

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5775
Family Service – Rabbi Jonathan Aaron

Shlomo’s “If not now, When?”

An “If not now, when?” moment can occur at any time: It is when opportunity meets ability, or when a passion is first recognized; It can be when you see a wrong going on between people, or a wrong going on in the world. “If not now, when?” could occur while you are walking down the street, or in an intense conversation with a close friend or family member. It can happen when you are a small child or a mature adult. Sometimes we may seize the moment, and come to the aid of someone in trouble or pursue a direction in life we had always wanted to pursue. But I imagine that for many of us, these moments come upon us, and then go without anything changing, without anything happening. We are going to spend some time thinking and talking about this idea. So let us get started with an “If not now, When?” story.

A long time ago, at a faraway land, in a town called Niniveh there was a boy named Shlomo. He grew up in the town, and there was something about this town that was different than any other in the world. You see, Nineveh was a perfect town. The streets were clean, there was no pollution, there were no homeless, and no one was starving. There was no crime. In fact, there wasn’t even a police force, because there were no disputes, and the old police station had been turned into a museum centuries before. The cause of this perfection goes far back into the lore of Nineveh, into Biblical times, when the prophet Jonah showed up and said: “Hey everyone, you guys are really bad people, and God is going to destroy this place in 40 days if you don’t shape up and turn from your evil ways! If not now, when?” And the King of Nineveh (there were Kings in those days) took it very seriously and answered: “Yo, yo, we can’t be mean to each other any more, no more violence, we’ve got only 40 days turn ourselves around, or it’s the end of us all! If not now, when folks?!!!” From that moment on, everyone in Nineveh treated each other with respect and civility. No one gossiped, no one stole, no one lied, no one did anything to hurt anyone else. And then something fantastic happened. The people had a lot of time on their hands – because being mean and angry and hurting others took a lot of time and energy – and the people took that time and started to help others in the town. Helped them get jobs, have a place to stay, and the town started to build buildings with services to help others. And all that negative energy was transported to positive energy, and the town, for hundreds and hundreds of years, developed into the most perfect place on earth.

But Shlomo was troubled. He knew that Nineveh wasn’t the only town in the whole world, and he had an itchy feeling that all towns weren’t like his, but he had never been out of Nineveh. He wanted to travel around and see other places and what the world was like, but he was only 13, and he wasn’t old enough to go off on his own. And it wasn’t the way of his parents, or any of the other Nineveh citizens to go off and travel. No Ninevite had left the town for years and years, the last one being

Reuven Halak, one of Shlomo's ancestors, who left the town in 1120, and never returned.

With all of this swirling around in Shomo's head, he made his way downtown to bring his father some lunch at his blacksmith shop, where even the horses waited patiently in line for their horseshoes. Through the years he had seen many foreigners come through Nineveh. Usually peddlers were found in their wagons selling goods to the many stores that lined the downtown streets. Anyone who ever did business in Nineveh knew two things: they would always be treated with a smile, and they would always get a fair price. On this day, just as Shlomo was walking past the General Store, and the store's owner, Jonah, threw him a shiny apple just as he always did as Shomo passed his store on the way to his father's place, a big black carriage carried by four huge black horses, pulled up to the General Store. A large burly bearded man popped open the side door and squeezed himself through the door and landed with a big grunt. At that moment, two boys from the store came running out to the back of the carriage to help him unload his goods. The man shouted, "Get your hands off of my stuff!!!" and pushed them both down on the ground "No one touches anything until I get my money for it!!" Everyone in the street stopped and gasped, two men and three women rushed to the boys to pick them up and brush them off. Shlomo, who was standing right near the boys stopped in his tracks and stared at the man. "What are you looking at, boy? You better stop starin' or you'll get yours, too." Before Shlomo had a chance to respond, the man slapped him across his cheek with the back of his hand, sending Shlomo to the ground. "See that, that's what you get for starin'!!" By this time, others had gathered around, and three people rushed to Shlomo's aid and pulled him up and away from the scene. Shlomo heard Jonah tell the man, "Sir, your business is not wanted here. There is no place for a brigand and a bully. Nineveh is a place for good, honest, and upright citizens. We don't do business with anyone who is less than that." Everyone else agreed with Jonah and urged the man to leave right away. By the time Shlomo was seated in the butcher shop with a big steak over half of his face, the man had disappeared, and about a dozen people were standing over him making sure that he was alright. "How are those other boys doing?" Shlomo asked. "Oh, they're fine, just a little dirt on their pants. But we're worried about you. We've called for your mom and dad." "Who was that man? Where did he come from?" Shlomo asked the crowd. Mayor Melek, who was one of those who helped him into the butcher shop answered. "He's one of those from outside, who doesn't understand how to act towards others in the world. He is what you can run into, outside. I'm sorry you had to see that, son."

Shlomo wasn't sorry, at that moment he became determined, determined to go out and convince everyone that there was another way to live, just like he had learned growing up in Nineveh. He took off the steak, and said, "Thank you all for your help, I'll be going home now." And off he went, even before his parents had the chance to arrive. He made his way back home to an empty house, his family had all gone into town to see how he was. He took the money he had been saving for years, out of an old sock, and grabbed some food from the cupboard and headed down the old west

road out of town. Nineveh, as you may have remembered, was a very large town, it took him a whole day to arrive at the border of Nineveh. He looked around and didn't see a soul. He closed his eyes and he said to himself out loud, "I am now leaving Nineveh to spread the word. I am going to find places that need the message that was given to us all those years ago. "Turn from your ways! If not now, when?" I will ask them. I hope I am successful." And with that, Shlomo was on his way.

This year, we want to explore, "If not now, when?" And just as we confess our sins on Yom Kippur every year, we are going to reflect and find our "If not now, whens" in our personal hearts, and amidst community. We want you to identify the "If not now, whens?" of your life. During this High Holy Day period, take the time to reflect upon this idea. It's a different kind of reflection, because in many ways it's not about the way we have behaved in the past, but how we want to behave in the future. If not now, when will you do that thing you always wanted to do, when will you take that time you need, or give the time you need to give to others. I don't know, could even be if not now, when will you call your mother, or brother, or old friend. It could be as simple as when will I finally cut and color my hair, to when will I finally forgive something I've held onto for decades.

Here are cards. We'd like you to fill one out and bring it back tomorrow or Friday at services. If you'd like to do this as a family activity, what a fantastic discussion to start the new year. We'd like to take what our congregation writes on those cards, and reflect it back in a video that will list our congregations hopes and dreams for themselves. The video will be played during the silent time between the afternoon story sharing service and N'ilah, as people come forward to spend a moment in front of the ark. I am eager to discover what it is we all really care about, and what troubles us.

Please take the time to think through your "If not now, When?" answers, and share them with us this year.