

Wake Up and Dream:
A Sermon to the Confirmands

Consecration 5765

May 13, 2005

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

My Confirmands, at this moment, I feel like the character Fred in Monty Python's marvelous Broadway show, *Spamalot*, which we all so enjoyed only a month ago. It was also just nominated for 14 Tony awards, by the way.

Anyway, the narrator tells us that the year is 932 A.D. and that with numerous kingdoms already suffering from the plague, there is still a 50% chance "of pestilence and famine coming out of the Northeast at 12 miles per hour."

Shortly after the show begins, a number of the plague's apparent victims are rolled on stage in a wooden cart as Robin calls, "Bring out your dead!"

Lancelot enters, dragging another victim. It's old Fred. Only poor Fred's not ready to be declared a casualty.

"I'm not dead!" he announces to Robin.

Robin tells Lancelot, "He says he's not dead."

But Lancelot insists, "Yes, he is dead!" Fred responds with his little song:

I am not dead yet
 I can dance and I can sing
 I am not dead yet
 I can do the highland fling
 I am not dead yet
 No need to go to bed
 No need to call the doctor
 'cause I'm not yet dead.

And with that, the four "victims" on the cart suddenly sit up and conveniently become Fred's chorus, singing:

He is not yet dead
 That's what the geezer said
 Oh he's not yet dead
 That man is off his head
 He is not yet dead
 Put him back in bed
 Keep him off the cart because
 he's not yet dead.

Anyway, though the sand of the hourglass is all but run out, and nothing remains of our Confirmation time together beyond Sunday afternoon's service, like poor Fred, "I'm not dead yet"! I still have tonight's sermon to try my best to penetrate your teenage defenses and urge you to wake up and dream!

I don't want to sound like that guy from the beginning of *Pretty Woman*, but I need to say outright, "Everybody ought to have a dream." In one of my favorite poems, Thomas Beddoes asks you this timely question:

If there were dreams to sell,
 What would you buy;
 Some cost a passing bell;
 Some a light sigh,
 That shakes from life's crown
 Only a roseleaf down,
 If there were dreams to sell,
 Merry and sad to tell,
 And the crier rung the bell,
 What would you buy?

I hope you know that we Jews are a dreaming people. Abraham and Sarah dreamt; Jacob and Joseph had their famous Biblical dreams; and so have many others of our Jewish past.

You see, to be more than a Jew by accident – I mean to be a really thoughtful Jew – is to cherish a worthy, redeeming personal dream that we embrace with our souls and do our best to realize...

To be a Jew often means participating in the most elevating aspects of our society's scientific, artistic, and civic life. It means living our lives at the highest selfless and moral discipline. We Jews are called by our tradition to not just be, but to be a blessing!

I know that your parents have told you this over and over again. They want you to set your goals as high as possible.

Your Confirmation day occurs in the post-September 11th world. What I am going to say to you, I probably wouldn't have imagined saying in the same way, at least to the Confirmation classes prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Everything is different now. We see things reframed and reinterpreted – a new reality, as it were.

We are now firsthand veterans of terrorism. The deaths of thousands of innocent Americans in the name of Islamic fundamentalism have left us vulnerable. But, where do we go from here? Of this you must be certain: our Judaism is an optimistic faith that has so much to teach in all times and seasons of both world events and personal experience.

This world of ours is still a beautiful place and overwhelmingly, the people who share our planet with us want nothing other than what we dream of: a safe and happy life for themselves and their children.

So, don't be imprisoned by fear! Prepare yourself for the arrival of a great dream, because it's on its way to grab hold of your imagination!

This dream will knock on the door of your consciousness at the most unexpected and, sometimes, inopportune moment. Your dream may well transform and change through the years – most people's do, in fact. But, listen: remain open to wonderful and worthy avenues of possibility for your future. That's all I'm trying to say.

But, let me mention something else about living this life with your eyes open. File this under, "Rabbi Cohn's view of reality."

I.

What do you think you deserve in life? Do you think you deserve to be the last survivor on the island, to get the final rose, or to be chosen as Donald Trump's next apprentice? Well, too bad. Sometimes, we're first to be kicked off the island, and often we don't even get to the door of the boardroom, let alone get fired.

It sounds peculiar, but we often think we deserve better than we get in life. We say:

Listen, if life is fair, I ought to get more, simply
because I deserve it.

The problem is, life often isn't fair. You heard it here first!

If life were absolutely fair, we wouldn't have many of the gifts we treasure: our good looks, our intelligence, our health, our talents, and their benefits. Those are all things that so many other people around the world can only dream of enjoying. We didn't earn these things. They came to us as a gift of grace.

II.

When we figure that life ought to bring us only success and rewards just because we're entitled, what happens when we don't get what we think we deserve?

I can tell you now and save you the trouble. We get offended and disappointed. We grieve.

I've heard it said that the world is like a building in which half of us think we are living in a prison, and half believe we are living in a five star hotel.

Believe it or not, those who think of life as a prison can't get over how good things usually are for them. And those who think they're living in a five star hotel are often complaining about the room service. So you see, a lot in life often comes down to our expectations.

Think of the great names of our people throughout history– our “survivors” and their “apprentices,” if you will. What did Moses expect from all his dutiful shepherding of his stiff-necked people? He didn’t even take one step into the Promised Land.

How about the righteous, blameless victims of the Holocaust? What about Anne Frank? Did she get her due in life? How about Pol Pot’s victims in the Cambodian killing fields? Or what about those who died in the Soviet Gulag or in Saddam Hussein’s prisons? Give yourself bonus points if you were even aware of those events.

So what shall I say to you as you prepare to chart your own course through this bright, big world of ours?

- For goodness sake, dream big.
- Risk it all to become your biggest and best self.
- What you are is God’s gift to you, but what you will become will be your gift to God. Be grateful and dutiful!
- Remember we are privileged with so much that we have not earned.
 - 1) Did you earn the love of these wonderful people who care for you so unconditionally?
 - 2) We stand on the shoulders of those who preceded us – those who fought for our freedom, as well as those who struggled to bring us knowledge of technology, philosophy, and science. We are their unmerited heirs.
 - 3) When we give up a sense of entitlement, we begin to realize how much we owe.

Max Birenbaum asks us each to make up our minds. Are you a guest in life, or are you a host? People are fundamentally one or the other.

It’s clear that from the outset, every one of us is a guest at a table we did not set. But, Birenbaum says if we live worthily and with maturity, we must evolve into hosts.

You see how life works? First, you hold onto a dream for yourself and you work, work, work like crazy to make it happen. Because, you understand that: Getting what we deserve replaces the childish notion that we deserve what we get.

During the War of 1812, President John Adams wrote his wife Abigail a letter wherein he expressed an important thought. It has been quoted by subsequent presidents and even by Winston Churchill during the darkest days of World War II. John Adams confessed to his wife:

We cannot guarantee success in this war, but we can do something better. We can deserve it. We can be worthy of our success.

That’s how you and I should try to live. The poet described such lofty living when he wrote of those now gone: “The left the vivid air signed with their honor.”

May each one of you be a life-long dreamer. And, don't you ever think of leaving this world until you have sung that song that your loving God has given each one of you to sing! Life is more than an adventure – it is a privilege. So, earn it!

Amen