle change from despair to hope. This week's *parshiyot*, *Tazria* and *Metzora*, deal with *negah* – spelled, nun-gimmel-ayin, a skin ailment, and *tzara'at* – spelled, Tzadeh-reish-ayin- taf, leprosy. But if

you switch the letters around, *negah* becomes *oneg*-joy and *Tzaraat* becomes *Atzeret* - celebration. So we move from these difficult moments to joyous celebration. Similarly on the calendar, we move from *Yom HaShoah* to *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* – a transition that frequently occurs over the week of this *parashah*. In Israel this is felt most keenly, but we should feel it, too, as we go from the deep sorrow of last Tuesday to the joy of *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* this Wednesday.

Another similarity between the concert and Jewish ritual was Bruce's emphasis on cultivating compassion. He gave a powerful speech -- at a rock concert! -- about the Greater Boston Food Pantry. And isn't that also the point of *davening* (of traditional prayer), to move beyond ourselves and think about who and what is really important in our lives. This sense of going beyond oneself reminded me of what Rav Kook, great first chief rabbi of Israel, called the fourfold circles: self, family, our people, and then all humanity.

Our mitzvot, from the mitzvot that are expressly *hesed*- (loving-kindness) related to our rituals, help us to move outside ourselves. Why, for example, do we keep kosher? – Sure, it is to identify with our people -- and eating is a big part of that -- but it's so much more. By forcing us to be mindful of what we eat, *Kashrut* inculcates within us a deep moral lesson about gratitude for the planet and creation. It teaches that something that was once alive (meat) is quite distinct from something that sustains life (milk).

Third the concert, like a worship service, created community. Bruce connected with everyone, even with us, though we were only a few rows from the ceiling. He walked around the stage, looking at almost every one of the 20,000 people there. It felt like he was singing or speaking with you. He went out and touched a boy who was being carried on his father's shoulders and it felt like an incredibly powerful healing moment.

Most of the people knew the words to his songs, especially the more popular ones, and some knew the words to all the songs. It made for wonderful communal singing experience like what it must have been like at the *Beit Hamikdash* – when they chanted *Adonai Hu HaElohim*, which we reenact a bit on Yom Kippur. And like our experience today, when we raised the Torah and sang *Vzot Hatorah* and *Al Shloshah Devarim* or any of the other songs we all know – we are swept up in the experience of being together.

While there was this sense of community, it also had real limitations because this was not a regular experience. As I taught on that Wednesday morning in our breakfast class, *tadir v'she eno tadir, tadir kodeim*, between something that is done regularly and something that is done only occasionally, the regular takes precedence. Which may be opposite of what we might think and do in the modern world, where we tend to privilege the rare events, but it makes sense. This was not a real community building experience – except for Sharon and me, who came together and left together. While I did chat for a moment with the woman next to me, who told me that she had Twittered the

previous night's concert, I would not call that a true getting-to-know-you experience, and that's the real difference.

Real community is not one Bruce concert or even two; it is living in a community. We *daven* as a shul every day and have learning, *hesed*, Israel and social opportunities all the time. Most of all, we build our community right here on Shabbat, when we celebrate together and support each other through our prayers for healing, when we read, learn and study Torah together, when we are inspired to become better people and Jews. Real community is built around the tables over Shabbat lunch at Kiddush or singing songs or bentsching (chanting the grace after meals) after we eat. It is created when we share with each other over a cup of tea or a game of basketball, through the weeks, months and years of being together.

Real community is created in people's homes having conversation about our lives, something that will be part of the community conversation project we are initiating next month in honor of our 50th anniversary year. Look for information online and in the bulletin, and join us!

Shabbat and conversation and regular shul is all *Tadir* – very common – and while it may not be as invigorating as a Springsteen concert, it is in many ways much more special and certainly more important. A real community, our community builds hope, cultivates compassion and sustains us for many years to come.

Shabbat Shalom.