

Rosh Hashanah 2012

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I want to do a little survey. How many of you would say that art is an important value in your lives—raise your hands. Now for all those of you who said art is a value, how many of you visit a museum or gallery every day. How many once a week? How many once a month? How many a couple of times a year? Remember your answer. I'll come back to this.

During our vacation in the Berkshires this summer we saw a revival of the play *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was amazed by two things. First that I knew the words to all the songs even though I had never seen the original production which said something about how prevalent the music was in popular culture of the time.

Second and more significantly I was struck by how prescient the play was. *Fiddler on the Roof*, loosely based on stories of Shalom Aleichem, opened on Broadway in 1964 and was a huge success. For those who don't remember or never saw the play or movie, the story in brief is as follows: The main character, Tevye, has a wife and 5 daughters who live in the town of Anatevka, a fictitious town located in the pale of settlement in Russia sometime in the early 20th century. To say the least, the play is a romanticized portrait of Eastern European Jewish life in a shtetl. Even though the show opens with the song *Tradition*, the traditional world of Anatevka unravels during the rest of the production. Winds of change will in the end sweep Anatevka away. Mostly that change is reflected in the stories of Tevya's daughters. Their traditional role is to get married and raise a Jewish family. The first daughter rejects the groom chosen by Yenta the matchmaker and instead wants to make her own choice and marry the tailor she loves. Tevya sings that this is unheard of -- a girl choosing her mate rather than her father choosing a good match (meaning someone who could support her). The daughter asks to marry the poor tailor because of love. Tevya convinces himself to agree. At her wedding a young Jew with new ideas introduces mixed dancing which leads to more mixed dancing. The second daughter falls in love with this man, a revolutionary (non-religious) Jew and leaves Anatevka to join him after he is exiled to Siberia because of his revolutionary activities. Finally the third daughter meets and marries a non-Jewish man and leaves Judaism to marry him. Tevye has unhappily agreed to the first two marriages but can't bring himself to accept his third daughter's marriage to a non-Jew. Just as this is happening the Jews are evicted from Anatevka by the Russian authorities.

As Tevye is leaving for America, a possible reconciliation is suggested between him and his third daughter. The play ends with the Jews of Anatevka leaving and being scattered across the world.

What is prescient about *Fiddler on the Roof* is that intermarriage was not much of an issue in 1964 in the American Jewish community. It will become a major issue 30 years later. In fact while set in the historical reality of the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe I would suggest that *Fiddler on the Roof* is really about Jews and Judaism in America.

The play begins with this paean to tradition but it is clear even in the opening scene that the tradition is kept only because it is the way things have always been done. No one knows why and when there are disputes—horse/mule the tradition doesn't have an answer. Most of the characters in the play are sympathetic. Even the Russian peasants are likable except when they play the Cossacks in the pogrom

scene. Even the local Russian official who is powerless to stop the pogrom is portrayed somewhat sympathetically. The only one who is not sympathetic is the rabbi who is left speechless whenever he is asked a question. He is a fool. Tradition and its representative have no answers to the real challenges that Tevye and the people of Anatevka face. In the face of the challenges to their life all they have is a community. The last scene is so poignant because the community is dissipating. Tevye is left only with his family and even then one daughter is in Siberia and another may or may not join them in America. In the end, it is family, not tradition that sustains them. Ultimately the take away is the song sunrise sunset, the song popular for so long at Jewish weddings about swiftly flowing years.

What does Fiddler have to say about American Jewry in the late 20th and early 21st century? We do not face pogroms—just the opposite, we live in an open society. Our lives are not as shaky as a fiddler on the roof. But something clearly still resonates here. As parents, we still have little control over our children's choices and as a community we are still trying to sing Tradition even in the face of its weakening in the non-Orthodox world. At least Tevye, despite watching all that he holds dear disintegrate before his eyes, never questions his identity as a Jew. Today, as tradition's grip loosens, why be Jewish? has become a central concern. Why be Jewish, what does it mean, is Judaism just a piece of nostalgia as it was in Fiddler in 1964?

And while I don't think today's rabbis are the fools as depicted in Fiddler, I don't think the tradition is doing much better for liberal Jews in trying to respond to the challenges we face. Liberal Judaism is in fact in trouble.

