

Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018

Rabbi Edward Elkin, First Narayever Congregation

People often ask me why I became a rabbi. It is not after all a typical profession for a nice Jewish boy in our time. Looking back on my curious choice, I see many factors which influenced me in this direction. A pious old-world grandmother who I loved. An inspiring trip to Israel when I was 14. Encounters during university with a wonderful Hillel rabbi and Jewish studies profs who both engaged and challenged me. All these are parts of the story of how I came to the choice that I did, and therefore how I come to have the honour and responsibility of standing here addressing you today, as I've done for each of the past 18 years.

And then there was a book -- a novel that I tore through several times in my youth, which opened up a Jewish world to me that I previously had no idea existed. The book was Chaim Potok's The Chosen. I imagine many of you have read it or seen the movie version. It is hard for me to capture how excited I became when I encountered the story of Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders, both of whom had fathers who envisioned a life path for their sons that they didn't want. The story is set against the backdrop of New York in the 1940s. With the nation at war, the Jewish community was filled with American patriotism, and also haunted by reports of the catastrophe befalling our people in Europe. In the war's immediate aftermath, the community was both energized by, and also bitterly divided by, the campaign to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. At the novel's end, Reuven combines his love of Judaism, his brilliance in Talmud study, and his belief in progress and modernity and Zionism, and decides to attend Seminary to study for the rabbinate. His decision was perhaps the first seed that was planted in my mind in regard to my eventual career. I didn't make the connection at the time, I didn't articulate "hey, that could be me" -- but when one encounters a character that one admires and identifies with on so many levels, their life story can certainly open up new horizons and new possibilities hitherto unimagined.

By contrast, the trajectory of the other main character in the Potok novel, Reuven's friend Danny Saunders, horrified me. The rigidity and fanaticism of the Hasidic world in which Danny was raised, and from which he ultimately determined to break away in order to pursue a career as a psychologist, did not hold any appeal for me -- despite the richness of the communal life and the intensity of the Hasidic faith which the author sympathetically portrays. Shaped as I was by my own family's liberal values, I was determined that whatever Jewish life I would build for myself, it would be much stronger than I had grown up with but would certainly look much closer to Reuven's than to Danny's -- embracing of the wisdom of the outside world alongside Jewish

wisdom, politically engaged, prioritizing ethical values and compassion over the most rigid interpretations of ritual law. I had no desire to build a wall between myself and the values I had been raised with, a wall that would keep me in a very narrow and confined place. The Saunders family, with its extreme old-world ways, its anti-Zionism, and its very disturbing father-son relationship, felt profoundly alien to me. The Reuven model seemed to hold the right balance – you could be a learned and observant and faithful Jew, a strong adherent of the particular Jewish covenant, and still be very much a part of the contemporary world in language, in dress, in education, in politics, in music, in sports. The Reuven model means you don't have to choose -- you can be a strong Jew, and a strong citizen of the wider society at the same time.

I have dedicated my life to the proposition that this center, this balance, can hold. My faith in the power of this model, in its truth, has animated my professional life and my personal life. But sometimes I confess, after more than 25 years in the rabbinate, I have doubts. This Rosh Hashanah, I want to share some of my doubts and worries with you – doubts in the ability of the Jewish people to hold the Reuven-like center that I so admire and which I try to live by, in the context of a wider society and culture which is in so many ways irresistible.

Before I share these worries, I need to acknowledge that the phenomenon of rabbis worrying about the future of the Jews is not exactly a new phenomenon. I stand in a long line of rabbis across the generations who have bemoaned the state of Jewish affairs in their own time and warned of imminent collapse. The writer Simon Rawdowicz satirically called us “the ever-dying people”, noting that every generation has Jews who are convinced like Chicken Little that the sky this time really is falling. This history provides me with some consolation, because all those Jewish leaders starting with Moshe Rabbeinu himself cried *gevalt* and yet here we are, still around, gathered in great numbers once again to welcome the new year. So should I stop worrying, or is there really something different, something uniquely threatening happening in our generation? I tell you, it feels different to me -- but perhaps every generation sees its challenges as unique. The question of whether something unprecedented is happening now, or if this is only the latest iteration of an age-old dynamic between leaders and the community – that question only our posterity will be able to answer. I acknowledge my limited perspective, and I don't believe any particular future is inevitable. In the present, however, I see certain trends that disturb me and I'd like to take the opportunity today to share some of these concerns with you regarding the strength and stability of the Reuven-like center on which I believe the Jewish future rides. To focus my reflections, I want to tell you about a speech.

