

# Weekly Teaching

March 1, 2019

This week, Roseanne and I had the opportunity to watch the movie, *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

The movie was a biopic on the British rock band Queen, with a focus on the lead singer, Freddie Mercury.

Roseanne and my children have always been music fans of Queen, which made me somewhat familiar with their songs. However, I had little knowledge about the band and its musicians.

I found the movie both interesting and entertaining. And, as with most movies I watch, I processed it all through both a rabbinic lens and a personal lens.

Personally, I'm not a huge fan of foul language, rock and roll, or a lifestyle that is not anchored within what I consider ethical values. But I do try to check my own personal preferences so as to consider the intentions and actions of others, and do so without pre-judgement.

Usually the ability to observe without pre-judgement lets me get beyond personal preferences and ultimately facilitate an appreciation of that which I would not have previously considered valuable.

After researching a bit more on Freddie Mercury, I really became quite awed by the vocal range he possessed.

He credited his remarkable range to having a number of extra incisors in his mouth, which created a severe overbite, which also caused him great self-consciousness and a feeling of being different throughout his life.

And I came to learn that the actor Rami Makek's portrayal of Freddie (who won the Oscar for his performance) well-captured the expertise by which Freddie Mercury was known to use both the performance skills of verbal and non-verbal communication while performing.

Freddie's life was taken way too quickly by the AIDS virus, and his coming to terms with his own sexual orientation is on its own merit a powerful reminder that we have hopefully evolved well away from prejudicial considerations within this particular arena.

In the movie, we are told upfront that Freddie's given name, Farrokh Bulsara, came from his Farsi parents. His family religion was Zoroastrian, and they had been victimized by religious persecution.

This Sunday I happen to be giving a presentation at the Zoroastrian Temple in Nyack, NY. I was asked to do so because of an article I published a few years ago documenting how much modern Judaism owes to Zoroastrian influences.

Many scholars will assert that we Jews learned our monotheistic theology from the Zoroastrians; that we discovered the theology of universalism enmeshed in core Zoroastrian dogma.

Our Jewish notion regarding Universalism is that God's law is universal, and no matter the particular faith of another, if they adhere to basic moral principles then they are leading a "holy" life.

Judaism also began to develop its own theology of "heaven and hell" after its contact with Zoroastrianism.

The pre-exilic Biblical books are absent of "afterlife" references, and the early Israelite theology was simply that we came from dust and would return to dust.

However, with our first exile to Babylon 2600 years ago, and the new immense exposure to Zoroastrianism (the religion of the Persian Empire), the “Jewish” afterlife stories become normative for us.

The Zoroastrian dogma of a “final accounting” is ultimately completely assimilated into early rabbinic Judaism with the teaching that “personal and individual immortality is always offered to the righteous.”

During the movie I was wonderfully reminded of the parallelism of Judaism and Zoroastrianism.

Freddie’s father had raised his son with the often stated teaching: “Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.”

According to Zoroastrianism belief, Zarathustra founded their faith in the region of Afghanistan.

Zarathustra wrote the Gatha, a collection of hymns that is contained in the Avesta, the Zoroastrian book of sacred scripture.

The primary teaching of Zarathustra was “the importance of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.”

This fundamental teaching is similar to the “Golden Rule” that is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the fundamental belief that righteous people must live by and follow the “law of love”.

The movie depicts that Freddie, in his life struggles, drifts away from the primary teaching of his sacred heritage.

But in the end, he returns to his father, and articulates his own full embrace to live his own life by possessing good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

An example of this comes with his band’s decision to re-emerge on the world stage by agreeing to participate in the international charity concert Live Aid to raise money for starving families in Ethiopia.

I admit my personal bias against “foul language, rock and roll, or a lifestyle that is not anchored within what I consider ethical values.” But it’s the last piece that I need to be most considerate of as I need to properly distinguish between life-style differences from my own life vs. ethical values.

The trap is that I might fail to see what is at the core of a person because of outside differences.

I like the idea that I should always set aside my own pre-judgement and simply try to discern whether a person is or is not living their lives by the Law of Love: “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.”

Shabbat Shalom,

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