

Rosh Hashanah 2011/5772
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What Are We?

Shanah Tovah. My topic this Rosh Hashanah is a pretty ambitious one. I'd like to talk about nothing less than the definition of Judaism, and if you think that's a bit too ambitious for a 25 minute talk, you're probably right. Nevertheless, it's this age old mystery surrounding the question of what and who we really are that interests me this year, and so I'm going to attempt to share some of my reflections with you in the short time I've got. I became particularly interested in this question over the course of my 6 month sabbatical in Israel this past year – the Jewish homeland being the place where this question of Jewish self-definition is explored and debated most publicly, and the place where the answer is most dramatically impactful in terms of public policy. But the question is no less urgent for us here in the Diaspora than for our brothers and sisters who live in Israel because our culture places such a value on the needs and wants and rights of the individual, that at times the role or place of the community become confusing or even alienating. I'd like to attempt to address some of that confusion, and stem some of that alienation today. At the very least, I hope to provide some fodder for discussion at your yom tov table.

I'd like to introduce this topic by telling you about a man named Edmond Fleg. Fleg was born in 1874 in Geneva into a family which was moderately observant -- Jewishly connected, but also prepared to make the kinds of compromises they felt were necessary to live in the modern world. As a young man and a budding intellectual, Fleg decided that the inconsistencies he had been raised with could not be borne. He abandoned Jewish practice and proclaimed himself agnostic. In so doing he followed the path of enlightened Jews throughout Western Europe. In fact, beginning in the middle of the 19th century, large numbers of them went all the way -- converting to Christianity to escape the burden of their Jewish birth.

Edmond Fleg's life, however, took a different turn. Having moved to Paris, Fleg witnessed the Dreyfus affair, in which a French Jewish army officer was falsely accused of espionage, and he was appalled by the anti-Semitism he encountered in the supposed bastion of liberty, equality and fraternity. He decided to attend the third Zionist Congress in Basel. There he found himself entranced by the coming together of Jews from all over the world – Russia and Persia and Poland and Egypt and North America – all of them sharing the dream of return to the ancestral land. For the first time Edmond Fleg felt himself part of Am Yisrael, the Jewish people, and he was powerfully affected.

Edmond Fleg returned to Judaism. For the rest of his life, Fleg – poet, playwright, essayist -- devoted himself to explaining how a French intellectual could find beauty and meaning in being a Jew. His most famous piece is called "*Pourquoi je suis juif – Why I am a Jew,*" written in 1927. It was through reading this piece when I was a university student that I first encountered the name Edmond Fleg. Fleg's piece helped instill in me an appreciation for the nobility of the tradition into which I was born, and inspired me to explore it further. I want to share an excerpt from this piece with you today, because I think it is instructive for a discussion of the question at hand, and also because thirty years after I first read it and became so inspired by it, I've begun to feel some reservations about it which I'd like to share with you.

Fleg composed *Pourquoi je suis juif* as a letter to a future generation. "People ask me why I am a Jew," he wrote. "It is you that I want to answer, my little unborn grandson...I am a Jew, because Judaism requires of me no abdication of the mind. I am a Jew because the faith of Israel requires of me all the devotion of my heart. I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps. I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes. I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest....I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not yet completed; humanity is completing it. I am a Jew because, above the nations and Israel [itself], Israel places the unity of humankind. I am a Jew because above the human being... Israel places the unity of God."