Michael Chabon is a Jewish American novelist, the author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, and *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, among others. Chabon was invited to be the commencement speaker at Hebrew Union College, the rabbinical seminary that I attended, this past spring. His subject was Jewish identity in the context of the wider society, and he opens by declaring his abhorrence for homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation and boundaries. For Chabon, boundaries are bad because they separate people and this separation will inevitably lead to the denial of the humanity of human beings on the other side. He calls the enforcement of boundaries between human beings a "toxin in the human bloodstream". And the antidote to this toxin for him, in this address to new rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, is intentional exogamy, in other words, intermarriage. That should be the Jewish communal agenda -- to promote intermarriage in order to rid ourselves of the toxin caused by boundaries between Jews and their neighbours. You can imagine that this speech caused quite a stir.

To make it clear, Chabon is not in this speech talking about extending love and compassion and a warm welcome and Jewish encouragement to those who make the choice to intermarry, as I and everyone I know, at least in the non-Orthodox world already does. Nor is he talking about offering conversion classes for those who might consider that option. No, Chabon is advocating for the active promotion of intermarriage as something which is desirable, something which should be encouraged in the Jewish community, to help us break out of the narrow confines of the toxic ghetto we have constructed for ourselves.

But this is not the main part of the speech that I wanted to reflect on with you this morning; rather, it is where he goes next that really troubles me. Chabon raises the issue of whether the policy of promoting exogamy that he is advocating for might lead to the disappearance of Judaism. He says he doesn't *think* that will happen, but he does not exclude the possibility that it could. And if it does happen, if Judaism disappears, he knows where the fault will lie. "On the day the last Jewish couple dies, after watching their children marry Hindus, Lutherans, atheists, Sunnis, Buddhists – the fault for that extinction will lie squarely with Judaism itself, and not because Judaism failed to enforce its teachings against intermarriage, but because it was necessary ever to have such teachings in the first place. Any religion that relies on compulsory endogamy to survive has in my view ceased to make the case for its continued validity in the everyday lives of human beings. If Judaism should ever pass from the world, it won't be the first time in history – far from it – that a great and ancient religion lost its hold on the moral imaginations of its adherents and its relevance to their lives. Nor will it be the first time that an ethnic minority has been absorbed, one exogamous marriage at a time, into the surrounding population. We will grieve that loss,

you and I, if we're still around to witness it. But we probably won't be, and anyway the history of the Jews, like the history of humanity and every individual human who has ever lived, is just one long story of grief, loss, and fading away."

This excerpt from Chabon's speech fills me with overwhelming sadness, but also with resolve to articulate a response, but not so much on the specific subject of intermarriage. Rather, I want to respond to the larger question of how much importance we ascribe to the perpetuation of the Jewish people. Michael Chabon seems quite prepared to let go of the Jewish future if that's what it comes down to in order to promote our universal values, which are for him clearly primary.

My fear is that more and more Jews are thinking about their Judaism as Chabon does, finding any expression of Jewish particularism in consideration of fundamental life decisions to be embarrassing, at worst racist, or at the very least completely irrelevant to their lives. This fear is what leads me to worry that the Reuven Malter center, the one that I have devoted my life and career to, the one that says we can be strongly Jewish and fully a part of the wider society, isn't in fact holding any more. If it's not, if the center really can't hold, if we have to choose one or the other, then perhaps a handful of us will reject the wider society in favour of their Jewish identity and become ultra-Orthodox. But the vast majority I suspect will reject their Judaism -- some actively by publicly disassociating themselves from the Jewish community, but probably many more passively, by simply choosing not to prioritize Judaism in their lives in any but the most superficial ways. And I'm just not as philosophical about the prospect of its demise as he is. I'm not giving up without a fight.

In the face of this challenge, many Jewish thinkers and leaders have put their minds to the issue of how to safeguard the Jewish future. A number of different tactics have been tried to motivate Jews to do their part to preserve our particular identity. One tack bases itself on Judaism's ancient and rich tradition of ethical teachings and commandments. Can we say that living a Jewish life makes you a better, more ethical person? If so, that would surely be a compelling reason to keep it alive in a world filled with so much cruelty and dishonesty and corruption. But I don't know if we can honestly make the correlation. Yes, many of us are motivated by Jewish teachings to go out and perform acts of righteousness and generosity, to advocate for social justice and tolerance -- and that's something for us to be very proud of. But lots of other people in the world are motivated by their own religious traditions, or by their secular convictions, to do the same -- and Jews know that. So while Tikkun Olam and social justice are critically important Jewish values and aspirations that we have to continually work on nurturing, I don't know that they are going to be "the thing" that will

convince Jews of the importance of preserving our particular Jewish identity, or of their own responsibilities as individuals towards that end.