A few months ago, NY UJA-Federation released results of its population survey. In summary, it highlighted on the one hand the rapid growth of the ultra-Orthodox community and on the other hand the decline of the liberal denominations. Some of that decline was demographic; the Conservative movement in particular has an aging population. Some of the decline can be attributed to the growth of Jews identifying as "just Jewish" rather than denominationally. Since the study's release there have been questions about the accuracy of some of the numbers, but let us assume that overall it accurately reflects the larger trends in American Jewish life, even taking into account that the NYC area has a larger concentration of ultra-Orthodox Jews than anywhere else in the country.

As long as I have been involved in American Jewish life there have been those who have spoken about the imminent demise of American Jewry. I have never been about the pessimists. I always had faith that the ever dying Jewish people would continue as they had done since Abraham and Sarah. I am no longer am so sure.

A reflection of the strength of American Jewish life has always been the organizational structure the community created. Looking at the Jewish organizational structure that so powerfully drove American Jewish life in the 20th century, it is hard to imagine which organizations will still be here in any meaningful way by the end of the 21st century. Already the American Jewish Congress and NYANA are gone.

The fraternal organizations so important in the 19th century and 20th century have all but vanished with the largest, Bnai Brith, in steep demographic decline. The equivalent women's organizations will last a little longer and Hadassah will be the last to go, without a major change in direction, they are unlikely to survive. Landsmanschaft are gone. The JCC movement no longer needs to acculturate Jews or provide

gyms when for profit gyms often provide better facilities. JCCs as a place where Jewish kids can meet Jewish kids—who is interested in that? The JCC in Manhattan and a few other JCCs across the country have developed a new and different model, but they are the exceptions.

Federations continue to lose donors. The mega-philanthropists end run the federation system to support the programs they want. The Jewish social service agenda that was the foundation of Federation's mission has come under question. What's Jewish about it? Why are we using Jewish money for social services that mainly serve non-Jews? That older social service model is in conflict with the Jewish continuity model. In 1969 when I led the student demonstrations at the national federation convention we criticized federation's annual grants to Jewish hospitals. Those hospitals, founded in part because Jewish doctors couldn't get jobs in regular hospitals, have long lost their "Jewish" purpose. In the decade following 1969, federations stopped supporting hospitals. How many other federation agencies have lost their old purpose?

Since funding will be critical in the future it will be necessary to have some organization to make it happen, but whether it will be the current form of federations or something else is not clear.

There are some Jewish organizations that will continue either because they are well-endowed or because their mission still resonates and there are newer ones who are responding to new concerns and new models like AJWS and Avodah the Jewish service corps. But you don't need a crystal ball to see that t we are at a moment of vast change in American Jewish life.

And what about religious life? Many question the future of denominations and wonder specifically about the need for denominational structure. The Jewish Reconstruction Federation recently merged with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the Conservative movement's United Synagogue is struggling, and the Union for Reform Judaism has made deep staff cuts. Close to a hundred million dollars is spent to run the non-orthodox rabbinical seminaries, who this year accepted in total fewer than 90 students. Is this a wise use of Jewish dollars? Is it sustainable?

And what about synagogues? With the decline of fraternal and Zionist organizations they are the last local institutions where Jews gather as communities. Across the liberal spectrum rabbis are concerned about the future despite all the recent attempts at synagogue change.

I am more convinced than ever that what is required is radical/transformational change rather than incremental changes. I spoke to you about this a few years ago and still believe that is necessary. Yet change is difficult. Let us be candid. Those who attend synagogues regularly are mostly happy with the way things are or they wouldn't be coming. And what kind of change is necessary and how to bring about that change---the answers are not clear and the case could be made for opposite solutions: we should be more traditional or we should be less traditional. Yet if we look to the future it is hard to imagine that we can continue to do what we have done and somehow it will all work out. Let me put it like this: nostalgia never works to attract new people who weren't around to enjoy the way we used to celebrate this or don't share fond memories of singing the old songs.

We have hopes that the Jewish Journey Project will lead to a transformation of the education of our children. It represents real change through a very different educational model. There is a great deal of excitement about JJP and it will be interesting to see its impact on our children, our families and on our

synagogue community. It is an example of transformational rather than incremental change and perhaps we will learn something from it. I do want to acknowledge the parents of the SAJ who have embraced JJP in the spirit of a community whose legacy has always been about advancing Judaism.

But I want to focus in this last section of my talk on what I consider the real challenge for us and for Judaism in the year 2012/5773.

The real challenge is modernity.

In pre-modern times, religion was a way to explain and understand a mysterious world. Why did things happen? Why did people get sick? Why did one side win a battle? Why did the sun rise every morning?

