Good Yuntif, Good Yuntif...

A Rabbi was walking along the boardwalk in Rehoboth Beach and saw one of his congregants, a pious and learned man sitting at an outdoor restaurant. The rabbi thought he’d say hello and maybe sit down for a beer, but as he got closer, he was horrified to see that this congregant was busy smashing crabs with a mallet and popping the succulent meat into his mouth.

The rabbi couldn’t believe what he was watching. Out comes the waiter with a plate of shrimp and oysters and as the congregant starts to slurp them down, the rabbi has had enough. He comes running up to the table and shouts, shmendrick! What are you doing?

The congregant nearly chokes on a piece of shrimp, but quickly regains his composure.

“Rabbi”, he says, “Have you been watching me this whole time?”

Yes!

Did you see the waiter bring me this food?

I did!

"And did you see me eat it?"

“Yes, I saw everything!”

“Then, Rabbi, I don’t see the problem here. The entire meal took place under strict Rabbinical supervision!”

You know what the rabbi did next? (Take out mallet!) He grabbed the crab mallet and knocked himself upside the head.

My family and I were so blessed to get away this summer to Rehoboth Beach for a few days. I was walking down the boardwalk when I ran into someone I knew from the Orthodox community of Baltimore. He was munching on something that wasn’t quite kosher. Kosherish, but not quite. I walked up to say hi. I just wanted to kibbitz, who am I to judge?

Well, he sees me and has a moment of horror as he realizes he’s been caught red handed by a rabbi. I said, “Hey!!”. What do you think he said to me? Not “hi” or “good to see you”, he says, “Hey rabbi, you ever try this, it’s delicious, it must be kosher!”

Later that night I was lying in bed and thinking about the funny situation. It really tickled me. What a perfect Jewish moment. He was caught between his desire for tradition and desire for freedom from tradition, all sprinkled with a heavy dose of guilt.

I don’t have anything against what he did. I think it’s extremely healthy to experience internal tension between our traditions and our desire to try new things and expand our horizons. One of the most important choices we make in our lives is how we strike a balance between adherence to tradition and feeling free to do whatever we like.

This is not just a decision of how Judaism influences our life, even though all of Judaism is a tradition. The “tradition” I’m talking about here is not tradition as in minhag- like something that’s not a law but just a tradition. What I mean is the sum total of all we’ve received from our teachers whether they be rabbis, parents, grandparents, a book, or the TV. And I’m not just talking about Judaism. There are American traditions. Being a Baltimorean is a tradition.
From yelling O! in the national anthem to our love of rainbow cake…I’m going to stick with rainbow cake and not that other kind of traditional Baltimore cake. From saying “ambulaaance” to calling our grandparents “mom mom” and “pop pop”. These are all traditions- as in things we’ve been taught or learned to do.

Many times, traditions don’t have a clear reason and sometimes, they even run counter to our perception of what makes sense or what we desire. I feel like sleeping in, but tradition tells me I have to get up and go to minyan (at least that’s what my wife told me this morning). I follow tradition against my body’s desires. Does it make rational sense to have a wedding or a party where the food costs much more and doesn’t even taste as good just so it can be a “kosher event”?

No, but in that case, many have decided that the tradition is more important than what makes sense.

We all need to balance our traditions with our desire for individualism and freedom. Otherwise, we’d all act the exact same. Some groups lean more heavily on the side of traditions and spurn personal freedom. Others think that anything traditional is old, stuffy superstitious nonsense. Most of us try to strike a balance between these two opposite ideals and doing so carries inherent tension and struggle.

Our Synagogue’s identity as Modern Orthodox is an example of this tension. Are we modern and free from the shackles of the past, or are we Orthodox and bound by our traditions?

The answer is that our shul lives in the middle of two competing values, and the tension they produce spawns creativity and growth.

Sometimes though, I think people lose sight of this delicate balance between freedom and tradition and lean too far to one side.

I’ll give you an example:

Sometimes, when I’m done with shul on a Shabbos afternoon, I’ll want to do something really mindless... so I read the Baltimore Sun. I was excited to stumble upon an article about a wedding between two young Jews at the Suburban Club. I was reading the article hoping it would reveal which rabbi did the ceremony. I didn’t find any rabbi mentioned but I did find this: the final few lines of the article: “When asked what the highlight of the wedding was, the bride replied, ‘the hit of the night was the candied bacon.

