

STEPHEN KRAVIT SPEECH TO MJDS 36TH EVENT MAY 30, 2018

This is the third time I have spoken before a large MJDS group. The first time was a fundraiser in the 90's, maybe for the 18th anniversary. It was a costume party. We know how to have fun at MJDS! I was dressed in my full Brewers uniform from fantasy camp a few years before, where as a fantasy pitcher I wowed them with my 39 mile per hour fastball. My opening line was: "The friends I grew up with would think they were hallucinating if they saw me now, speaking as president of a Jewish school." Maybe because of the baseball uniform too.

The second time I was president of the school addressing the graduating class of 1998, 20 years ago. I said, "I would like to close with some thoughts from those well-known philosophers, the rock group Green Day, from a song called, appropriately enough, Good Riddance:" Maybe some of you here tonight were there then. It goes:

Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road,
time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go,
so make the best of this test and don't ask why,
it's not a question but a lesson learned in time,
it's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right,
I hope you had the time of your life...

It was popular then, chokes me up now. The entire class and even the parents in the congregation began to sing along. That's the power of pop radio when your kids control it. I'll never have that kind of effect in a speech again.

We have established that I am not a baseball pitcher, or a singer, and now you are going to learn that I am not a Jewish scholar, but I am a lawyer, and never afraid to discuss things I am passionate about, so here goes.

I have a short speech tonight. I will be reviewing all of Jewish history. But I'll be brief! Which is what every lawyer lies, and says.

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It starts 5778 years ago on the Jewish calendar, when God created the world. Some number of years later, Abraham came along, accepted that there was but one God, and in so doing, became the first Jew. Let's pause tonight to appreciate that.

Abraham *chose* to accept there was but one God, and thus became the first Jew. Now before I go on, remember I am a lawyer, and here are some disclaimers. My personal Jewish education was forged on the crucible of resentment – my father Hirsh, who was a founder of Temple Shalom but whose yearly service attendance rarely exceeded two hours, had an argument with the Rabbi – who had what has to be the most oxymoronic rabbinic name in Jewish history, Rabbi Pastor – the result of which was our family quit Temple Shalom, which was down the street, and joined Temple Emanuel, which was a two hour school bus ride each way – or so it seemed -- three times a week, twice after school for Hebrew school, and Sunday mornings. Like I said, resentment. Just to rub it in, the bus route always breezed by Temple Shalom on the way. It wasn't all bad, the Fox Point guys got to know and enjoy the Shorewood guys like Jerry Zucker of the movie *Airplane!* who was in my class, and we all ditched class to get ice cream at Riegelman's on Downer.

You get the idea. My Jewish education was flawed. Do not rely on me for ecumenical insight or accuracy. When I came back to Milwaukee after law school, it was to get a great job as a federal prosecutor and train as a trial lawyer. As a single 25 year old Harvard law graduate with a new job and a cool government badge, living a Jewish life wasn't a priority. One fateful Saturday night, February 21, 1976 to be exact, I was with my college buddy Dr. Steve Kagen, then a med student on rotation at Sinai. You may recognize him now as the former U.S. Congressman from Appleton. We were celebrating Havdalah together, you know the end of Shabbat – not really, we were at Morry's on Prospect looking for love. But in our defense, Morry was Morry Katz, who just recently passed by the way, so it was a Jewish pick up bar, and it may have been fate or God's will that my gorgeous wife Anne was there that night with her sister, and 42 years later she is still here, still gorgeous, standing with me.

Anne is younger than me, obviously, but we are both public school kids, both went to Nicolet High School, neither of us had any experience with private or parochial schools. Anne was not born Jewish, but she had a number of Jewish friends, including a best girlfriend and a seventh grade boyfriend. Names are being withheld to protect the guilty. Like many young people today we didn't think much about religious issues as our relationship developed, I know I didn't, and then one day she said she was going to start studying with Dr. Herman Weil, a holocaust survivor and scholar working with Rabbi Silberg at Temple Emanuel, and that she wanted to become a Jew by choice. I recall being ambivalent about this at first, maybe reflecting my own ambivalence about the meaning of being Jewish at the time. But her commitment and interest were real, and she loved her time with Dr. Weil. She wrote a research paper that wasn't graded or for credit, she worked hard on it and learned. What a concept, learning for learning's sake, instead of to get a grade or a degree.

Anne's story is the modern day version of the story of Ruth, the non-Jew who became the first Jew by choice discussed in the Bible because of Ruth's love for Naomi's Jewish family. Rather than remain in her native land when Naomi was to return to Jerusalem, she famously said "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

It was a good call, Anne, because as everyone in this room has heard, Jews are the "Chosen People" of God. Hold the resentment, all you non-Jews out there! Being God's Chosen People has nothing to do with being superior to others or of having a step up on the stairway to Heaven – rather, it has everything to do with the unique, compelling obligations and responsibilities Jews have to their families, communities, and God to make a difference, to follow the right path, to do something with their lives to change the world, big or small.

Those who choose to live life as Jews aren't "chosen" – they are "choosing" -- to live within a moral code, and a system of Jewish ethics that has shaped the world around us and elevated humanity (Jews and non-Jews alike), that is, to follow the right path – the *derech eretz*.

Those who choose to be Jews also take on an affirmative obligation to heal the world – *t'kun alom*. This obligation means there are no Jewish introverts – you must give of yourself to others, in any way large or small that heals the world, whether that is reading to your toddler when you are too tired to move, or arguing for justice in the Supreme Court, it makes no difference. Ask yourself, are you doing something to build a relationship, change a law, right an injustice, heal a wound – or support an amazing school? If so, you are doing *t'kun alom*, changing the world, following the right path -- you are choosing to be Jewish.

Back to Abraham. When he was the only Jew, there could be no argument or dissension. You know the old saying, "Two Jews, Three Opinions." Over the millennia, ethnic and cultural divisions occurred, wars, and political movements led to the great Diaspora in 800 B.C.E., the legendary 12 tribes of Israel dispersed to all corners of the earth. Judaism survived by adapting, and molded to the times and through the language and cultural lens where the Jews lived.

In America in our lifetimes, Jews are segmented into denominations, not necessarily based on where their most recent ancestors lived, but rather based on adherence to different Jewish rituals, texts and traditions: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstruction, and within the Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Lubavitch, Hasidism. Denominational Judaism is complicated by Jews in Israel, where about 30% of the world's Jews reside, and where the legal religion is a form of Orthodox, but not everyone agrees on which form. Like I said, two Jews three opinions.

Navigating common ground between or among Jews is perilous. The question “Who is a Jew” has no universally agreed answer. There is no one set of rituals. For example, if you choose to keep Kosher, there are rules. Not just one set of rules. 1001 rules. I kid you not. There is an official website for Hechsher symbols – those circle k’s or circle u’s that you see on a label that show what is inside is Kosher. There are 1001 Hechsher symbols, the circle k and circle u are just two of them, and each Hechsher represents a different method of determining kosher.

The question “What is Kosher” has 1001 different answers!

So now you are asking yourselves, What does any of this have to do with Milwaukee Jewish Day School? Is the bar still open? Why are they letting a self-confessed ignoramus lecture on Jewish history? And I will give you a trial lawyer’s answer, something I say often when I am taking a deposition and an exasperated witness starts asking me questions: “I’m sorry. I just ask the questions, I don’t answer them.”

If the bar is still open, send one up for me please!

Differences in ritual, level of observance, tradition, dress and even the prayer book to read from led to centuries of inter-denominational conflict in Judaism, and the historic development of Jewish day schools was, until just recently, dedicated and supported only by Orthodox, Conservative or a few Reform denominations.

But then, 36 years ago, spanning just the last .623% of the 5778 years of Jewish history, MJDS was born. A Eureka moment! Doris Shneidman who is here tonight, and other free thinking Jewish idealists around the country had an idea. Why is there all this factionalism inside the Jewish faith? The essential core of Judaism is pristine, powerful and beautiful: *derech eretz*, follow the right path, *t’kun alom*, heal the world. Let’s create a school that gives students an exceptional education; that engages them

in Jewish study and instills in them a love of Jewish learning, values and ethics, develops their critical thinking skills, and helps them attain a joyful, lifelong foundation for positive Jewish identity, leadership and intellectual growth.

The Milwaukee Jewish Day School was born, founded on that powerful, simple mission statement. **The premise of MJDS is post denominational Judaism -- the oxymoron of Jewish Pluralism! There is only one important quality that makes a child or a family eligible for MJDS – they choose to be Jewish and practice some form of Judaism at home.**

The point of my remarks tonight is this:

All Jews today are Jews by choice. It doesn't matter who you were born to or how you were brought up. If we are the "Chosen People" it is because we have chosen to believe in one God, live by the right path, and heal the world. Whether you were born Jewish like I was, fell away, and chose to come back like I did -- through my wife, children and strong association with MJDS; or you are like Anne, or Ivanka Trump, Connie Chung, Anne Meara, Elizabeth Banks (and a long Wikipedia list of other converts) choosing Ruth-like to become a member of the tribe; or however one comes to a strong belief in God, the right path, and doing all you can to heal the world, hand in hand with a group that will march with you all the way to get there, MJDS is here for you – this inclusive, attractive Jewish jewel, happily graduating tomorrow's game changers.

Tonight you have seen and we have celebrated the amazing accomplishments of our 36 years of students, of how extraordinary and advanced the programs are at MJDS today, how the children have a brand new innovation center to do the kind of collaborative learning available in almost no other elementary school anywhere, how dedicated teachers and staff work tirelessly on an individual student basis to offer projects and learning experiences that keep our students excited and energized, and

how my family has experienced first-hand the benefits, the result being the magnificent ladies our daughters have become. Anne and I and the girls credit their 10 formative years at MJDS for their successes today – Dr. Ali the psychologist treating children and young adults in distress; Dr. Jessie the pied piper of dentistry, making a child's visit a pleasant experience; and Katie on a mission, working for Purpose, making what should happen in the public interest look good.

I am pleased to say that Anne and I are not done, my two grandchildren, Ali's children Jack and Hannah will be attending MJDS. Jack will be the first "O'Brien" to attend, joining a long list of other non-traditional Jewish last names over the years.

I leave you with this challenge. The most successful modern program to reach Jewish youth regardless of commitment or affiliation is Birthright Israel, which most of you know offers a completely free guided trip to Israel to any Jewish youth 18 to 26 years old. That program reinforces Jewish identity and pride, and launches leaders.

Tonight, right now, let's establish **BIRTHRIGHT MJDS** – let's work to make our magnificent school completely free and available to any Jewish student pre-K to 8th grade, to give and share with them the opportunity, the framework, the empathy, the learning, the rigor, the fun, the intellectual achievement and the joy of living a Jewish life. Our school already works to accept all students irrespective of ability to pay. That's how to Pay it Forward! That's how to perform *t'kun alom*! Let's start tonight!

Not bad. Nearly six millennia of Jewish history in 10 minutes. The next 36 years will be the most challenging educational environment in human history. Come join us, support us, bring us your children. The pleasure will be all yours.

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I want to thank Anne, Ali, Jessie and Katie, Doris for founding the school, the organizers of this event, Aaron, Jason, Felicia and all of you who have loved and supported MJDS through its formation, infancy and into adulthood. You honor Anne and me, but we honor YOU. You sent your children, you donated, you sold fruits and nuts, you gave of yourselves, and the results are just plain spectacular.

Thank you and Shalom!