

Rabbis recreate biblical characters during Global Day of Jewish Learning



From left, Rabbis Howard Needleman (David), Arnold Samlan (Solomon), Cheryl Weiner (Ruth), Gideon Goldenholz (Jacob) and Jeffrey Salkin (Franz Rosenzweig). (Staff photo/Todd Roller)

By Marvin Glassman
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Five Broward County rabbis teamed to recreate biblical characters in the program "All You Need Is Love" as the 2015 Global Day of Jewish Learning took place recently at Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El in Plantation, coordinated by the Orloff Central Agency for Jewish Education.

The GDOJL was conceived to mark the completion of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's monumental translation of the Talmud in 2010. According to Judy Asuleen, Orloff CAJE director of Education, 2015 marks a milestone in which 400 communities from more than 40 countries are participating in the event.

What was especially novel about the 2015 program was seeing the local rabbis becoming actors in discussing the meaning of love dressed and speaking as Jewish heroes and thinkers from throughout the ages.

"What is especially relevant as a teacher is to see the quotes from biblical characters become more vivid and expressive by recreating the historical figures," said Rabbi Cheryl Weiner, a community educator, who acted and dressed as Ruth.

Joining Weiner as Ruth on the panel discussion of historical figures commenting on what love is and is not were: Rabbi Gideon Goldenholz of Temple Sinai of Hollywood who was Jacob, Rabbi Howard Needleman of Temple Kol Ami Emanu-el as King David, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of Temple Solel as Franz Rosenzweig and Rabbi Arnold Samlan, executive director, Orloff CAJE as King Solomon. Rabbi Akiva Mann, a frequent CAJE lecturer and director of the Institute of Jewish Knowledge and Learning was the moderator.

Each rabbi brought a different perspective of what love is and means from the era of Jewish history that each character represented.

"Life was not easy for me as Saul tried to kill me when he knew I would be king," said King David (Needleman).

"I expressed love through my songs that were played with my harp. I wanted to unify all the different tribes together as I had difficult children. I had the love of my brothers and that is the love I wanted to inspire through my psalms, and create love through unity through my messages," said King David.

As Franz Rosenzweig, the German Jewish philosopher of the early 20th century, prior to the rise of Nazism, Salkin noted that love is from the Hebrew word Ahava.

"Love is not emotion or eroticism. Love means that I exist. Love also means that I am in a covenant with you," said Rosenzweig.

Rosenzweig died of Lou Gehrig's disease prior to age 30 and, despite his physical handicaps, stresses the importance of what love is, influenced by existentialism and Martin Buber.

"Ahava or love is about how to be giving, but for someone who hates me, Ahava may have limits," said Jacob (Goldenholz)

"I have to be forgiving and accept others, but I must also be ready to defend myself to those who hate me and prepare for war in case it is needed," said Jacob.

King Solomon interpreted love to be compassion and to be so compassionate that one may spare one life's for another.

"I am known for my wisdom. When two women made claim to a child as their son, I suggested that the child be divided in half. The woman, who truly loved her child, made the compassionate sacrifice to renounce her claim to spare the life of the child. I had love shown to me by the compassion of the woman who renounced her claim. A mother who made that choice is the one that showed love," said Solomon (Samlan).

Perhaps the biblical character that resonated best with the audience was Ruth.

Unlike the other biblical characters, Ruth indicated her love for freely choosing Judaism and freely caring for her mother in law.

"I was revered by Jews to be called the mother of royalty. As I told my mother in law, where you go, I will go and followed her to the end of her days. There is a great legacy of love to those who choose to be part of your tribe (Judaism)," said Ruth (Weiner).

"For those who wish to be Jews, we act through love. For those who love Judaism, we say come to us, join us and become one with us. As women, we love with Hesed (translated from Hebrew as "kindness").

Each of the biblical characters took questions, responding to what love means in the contemporary era. One interesting question brought up the dilemma of how to show love regarding the Syrian refugees, given the recent tragedies in France.

"Love means giving someone a chance, not to give a clear message that those who look like evil will do evil. We have to be careful between when it is right to protect ourselves and when we are doing harm to the innocent," said Ruth.

"I am very practical. I say forgive and trust, but also prepare to defend yourself and be cautious, as we must always be ready to defend ourselves," said Jacob.

"The program was so educational and entertaining as well. Dressed and acting as the biblical characters, I had a deeper understanding of the concept of love through the biblical eras of Jewish history," said Holly Lerner of Weston, who attended the event.

To learn about upcoming events from the Orloff Central Agency For Jewish Education, 5890 S. Pine Island Road in Davie, call 954-660-2074 or go to www.orloffcaje.org