The answer: because God or gods created the world and controlled what happened. Sometimes those invisible forces could include demons who liked to torment humans. Over time, a belief in one God, a God of justice pre-dominated. It became the unified theory to explain the world. God punished sinners and rewarded the righteous. If the suffering of the innocent wasn't completely explained by this notion at least there was some context for a way to strive to understand the world or a foundation to have faith that there was a just God or that God had a plan even if you didn't understand it. The world was not random but a world of purpose. But then over time, humans came to understand the world more clearly and discovered the laws of nature. Humans discovered germs and contagion and disease no longer seemed either random or the scourge of God. Or as the atheist Christopher Hitchens wrote in 2007: "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important."

Jews embraced modernity because the pre-modern world of Europe offered them economic restrictions and persecutions. For the Jews, there was almost nothing good about the status quo. Opening the ghettos was tied to a rational secular way of thinking. (It is why Jews have embraced liberalism for the last 300 years. Conservatism either upheld or wanted to return to the way things were. There was no economic or social incentive for Jews to embrace the conservative view. It was only in the liberal view (even if not uniformly) that Jews saw a way to leave the ghetto.

Science, rationality, progress all challenged the old religious life that Jews abandoned in droves in Eastern Europe in the years before the Holocaust.

Judaism in the 20th century became about people hood. Jews had a nation state—Israel-- like other people. In Kaplan's formulation, Judaism was a civilization that included culture and people hood along with religion. I would posit that liberal Jews gathered in synagogues because that is what Jews did as Jews. As the ethnic Jewish neighborhoods of the first half of the 20th century disappeared, synagogues on Shabbat became the places where Jews gathered with other Jews and did Jewish things. In synagogues Jews celebrated their Jewishness and studied Jewish texts or listened to the rabbi talk about Judaism but mostly didn't pray the words they no longer believed.

We have tried a variety of responses to modernity, some of which could be argued worked for a time, but even if they did in the 20th century in this century they are not working. We haven't come up with a successful model for living in modernity and in Judaism. The UJA study seems to suggest that we either choose modernity or Judaism. If we choose modernity, we are mostly not Jewish. If we choose Judaism, we are mostly rejecting modernity.

Why the crisis now? Perhaps some of the other attempts to reconcile Judaism with modernity have run their course. But I think we have reached a new era of modernity—America in the 21st century.

If the purpose of religion broadly and Judaism particularly is not to explain how the world works, if it not based solely on ethnicity and people hood in a world where each of us can choose freely to be Jewish or not, then what is Judaism's purpose?

I actually think that it still is to explain how the world works, to grapple with the mysteries of this world—no longer about how nature acts or why things happen but the great questions of life which, I despite science and modernity and rationality, still remain.

What is the purpose of my existence? What is the point of living? Is Kohelet correct that everything is vanity of vanities? That basically we live and die and ultimately are forgotten? Or how can my life be more than the span of my days? What are the principles and values that I want to strive to live by? What can I do to change my life to make it closer to my vision of myself? How do I make my days count rather than just pass me by? How can I stop saying when I have time I'll... and instead do it today when I still have time? How do I strengthen my relationships and pay attention to what other people need? How can I be better aware of the blessings of my life?

I think Christopher Hitchen was wrong—the most important things are still not explained and I don't think either a telescope or microscope will ever explain them. It is the world beyond the tangible, not the world that can be touched or perceived, that is the domain of religion.

We are all on a journey. A precious journey that is only ours to make—a unique journey never to be duplicated. Increasingly, I have come to feel that it is not the accomplishments, not the fame nor the fortune that ultimately matters. Here Kohelet is right; very little endures

What is important is how you make the journey, for that is what impacts on your life.

It is the relationships you created that partake of the eternal. Those relationships are what you leave behind, that reverberate out into the universe.

In our existential aloneness, we experience the world as basically about ourselves—my world is michaelcentric. Paraphrasing Louis XIVth it is not just l'etat c'est moi but la monde c'est moi. I am the world---the center of my existence. But Judaism reminds us that the world is bigger than our individual selves. Rosh ha-Shana tells us that we are not masters of our universe even as we are reminded that what we do makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of all the people we intersect with. Kohelet is wrong about that. What we do matters. Change is possible. There is plenty that is new under the sun.