It was at all the bars and people were piling it on their burgers” . And that was the end of the article. The highlight wasn’t the ceremony, or the friends and family, or the dancing and joy, it was the candied bacon. 20 years from now, I hope this couple still enjoys the memory of their candied bacon.

Now don’t get me wrong. I enjoy candied bacon as much as the next rabbi, but it’s not the highlight of my wedding! But that’s what can happen when you totally lose sight of tradition.

On the other side of things, many would argue that our shul clings too strongly to tradition. Besides bathrooms and locker rooms, is there any other place in our lives that we are divided by gender? Even most dorms at universities are now coed.

Why do we cling to the tradition of having a mechitza? I’ve been told that if the shul had mixed seating, we’d have many new congregants and be able to impact a wider range of Jews.

And yet, you’re here. And I want to take a moment to thank you deeply for that. Thank you for attending our traditional Modern Orthodox shul. MMAE is like the little engine that could. No one thought we could make it. But we know we can. You fill these halls and sanctuary with life!
Everyone here has obviously made a decision that balanced the ancient tradition of separate men’s and women’s prayer spaces with their modernist desires and egalitarian attitudes. You leaned toward tradition and the proof is that you are here.

On the other hand, I think most of us are deeply offended by recent cases where tradition has gone off the deep end and drowned out the voice of modernity and reason. Buses in Jerusalem where women have to sit in the back, or not letting women pray together at the Western Wall are just a few examples.

Just as society must find the proper balance between tradition and freedom, so must we all individually.

We live in a world that increasingly values change and innovation. These can both be holy forces that push to world to evolve and help us grow as people. Yet at the same time, the stronger the winds of change are blowing, the more important it is for us to be anchored in our traditions.

As we learn the newest app or mean of communication, whether twitter, facebook, or constant texting, let’s not forget to take the time to call our grandparents or put down our phones when we’re with our families.

How can tradition help us navigate this increasingly complicated and busy world?

For the answer to that, I’m going to turn to the words of one of the most famous and holy Jews of the last century- Tevye the Milkman.

And how do we keep our balance?

That I can tell you in one word: Tradition!

Song!!! Choir

Because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years.

Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything.

For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl.

This shows our constant devotion to God.

You may ask, how did this tradition get started?

I’ll tell you...I don’t know. But it’s a tradition.

And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

Song!!! Choir

Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as, as...as a fiddler on the roof.

Song!!! Choir

Let’s give a cheer for our choir!

I want to repeat one of Tevye’s lines:

“Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”
To me, that is the most important thing tradition provides us: An identity and a mission.

Who am I and what am I supposed to do in this life?

If you know the answers to these questions, you will never be lost no matter where life takes you. At great moments of joy and success, and inevitably during those moments of sadness and loss, your identity will not change.

Who am I and what am I supposed to do in this life?

Isn’t that the question we all must ask ourselves on Rosh Hashana if nothing else?

With our traditions, those are questions we don’t have to answer on our own.

The Hebrew word for tradition is “mesorah”. It implies passing something from one hand to the next. Our Jewish traditions are the wisdom, faith, hopes, and the very soul of every single one of our ancestors and every Jew who came before us. It is passed from their hands to ours.

In the movie “Amistad”, John Quincy Adams tells the Supreme Court of an African tribal belief that all a person’s ancestors live inside them.

This is true for Judaism as well. Everything our ancestors lived for and died for now resides within each of us here today. In every generation, it is the passing down of our tradition that sustains Judaism. There is no Moses except in our collective memories and so every word that Moses spoke was to you and me.

I believe one of the most important goals of Rosh Hashana is for us to renew our commitment to passing down our tradition.

This is the very meaning of the word Teshuva. We should say we want to do Tikkun, to fix our sins and problems. Instead we do Teshuva- to return to the paths of our teachers.

One of the most important usages of the word teshuva comes in this passage:

Heishiv Leib Avos Al banim- Please God return the hearts of the fathers to the children.

This is what we are here to do. Renew our connection to the hearts of all who proceeded us.

The only way to pass down our tradition is to live by the traditions ourselves. Let’s take the time to appreciate the traditions of our families, our community, and our people. They anchor us to our identity and our past. They help us know who we are.

Our traditions assure us that we are living life as if should be lived.

May we be blessed to celebrate, renew, forgive, and begin again this Rosh Hashana. May new adventures and opportunities await. And above all may we always stay rooted and connected to our families and to all those on whose shoulders we stand.

L’Shana Tova!