

Fishing on Yom Kippur - A Short Story

by Jon Zalaznick | Oct 19, 2011 |

"How long are we-"

"Shhh," my Dad whispers back. "He does the sermon, then the Torah reading, then we're home."
"Thank you," I nod. As I turned back towards the bimah, out of the corner of my eye I noticed something strange. At the back of the room, a congregant was frantically waving her arms, trying to grab the Rabbi's attention.

Catching the entire congregation off guard, the rabbi stops his sermon and looks towards the back of the room at the flailing woman. Almost immediately, he runs off down the aisle, his right arm extended towards her. As he reaches her, she puts an open cell phone in his outstretched hand, and we sit and watch as the two of them exit the doorway. I turn back towards the front of the room only to see the student Cantor unsure of what to make of the situation and the crowd getting anxious and confused. Before I could think to say anything, my dad starts nudging me out of my chair, "Jon, you've got to go do something."

Go do something? "Such as"

"I don't know, you're Mr. Creative," he shrugs. "Go up there and stall."

"You want me to stall an entire congregation on the morning of Yom Kippur? What would I"

"It's Yom Kippur and the rabbi is a family friend. Clearly there's an emergency."

"Yes, but"

"No buts," he points towards the bimah. "You'll figure something out."

I look at him to see if he's serious. But as I see his face, I slowly realize that he's right. I'm only 20 years old, but I get that a friend needs help. I guess there's a reason for these High Holy Days, isn't there?

I stand up and begin walking toward the bimah, each step echoing through the sanctuary. My natural fear of public speaking is amplified by the fact that my audience is comprised solely of hungry Jews, forced to spend the day with their in-laws.

Taking my spot on the bimah behind the podium, I angle the microphone towards me. The slight crackle on the speakers almost immediately returns the crowd to its default High Holy Day silence and I look out on the congregation. I grab the podium firmly as if I were delivering my Inauguration Speech in front of the Capitol Building.

"The rabbi said he'd be right back and asked if I could say a few words"

Great, it's Yom Kippur and I'm kicking off with a lie.

"Uhm I don't uh" Think Jon. Say something honest. How bad could you be if you're just honest?

"I don't have anything truly profound to say. I'm not uh I'm not going to say something this morning that you don't already know."

Wow, that's weak. You need to find a better voice than this. Just tell a joke. Go from there.

"Earlier in the week, I was I was sitting in the library with a friend of mine, Nick. Nick isn't Jewish - not a religious guy at all actually. And at one point, he looks up from his textbook and whispers to me, *Hey Jon, when's Yammer Kippry?*

A few laughs.

"That's the holiday your people celebrate, right? When you guys don't eat so that you can be absolved? Like a big Jewish Confession, right?"

"Yeah, I answered him. Close enough."

"He nods back and asks, So, when is that anyway?"

"This Saturday, I tell him."

"YES!" he responds by throwing a celebratory fist bump in the air.

"I had to ask him, Why are you so excite-

"He cut me off, It's on a weekend."

"Yeah. Sure So"

"Lot of smart Jews out there Way I figure, you guys probably have this religion thing all figured out right"

"Nick," I laughed, "Just because you believe in some stereotype doesn't mean"

"He stops me. Jewish holiday Jewish god I'm betting you guys get great weather Perfect for fishing."

The congregation laughed harder, and I began to find my groove.

"It's funny when you get to laugh on Yom Kippur," I smiled. "Last Yom Kippur, I didn't have the privilege to come back home for services. Tests and papers kept me up at school, and I kind of missed out on the whole experience; seeing family and friends, sneaking food when Mom isn't looking, watching the football game on TV - the Essentials"

More laughter

"But," I sighed. "Next best thing was the Hillel service. I don't even think I was going to go, but my buddy Nate insisted. So, there we were, sitting at the back of the service, trying not to fall asleep."

"To tell you the truth," I continued, "I don't remember the service too well. I remember it being long. I remember checking my watch and asking Nate what time break-fast was but the service isn't what I remember best. What I remember was the walk from the service to break-fast."

"I remember leaving Ne'ila and speaking with my friend Nate," I smiled. "He was cracking jokes on how he didn't understand the point of fasting. "My favorite part of it was" I paused to remember the quote. *"Jon, I believe in God. You believe in God. So what are we doing starving ourselves?"*

"God wouldn't forgive us? How could he not forgive us? It's Yom Kippur."

More laughs.

"Nate was always a funny guy he was always saying things like that. He, uh I remember when we entered the break-fast room, he started cracking up at the sight in front of us. I asked him what was so funny and he said *Jon, we've been tricked.*

"I didn't get what he was referring to and asked him to explain."

"I just realized what we are all doing here," he laughed.

"What are we?"

"He cut me off, We've all gathered here, looking our best, to surround ourselves with gorgeous Jewish women."

The congregation went hysterical.

I waited for the crowd to calm down and continued. "I of course tried to play it off. *No, no, no, I wasn't staring at* But Nate knew me too well.

"Think about it, he said. This is an event designed by your mother, Jon."

I paused as the crowd turned their faces to see my Mom as she was laughing and trying to stop herself from blushing.

"We are being offered the chance to mingle with future college-grad, pretty Jewish girls that don't need to be forced to attend High Holy Day services Clearly, your mother is playing a much bigger game than we know."

The congregation goes into uproar as my mom nearly ducks behind her prayer book, hiding her beat red expression.

"But that was Nate for you just having a good time..."

I paused and watched as the rabbi silently appeared in the doorway of the sanctuary and waived to me slightly as if to say that he was ready to take back the podium. I began to conclude, "Truth is, I haven't thought about Nate in months."

"See unfortunately, Nate died not too long ago. He went swimming in a lake over the summer and drowned," I paused trying to stop myself from tearing up. "Kind of sudden, I thought at the time. One minute he's here, the next I'm getting a phone call with the bad news.

"But yeah," I sighed. "Guess it's easy to see why would you'd want to forget. Why you'd want to focus on other things and not dwell on" I choked up. "But last week, talking with Nick, reminded me of him. It reminded me of that silly little concept - laughing on the most solemn day of the year."

"So," I looked out at the congregation. "Think of Yom Kippur not as a solemn day of quiet reflection, but as a day surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones

"And when you are with people you love, you should never miss an opportunity to laugh"

"In fact, you may have to make those memories last you a lifetime."

I nodded towards the Rabbi indicating that he should come back to the bimah and I started walking back towards my seat. As our paths crossed, he patted me on the back and then regained his place on the bimah.

My dad gave me a solid nod as I took my seat, and we watched as the rabbi grabbed the podium as I had only moments ago. Rabbi smiled, looked right at me from the bimah and then turned to the rest of the congregation, "And if there is anyone else here that needs to make a phone call during the service, please go right ahead." The congregation chuckled.

"And if this call comes from a friend," he turns towards the windows and looks out on the sun shining, "Remind them that it's a great day to fish."

(Dedicated to the memory of Nathaniel Rand, 1989 - 2011)