We need to reconstruct the tradition in deep and profound ways. If the Ten Commandments were seen as the core of the revelation of Sinai, we need to ask what the basic principles and values are that will animate a contemporary liberal Judaism. Remember the survey on the importance of art where I began. Rabbi Tzvi Blanchard was once visiting the Metropolitan Museum and he watched someone who was clearly an art student examining a painting and taking notes. After awhile the student turned to Tzvi and asked him what he thought of the painting. Tzvi hesitated, saying that he was not an art expert. He felt embarrassed in front of this art student. The student replied that his teacher had given them an assignment to go to the museum and ask people what they thought of this painting. Tzvi was still hesitant, but the art

student said the point is to ask people like yourself: what do you feel when you look at the painting. . The fact that many people visit art museums only a few times a year may not be indicative of how important art is in their lives.

Similarly what Judaism needs to do is to ask all kinds of Jews including those who come only on High holidays or who never come at all—how does Judaism make you feel? How can it help you meet the challenges and opportunities of life? How does it/how can it enrich your family and/or your individual life. Great art moves everyone, not just experts. A great Judaism would do the same. I encourage you to think about the basic principles/values in Judaism that resonate for you. I came across such a list online by a person I don't know. Wendy Grinberg, an educational consultant at Hebrew Union College, suggests a list of mitzvot for liberal Jews. I have adapted, extensively modified and expanded her list to reflect what resonates for me. The first three are based on Pirkei Avot 1:6.

Get yourself a teacher: The study of Torah/Talmud torah is a lifelong enterprise. There is no graduation. Find a topic, a book, a text, a teacher. Find Torah in the important stories of your life. The goal is not mastery of Torah --it is the interaction with the ongoing discussion of the Jewish people for the last three thousand years that is critical.

Find yourself a friend: Judaism is about being connected. Create relationships. Strengthen ones you have. Love your neighbor as yourself means anticipate what someone else needs or would like by thinking of what you would want.

Find yourself a community: Jewish life takes place in the context of community, not in splendid isolation. In the face of life's challenges, community can provide us a supporting shoulder to lean on. Synagogue communities are places to share joyous occasions and moments of sorrow. Unlike clubs or minyanim, they are diverse in their membership, with people of different ages and different backgrounds and different interests, thereby reminding us that each one of us (no matter how annoying) is created in the image of God.

Give people the benefit of the doubt. Don't assume the worst. Remember we all make mistakes, we all forget important things, and we all speak thoughtlessly.... Who can know what another person's motivation for what they did? Rosh ha-Shana reminds us that judgment should be left to an all knowing God since we are not all knowing.

Speaking of which, be a Yisrael--Israel --one who struggles with beings divine and human. Struggle with God. Be ready to speak truth to power. Judaism was born in freedom—with the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt. We celebrate that freedom at the Seder by encouraging questions even by, especially by, the youngest amongst us. Don't be willing to accept the world as is—we are to engage in the ongoing task of tikkun olam/repair.

Give it away. Be ready to take what you have been blessed with and give it away to those in need. Give not just money but give something even more precious—give of your time. Try to respond to every other image of God with a kind word.

Life---celebrate life. Be in the moment. Remember the past. Anticipate the future.

Judaism is life not a withdrawal from life. That is a fundamental mistake of ultra=orthodoxy, exemplified by the notion that the ideal life is to spend it in a kolel-studying Torah rather than earning a living. It is a complete misunderstanding of Judaism.

Tradition is not the more Torah you have the more life you have. Even Tevye understood this.

Rather it is the more life you live, the more that you have fulfilled Torah. Judaism is not about doing the Jewishly Jewish thing to perfection. It is not about super glatt kosher potato chips. It is about fully engaging in life aided by the wisdom, teachings, and practices of centuries of Jews striving to answer the question—what is the meaning of this one life I have been given?

The first mitzvah in the Torah is not Shabbat or kashrut; what it is the prime directive of Torah?

Peru urevu umilu ha-eretz you should be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. I believe that does not just mean have babies—it means that God ceases the work of creation and now turns to humans and says--I give you this earth---take care of it; take care of each other; create culture art and music, build communities, develop new ideas---continue the work of my creation. There won't be one way to do this – Judaism is a way; there will be many others. But for those who choose the Jewish path—and make no mistake about it—we don't live in Anatevka and everyone here is a Jew by choice-- Torah is not meant to be preserved in nostalgic plays or in a retreat from the rest of the world. Rather the Torah is waiting--- waiting to be unrolled, waiting for new insights to be discovered amidst the black fire and the white fire that gives an ever changing form to an etz hayim ---a torah that is a tree of life to all who grasp it on their journey to the Promised Land.