When I first read this as a young man, I was blown away. Having grown up on the south shore of Long Island, attending Hebrew school and High Holiday services and having a bar mitzvah but not doing much else that was identifiably Jewish, I honestly had no idea that being Jewish was -- so great. Being a Jew requires no abdication of the mind? Amazing – fancying myself something of an intellectual, I wasn't prepared to abdicate any of my convictions. Being a Jew means not giving in to despair? Fabulous – I already knew that human society could be a pretty tough place; any way that could be found to hang onto hope for the future would definitely be beneficial. In every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps? Impressive – I was the son of a lefty father, so compassion for the vulnerable and the suffering and the underdog was something that I was raised on – but I never connected that impulse to being Jewish. In fact, I had never connected any of it to being Jewish. And here was Edmond Fleg making those connections for me, articulating what being Jewish meant in a way that helped me to feel that this was a pretty exceptional people I was born into. Unity of humankind more important than any one nation, including the nation of Israel? How noble a concept that sounded to a post-Holocaust Jew raised with the conviction that nationalism was evil.

Pourquois je suis juif moved and inspired me greatly at that time in my life. But living this past year for six months in the homeland of the Jewish people, I've actually come to reconsider the whole project. Fleg came up with a wonderful list of reasons why his grandson should be a Jew. But the very question he asks reflects just how radically different the modern understanding of Jewish identity is from that of our ancestors. I'm guessing that our pre-modern ancestors, presented with the task of writing down reasons why they were Jewish, would have been baffled. What do you mean, *why* am I Jewish? Does anyone ask an Irishman why he's Irish? Does anyone ask a Japanese person why she's Japanese? Do we ask a man to explain why he's a man, or a woman to explain why she's a woman? Do people with brown hair have to give an account for why they have brown hair, and do people with blonde hair have to defend their blondness by listing all the wonderful and noble attributes that go along with it? No. All these questions seem ridiculous to us. An Irishman is Irish because...he's Irish. A woman is a woman because that's what she was born. Blondes are blonde simply because that's what their genetic makeup programmed them to be. None of it requires explanation. But Fleg clearly felt, and many of us clearly feel, that Jewishness is different. Jewishness requires an explanation and a justification.

And here's another problem with Fleg's list. Does it stand up? He maintained, for example, that Judaism requires no abdication of the mind. Well, that's fine and dandy. But what about M.Sanhedrin 10:1, which maintains that an individual who denies the resurrection of the dead or who denies the divinity of the Torah has no share in the world to come, and in which Rabbi Akiva claims that the same consequence applies to those who read heretical books? Fleg maintained that Judaism means not giving in to despair. Well, what about the biblical book of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes? Kohelet looked all around him, and concluded that everything is הבל הבליים, vanity of vanities, and that whenever we think we've accomplished something new, in fact אין חדש תחת השמש – there is nothing new under the sun, nothing ever really changes. Where's the hope in that?

It's not that I'm disagreeing with Fleg about Judaism's fundamental principles. We have a vast tradition, and you can always find exceptions, and those exceptions don't necessarily undermine the general rule. But I can imagine Fleg's grandson responding, "Zayde, I love you and I respect your decision to embrace Judaism. But you know what? As a scholar, I can be against abdication of the mind -- without Judaism. As a humanitarian, I can weep when suffering weeps -- without Judaism. And as for the unity of humankind being above nations, it's actually easier for me to believe in that principle and act on it -- without identifying with the Jewish nation." What could Fleg respond then? How can committed Jews articulate their ongoing

Jewish connection to themselves or to others without falling into the trap of coming up with reasons that can then easily be refuted? However beautiful a reading like Fleg's might be, are any of his reasons *pourquois il est juif* ultimately persuasive – in a world where there are so many options, so many lifestyle choices, a multi-cultural wired world where we're so acutely aware of the wisdom and teachings of other traditions?

I understand why Fleg did what he did. He knew so many people who were at the exit door ready to leave Judaism altogether, and he desperately wanted to keep them in. Trumpeting Judaism's virtues seems like an obvious tactic in pursuit of this goal. But looking back, we have to ask whether, by providing reasons, he may have inadvertently contributed in to the very assimilation that he was trying to stem? Does the very listing of reasons, however inspiring they may be to some ears, including mine and possibly yours, play in to the ultimately self-destructive idea that Judaism needs to justify its existence?

Hillel Halkin, a contemporary American-Israeli writer, reflected on this same Catch 22 in a book which had a great influence on me years ago, Letters to an American Jewish Friend: A Zionist's Polemic. The book consists of a fictional correspondence between two friends, one of whom has made aliyah and is trying to convince the other, who remained behind in the States, why he too should move to Israel. At the very end of the book, after all the arguments back and forth, the question has boiled down to its most fundamental, why should we Jews continue to exist? Fleg had tried to answer that question by coming up with some very noble justifications. Halkin's answer on the other hand sounds quite unconvincing: Jews should exist, he says, *because we already do*.

"If you need more of a reason than that to be a Jew," he writes, "you certainly cannot be much of one...I don't know why one should be a Jew. I don't know whether the world needs us. I don't know whether God needs us. I only know that we need ourselves. For that you don't need reasons. You have to feel that you are one of us. If you don't, you're excused."

Halkin's response is a tough one. There are no reasons. You just have to feel it. If you don't, there's nothing more to say. Most of us would want something more, and in fact Halkin can't quite just leave it there either. In the best Jewish tradition, he provides a *nehemta*, a bit of comfort. He says to his friend¹, "Let the philosophers philosophize and the theologians theologize as they wish; what...does that have to do with us? If we have ourselves, if we are willing to be ourselves, we don't need their reasons...And

¹ Halkin, pp.241-43

yet, just between the two of us, since no one is listening and we are free to say what we want, are we not a most marvelous people? A most singular, stiff-necked, curious, perverse, troublesome, unpredictable, amusing, heartbreaking, and thoroughly exasperating people? ...Surely there is something about us that defies all attempts at explanation. We have always been a mystery to others, which is no little part of the reason they have hated us; now, as though to complicate matters still further, we have managed to become [a mystery] to ourselves. And yet here we are, risen time and again from the ashes, four thousand years after the first of us left Ur of the Chaldees for "the land that I will show thee" at the bidding of an unknown God whose extravagant promises he was mad enough to trust...*Four thousand years!* Nations, empires, entire civilizations, have come and gone in that time leaving hardly a trace, and *here we are*. No wonder we are confused by it, the very thought of it baffles the imagination. Tell me, though: is there not a great drama going on here, and are we not still part of it, even if we no longer have reason to believe that we possess its authoritative script? Let the world make of us what it pleases. Let those of us who are unimpressed by having been born into such an adventure find something to impress them more. You and I, my brother, have ourselves to think about. If it is hard, so much the better. If we can discern no purpose to it, let the mystery be the purpose. Did not Abraham follow a mystery too?"

Halkin's purpose in writing this book in 1977– convincing North American Jews like us to make aliyah – has clearly not been achieved in the 35 years since, and is unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future either. Nevertheless, I think Halkin, and Zionism in general, still challenges us Diaspora Jews in a useful way by provoking us to ask the most fundamental questions about what being Jewish means. As someone who deals on a regular basis with Jews who are wondering what their Jewish identity is all about, as well as with folks who are thinking about converting to Judaism but want to learn more, I'm wanting to say more than "you just have to feel it". It's scary to say that, because what if they don't? Are they then "excused"?

Of course, once someone feels the connection, there are a thousand things that I can say about our tradition to help deepen that person's understanding and appreciation – there are texts which can both inspire and challenge us; rituals which help mark the flow of time and the significant experiences of our lives in a particularly meaningful way; opportunities for communal participation and *tikkun olam* which can help us move beyond our individual, often solipsistic lives; cultural and artistic expressions which touch, edify, and provide joy; spiritual practices which can take us out of the mundane world we inhabit most of the time. But none of those are *why* we're Jewish, they're all the result of being Jewish and engaging with it

actively. If being a Jew doesn't touch us, if we just don't care, if we're bored by it or cynical about it, then I don't know if any of these things will move us from that spot of indifference.

You're all here today, something drew you here when there are 50 other things you could be doing on a Thursday in September. Something drew us here and at the end of the day it's hard to articulate clearly what that is. We are blessed to live in a free country; there was no compulsion. Maybe a little guilt, but at the end of the day, no compulsion. Per Halkin, can it be because being Jewish is just what we are? And that if you're Jewish, this is what you do on the first day of Tishre every year, no matter what? Does it have to be more complicated than that? Does it have to supply ultimate meaning to our lives in order to be justified?

This is where the religious vs. ethnic debate in categorizing Judaism really comes to a head. Religions provide ultimate meaning to their adherents; that's their job and if they don't do it, they've failed. Fleg certainly tried to convince anyone who would listen that Judaism does provide it. Some in our community, looking at it as a religion, expect ultimate meaning to constantly flow forth and when it doesn't, they become disappointed and alienated. Membership in an ethnic group, on the other hand, doesn't carry that burden. But it is also therefore potentially less significant – perhaps nothing more than a biographical footnote in the story of our lives. Certainly nothing that makes any particular demands on us. For some, ethnicity is even a negative, because it carries connotations of particularism, narrowness, or tribalism. So what are we?

Well, it certainly can't be denied that many people derive great meaning from their Judaism, and that's of course terrific. I love it when people find meaning in their Judaism, and in fact my life's work is to help Jews find those things in our tradition that will touch them. But I don't think that any of those things are *why* one should be Jewish, they're not the *reason* we're Jewish. Nor is the fact that while we're only one-fifth of one percent of the world's population, our people has produced all these Nobel prize winners and world chess champions. I mean, all that is very nice, but again, ethnic pride is not enough of a reason to be meaningfully Jewish (especially when we remember that our people has also produced Bernie Madoff and plenty of other scoundrels as well). At the end of the day, I am a Jew not because of Einstein and Marx and Freud and Mahler and Proust and Kafka and Bernanke and Abella and Paul Newman and all the other famous Jews who "made it" in the wider world in various spheres (quite a few of whom renounced their Jewish identity anyway)²...but because it's simply who I am and I couldn't be

² Jonathan Sacks, "The Unwritten Chapter," *The Jewish Chronicle*, March 2008.

anything else. Being Jewish is not one of the array of lifestyle choices available to citizens of modern western countries. It's either essential to who we are, or it's nothing.

Once we accept it as essential, then all those great things about it that I mentioned a minute ago start to flow. But the obligations flow too of course. *Schver zu sein a yid*, it's hard to be a Jew – there's no doubt of it. There are mitzvot to perform when we're already pressured for time, good deeds that must be done for others when we've got our own problems, tzedakah that must be given out of limited budgets in tough economic times, Jewish learning that must take place when there are so many other things we need learn in order to live productively in this society, like math and science and languages and literature and the rest. There are synagogues that require our support and participation, in terms of our volunteer time and our finances. There are spiritual questions, faith questions we must wrestle with as Jews, even if we think that's not our "thing" or we think we don't have a natural bent for prayer. There is the imperative to hang on to our hope even when life feels bleakest. And, at this time of year especially, there is the challenge of teshuvah – the honest introspection and merciless self-confrontation we undertake during these *yamim noraim* as we come to grips with the values we really live by, not the ones we talk about, and think about what we must do to change, to become better. These and more are the obligations that go along with being a Jew. We don't have to do them all at once, or all in the same way, but we do need to be somewhere on that road if we are a serious Jew, if we feel that identity emanating from our gut. But is Halkin's concept that the only reason to be Jewish is because that's what we are, enough motivation to take on these difficult challenges and obligations?

And here's another question for Halkin: does the sense of belonging to the people for no particular reason other than that's what we are make us "tribal" or "narrow" or "particularistic"? If so, then I say, so be it. Perhaps we are a tribe. Today we more often use the word "people" about ourselves, because the word "tribe" can have a negative or primitive connotation. At most, we'd use it as a self-deprecating in-joke, as in the acronym MOT. But maybe the word "tribe" does say it best. What does it mean to be a tribe? It means we have a special connection to the other members of our tribe, and they have a special claim on us that's different from the claim of the rest of humanity. It means we have to honour the memory and keep alive the traditions and sacred writings of our ancestors, like other tribes do. Being a tribe doesn't mean we have to denigrate other tribes, or exclude people from other tribes who sincerely want to join us. God forbid. I say to you on this Rosh Hashanah 5772, as we celebrate our tribal new year ritual together, let us strive to be the most compassionate, most humane, most generous, most open-minded, most welcoming, best damn tribe in this whole bloody world.

But as we challenge ourselves in this way to be better as individuals and as a community vis-a-vis the outside world, let's also have the self-respect to know and accept and rejoice in who we are, and nurture the development of our particular tribe without embarrassment, without the fear of being labelled "racist" or "narrow" or "ethnocentric". That self-respect means participating in and supporting our own educational institutions for young and old, where our people's glorious tradition is studied and transmitted. It means getting involved in our religious institutions, where our ancient rituals are enacted and our God is worshipped. For us Diaspora Jews, it also means supporting our tribal homeland, Israel, in one way or another. And let's realize that our membership in this tribe may sometimes require us to compromise a bit on our own individual wants and needs for the sake of the group. Not always, we're not a cult, and Fleg's "no abdication of the mind" is an important principle to remember. But sometimes, if our group is precious to us, our individual autonomy has to give way, even in some very personal parts of our lives like where we live or whom we're with or what we do with our free time. I recognize this is not a popular case to make in our very individualistic era, but I believe it to be utterly necessary if we are to be something more than an agglomeration of individuals, something more than the sum of the parts which comprise us, necessary if we are to be strong enough today so that our grandchildren will want to open the next chapter of our people's 4,000 year old story -- because they'll know that no matter what else is going on and no matter how else the world has changed, that it's simply who they are, unconditionally.

I want to close with some brief thoughts about my experience living in Israel for six months this past year on sabbatical, an experience which helped crystallize some of these ideas in my mind. Because one of the key differences between Israel and the Diaspora revolves around this whole question of "why be Jewish and what does it mean?" For us, living in the Diaspora as part of a tiny minority, it is an existential question, and that's what it was for Fleg. I'm trying to make the case this morning for us to stop asking it, accepting that's simply who we are and moving on, but even I recognize that lots of Jews, whether they articulate it in those words or not, are asking that question. In Israel, it's different. Israel is in many ways a tribal society. For many Israeli Jews, especially those who define themselves as secular, Jewish is their tribe, it's just who and what they are. What they do with it is another matter, and there are a riot of diverse cultural and religious and philosophical and political expressions of that identity for people to choose from and argue over. But the experience of taking off from that starting point, that assumption, is in my opinion, a great gift that Diaspora Jews can learn from Israeli Jews. For this one lucky Diaspora Jew, who had the opportunity to live in that society for six months, observing that identity play itself out was both thrilling and inspiring.

It's Rosh Hashanah today. We're starting the new year together, as Jews do and have always done. The year we're concluding hasn't been easy. The economy has been volatile; whole countries seem to be on the verge of bankruptcy, another recession may be looming, and unemployment remains high. The Arab spring has been fascinating and even at times inspiring to watch, but who knows where it's going and what it will mean for Israel and for the west? Osama bin Laden's been killed, but the terrorists are still out there and Iran's influence only seems to be growing. They've burned and looted in London and massacred innocents in Norway and thousands are starving in Somalia. The Palestinians have applied for statehood at the UN – no one knows what that will mean for an actual two state solution on the ground. Social protests have swept through Israel, and it's still not clear if they will simply fizzle out or actually be the harbinger of real change. 5771 has been a year in which many of our assumptions have been shaken and can no longer be taken for granted. That's unnerving. But here we are. Shehecheyanu. We're alive to witness it, talk about, argue over it. