

Sermon for HOOCHY Shabbat – Feb. 12th, 2011

By Justin Polgar

Shabbat Shalom and welcome to the HOOCHY led Shabbat morning service. A lot of you may have noticed many new faces today. Well this is because our shul is hosting a Shabbaton for RJCO. RJCO stands for Regional Jewish Communities of Ontario, which is an organization that provides outreach and activities to Jews who live in small Jewish communities. The kids that you see here today come from places like Barrie, Guelph, Oshawa, St. Catherines, Whitby, Ajax and other small towns. This weekend is an event where Jewish youth from these places get together for a weekend to meet new Jewish people, to learn about Judaism and to have fun. For all of us in RJCO it is important to go to these events because growing up in a small Jewish community can be tough, so RJCO is a great opportunity to be able to meet more Jewish kids. Another advantage of going to RJCO is the educational component. Each year RJCO has a different theme; this year is centered on the holocaust. During our last RJCO Shabbaton we had a man from Austria come to talk to us about how countries, such as Poland, Austria and others have built memorials in memory of those that perished during the Holocaust. This Shabbaton we will be learning about the March of the Living as well as hearing the story of Bianka Kraszewski, a holocaust survivor who is a member of our congregation.

For me, growing up in a small Jewish community and being the only Jew in my class made me feel special and different, but in a good way. I always loved telling my peers about Judaism because they would always listen and ask me questions about it. When I was little...er I told my friends about the holidays, nothing serious, but as we grew older the topics became more serious like the holocaust and the conflicts in Israel. I always liked telling my friends I was Jewish but recently I have had to reconsider telling some people about my religion to avoid anti-Semitic comments toward Jews. These days at school it's common to hear people calling others "Jew" as an insult, sometimes as a joke, but still an insult. I constantly hear this and it really annoys me, so, for me, I usually have an action plan to stop all of this. After I hear an anti-Semitic remark, I first confront that person right there and then ask them a lot of "Why did you say that?" type of questions. They usually respond with a lot of "uhh I don't know" or "uhh sorrys". So the conversation usually leaves the other person feeling embarrassed, and later on I confront the person again and say sorry for the whole interrogation from before. I ask them politely this time to not make any anti-Semitic remarks like that again. Secondly I try to educate the person by bringing up conversations about Judaism because what I have found, is that the more people know me and about Judaism, the less they make anti-Semitic remarks.

But when I have met people who have never met a Jew before and know nothing about Judaism, it seems to be almost second nature to use "Jew" as an insult. I think it's important not to let remarks like this pass. It's not just with me that this happens – because every time I get together with a group of Jews from HOOCHY or RJCO, we seem to all have this problem in common. We all have multiple stories about being made fun of because of our religion, or even having pennies thrown at us. These

experiences have made us realize that it's not okay to use a person's religion, race, sexuality or mental abilities as an insult, even as a joke. It still hurts. We need to address these things and not let them slide – we need to educate people about diversity.

Also, living in such a small Jewish community, it's more difficult to be a Jew. What do I mean by difficult? I have to take more responsibility for my Judaism and doing so with pride. So many of my friends and neighbours would be Jewish if I lived in a larger Jewish community, like Toronto. I could walk down the street and see Hebrew writing on buildings and store fronts. We could go into a store and buy Jewish food, eat at Jewish restaurants, see mezuzot on many doors, and see anything BUT Christmas lights on houses in December. And I wouldn't have to go to synagogue to feel Jewish – but here in Oakville, if I didn't go to the synagogue and Hebrew school, I would have nothing. My Judaism would be totally forgotten. Because I live in this small Jewish community, I need to look for opportunities to immerse myself in Jewish activities. So, groups like RJCO have allowed me to meet other Jews who experience the same things as I have. Our own HOOCHY youth group, has many wonderful events – for example, this year we've had a Limo Scavenger hunt, a swimming party, classes and dinner with the Rabbi, and we're going on a trip to Boston in the spring. Also every year since I was 8 years old, I could hardly wait for the summer to go back to Camp George. This is one of my favorite places to go because of the great people, activities, surroundings and counselors. It also gives me the opportunity to experience daily living within a large Jewish community. There are also many Israelis that come to George in the summer to experience our camp for themselves and to teach us about Israel and tell us their stories.

Ever since I surrounded myself (or my mother has surrounded me) as much as possible with other Jewish people, activities and communities, I have had the urge to learn about Israel, which has lead to my doing many projects and speeches in school about Israel. So much so, that I have decided to learn firsthand and am planning to spend a semester in grade 11 on EIE – the Eisendrath Israel Exchange – program in Israel. I know a number of people who went on this program, including many from Camp George and both Jonny and Zach Newburgh from here, Shaarei-Beth El. I have only ever heard positive things about this program and I am excited – actually, I can't wait!

So, being a young Jewish person in Oakville has had its ups and downs. But if you really want to feel Jewish in a small community where it's so difficult, then you have to find the opportunities and make it happen for yourself. Whether it's speaking up for yourself, joining the local Jewish youth group, gathering with Jews from other communities, going to Jewish camps, connecting yourself to Israel, educating yourself, educating others, or going to classes with the Rabbi, there are always ways to make you feel Jewish in any type of community. You just have to go that extra mile and make it happen.