Another tack claims that Judaism merits observance and preservation not because it makes us *better* people, but because it makes us *happier* people. That goal is surely appealing in a generation when so many are seeking the thing that will bring them personal fulfillment, that will help them feel more authentic and purposeful, that will help ease the burden of their loneliness, that will make their family lives more harmonious. And so many rabbis and Jewish educators in all the movements market Jewish living in this way, hoping to carve out a niche for Judaism on the self-help shelf: Judaism will make you a happier person, a healthier, less stressed-out person. It will bring your family closer and make you more centered. One example that I often talk about regards the use of technology on Shabbat – take a full day each week away from those blasted screens to which we’re all so addicted – and see what wonders it will do for your soul and for your family time and for your concentration! And I believe that very sincerely, anything that will help get people off-line even for a bit is, for me, healthy. I experience this aspect of Shabbat observance every week as a great gift Judaism has given me. But I acknowledge that lots of people in contemporary society are talking about the pernicious parts of our omnipresent digital culture and are finding various ways to get us off our devices. I hear they’ve even come up with an app that will help you limit your time on-line.

So if Judaism doesn’t necessarily make us kinder, more ethical people, and if it doesn’t necessarily make us happier and healthier people– what else can we deploy to preserve it? Well, in other times and places, when all else failed, anti-Semites could always be counted on to remind us of who we were, even if we ourselves weren’t sure. The problem is, as I see it, in our time, with a few worrying exceptions, I just don’t think our society is anti-Semitic enough to perform that function. Non-Jews for the most part have no objection to our being their neighbours, colleagues, or friends. Once exclusive country clubs and top-notch universities have Jewish presidents. Our political elite, both in the US and Canada have embraced Jews into their families without a whimper – the Kennedys, the Clintons, the Trumps, the Mulroneys – all have Jewish members, and poll after poll show that the vast majority of our Gentile neighbours have no objection to their children marrying one of us. In so many ways on the whole scale of Jewish history we’ve never been more accepted than we are now. We mustn’t take that for granted – it’s a good thing. But this good thing does mean that the anti-Semites out there who do exist, and they certainly are out there on the left and on the right and must be countered vigorously, are not going to be the answer to our identity worries. So far anyway, *baruch hashem*, there just aren’t enough of them. Shoring up Jewish identity on the basis that the world is against is not an approach that would resonate for most

contemporary North American Jews, I don't think. If we are to maintain our particular identity, we'll have to figure out a way to do that for ourselves.

I'm going to test out another possibility with you. How about Israel as a means to preserving Diaspora Jewish identity? Now inspired by Reuven Malter's Zionism and by my own many visits there, I am a committed lover of Israel. I love Israel as a place where Jewish values are argued over and lived in the public square in a way that I find thrilling. I love Israel because its existence has enabled the development of a thriving contemporary Hebrew culture in such areas as literature, film, music, and dance which has enriched my life in innumerable ways. The ancient stones, the beauty of the land, the connections to the Bible – all enthrall me. Okay, so I happen to disagree with some of the policies of the current Israeli government; that won't surprise any of you who have heard me speak about Israel over the years. So do many Israelis disagree with their government; that's democracy. I don't want to minimize how painful these disagreements are, but they don't affect my commitment to the existence of a Jewish state nor do they impugn my Zionism; they motivate me to do whatever I can do over here (and what we can do while living here is limited, but still very important) to advocate for the kind of Israeli society I believe in.

But for the purpose of today's discussion, I have to acknowledge that as much as Zionism is a key part of my Jewish identity, and as hard as I work to nurture it in others and encourage young people to go on Birthright or longer term Israel programs so they can learn about the land and the people and the history and argue over its politics, and as delighted as I am with the shinshinim program which brings young Israelis to our community every year to share their knowledge and love of Israel with us here-- still and all I don't think Israel is the answer to the challenge of Jewish identity for most Diaspora Jews. Those who, like Chabon, feel that any kind of boundaries are by definition ghettoizing and racist, are not going to be too excited either by the idea of a Jewish state altogether, or the reality of contemporary Israel. And even for those who *are* sympathetic to the idea of a Jewish state, I don't know that Israel is going to form the basis for a strong Diaspora Jewish identity for more than just a few of us. It's too far away; the culture is too different; the politics are too messy; it's just not our lived daily experience here.

* * *

So I ask, if practicing Judaism doesn't automatically make us better people, and doesn't automatically make us happier, and if neither anti-Semites nor Israel can be counted on to save our Jewish identity, then perhaps Chabon is right and we've come to the end of the road for a Judaism based on maintaining our particular, bounded people? Maybe it'd be a little sad to

see it go after so many centuries, but not really such a big loss after all? As he says, lots of other ethnic groups have disappeared in the course of history, and it's sad when a unique culture fades away just as it's sad when a species goes extinct – but you know what -- the world does continue to spin on its axis. And we did have a pretty good run, longer than most. After we're gone, they can build a museum and people can learn about our history that way. Scholars can still write dissertations about us, much as they do about the ancient Akkadians or Sumerians or Etruscans. We can take some pride in the fact that in this new boundary-less world culture being created, there will be a few strands of Jewish cultural DNA. People will find other belief systems to challenge them to be generous and kind, and other structures to frame their work towards making the world a better place. As for the eternal quest for personal fulfillment and happiness and wellness and a healthy balanced life -- there is meditation and yoga and meds and shrinks and fitness classes and time in the Great Outdoors and lots of other really useful and worthwhile techniques that are great for that goal.

Now you see what's keeping me up at night. I ask, what's going to hold the center, the Judaism of the Reuven Malter character, my Judaism, I venture to say "our" Judaism?

I started this sermon by speaking personally about some of the factors that led me to become a rabbi. I'm going to conclude by speaking personally as well, about what continues to motivate me in my work, and in my life as a Jew, why I believe this Jewish enterprise is worth preserving, worth fighting for, worth sacrificing for. For me, the answer has to do with something which I feel very deeply but which is really hard to articulate -- and that is faith. Folks, I'm a believer. I believe Judaism is True -- in some cosmic sense that is beyond my understanding.

What is Judaism's truth? Judaism challenges us to believe in the transcendent God who gave our people the Torah and entered into a covenant with us at Mt. Sinai that entailed many obligations called mitzvot. A God who brought the universe into being. A God who brought the Jewish people into being. A God who loves us, a God to whom we are bound. This is core Jewish theology, and it is this belief that I hold to be true. It is this belief that animates my commitment to doing all I can to safeguard the particularistic Jewish future, in the face of what I perceive as a suicidal rush to universalism.¹

Now don't mistake me, I also believe in the ideals of universal human equality and dignity. I understand where Chabon is coming from, much as I disagree with where he has landed. We have responsibilities as human

¹ Cliff Librach, Paying the Price for Abandoning Jewish Peoplehood, Tablet June 18, 2018.

beings and as stewards of this planet, and we must never allow our particular group loyalty to excuse us from these responsibilities or rationalize them away. I acknowledge that there is some tension between my universalistic ideals and my determination to preserve the unique identity and covenant of the one particular human group with which I am associated. All I can say about that tension is that it has existed since ancient times, and I am prepared to live with it and continue to wrestle with it creatively -- because I don't think there is a resolution to the tension. We simply have to strike a balance between our love and concern for the larger world on the one hand, and our feeling of attachment to and responsibility for the Jewish people in particular, on the other. If our balance gets out of whack one way or the other, well that's one of the purposes of this time of year on the Jewish calendar -- to become conscious of those parts of our lives that are out of balance and try to rejig them. As Isaiah Berlin wrote², "Human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and [they are] in perpetual rivalry with one another." We may crave consistency, but in this case -- as in so many others -- consistency translates into an extreme position, either Reb Saunders or Chabon. I'm still determined to fight for that center. That position in the center means that I feel commanded, I feel obligated by the commandments of the Torah. Yes, I make choices in my Jewish life about how I observe those commandments, and under what circumstances they may be changed in response to the times. But what I don't feel I have a choice about is being Jewish, or about the imperative to work my hardest in my own imperfect way to preserve this covenant with God for the present and for the future, to put skin in the game. I believe that is what God wants me to do.

So this is my answer to the problem of Jewish identity in the contemporary world: God, and Torah. Probably not a shocker, I know. The headline "Rabbi Calls on His Congregation to Believe in God, and Follow the Torah" is probably not going to be very successful clickbait. But that's my core message to you today. Judaism is about what God expects us to do with our lives as expressed in the Torah, as interpreted by generations of Jews who came before us in accordance with their wisdom, and as interpreted by us in accordance with ours, in all our diversity. It's about the ongoing quest to hear God's voice, because God wants to help us understand who we are, what our purpose is, where we're going, how we can be kinder and more generous and do more to repair the world, how we can be happier and healthier individuals -- all the while using Jewish language, Jewish stories, Jewish rituals, to further us in these goals. Using the particular language, stories, and rituals of our small people doesn't make us small, and doesn't make God small. Jews have never believed that a person has to be Jewish to

² Two Concepts of Liberty, pp.31, 33.

be in relationship to God. God is the God of the whole world. Mysteriously, within that whole world, God initiated a covenant with the Jewish people. Miraculously, we're still around to continue the conversation about what that means, and that quest to understand God and Torah and mitzvot does not belong only to the Orthodox. It belongs to all of us. That quest is why, I believe, we are here today on this Rosh Hashanah. That quest is why Judaism is worth preserving, why it is worth sacrificing for when necessary, why we shouldn't be embarrassed by its particularism. Our boundaries don't have to be toxic, and they don't have to dehumanize those on the other sides. They can be permeable, indeed always have been, and they can be loving. But we can't exist if we do away with them altogether.

At the dawn of a new year we ask ourselves, what are we prepared to do to reinforce our identity as a particular community in the face of Chabon-like critiques? We're not in our time and place being asked to sacrifice our lives for our Judaism, *has ve-halila*. But how much of our limited resources of time and money are we prepared to devote to Jewish learning for ourselves and our children, to school, to camp, to Israel trips, to home ritual observance, to ongoing participation in and support of the life of the synagogue? What parts of our home and family life are we prepared to conduct using Jewish language and Jewish traditions? What parts of our political activism are we prepared to devote to defense of the Jewish people, and of Israel with all its flaws, and of Jewish values as they apply to the issues we face in Canadian society such as poverty and civil liberties? Are we prepared to consider at all in our search for a mate, that this partner be someone with whom we can reasonably expect to build a rich Jewish life and a strong Jewish home – whether they were born Jewish, chose Judaism, or is at least prepared to actively support us in our own Jewish lives? Most fundamentally as people of God, what parts of our souls are we prepared to open up to the challenge of Jewish prayer and teshuvah and contemplation of the Divine? What is the shofar calling us to do in 5779? The good news is, you don't have to become rabbis like me in order to do it! Just stay on the Jewish path, and be open to growing while on that path.

When you go home for Rosh Hashanah lunch, here are some questions to consider at your table: Do you agree that the ideas in Chabon's speech reflect a serious problem for the future of the Jewish people, or do you think that, like many Jewish leaders before me, I'm worrying too much? If you think we do have a problem, do you agree that embracing God and Torah, however defined, are the solution, or at least a solution? If not, how do you see the Jewish community responding to this challenge, and how do you see yourself as an individual responding? If you like, after yontif drop me a line and let me know what you think.

I've come a long way in my own thinking since I first decided to pursue the rabbinate. You may have noticed that as I reflected on some of the factors that led to my decision I spoke about people -- whether real or characters in a book -- who influenced me. I didn't mention God. I certainly didn't hear a Voice booming out from heaven calling me to this work; it all felt a lot more rational than that. A career choice. But from my vantage point today, I believe God was part of the story as well -- not in the form of a specific or clear Call -- but rather operating as an ongoing influence on my soul during those formative years, guiding me and challenging me to grow in the ways I needed to grow by doing this work, just as God guides all of us to grow in the ways we need to grow. This time of year we're asked to adjust our frequencies a bit so we can tune into the divine message.

The fanaticism of Reb Saunders in *The Chosen*, and his counterparts today, are clearly not for us. I hope and pray Chabon is also not for us. The center can hold, I really believe it can, but people -- we have to work at it. It's so precious, it's such a gift, such a blessing to be a Jew. The holidays, the history, the Hebrew, the stories, the mitzvot -- all of it. We have to challenge ourselves to believe, and we have to care enough to feel commanded.

תחל שנה וברכותיה. In the new year of 5779, won't you join me?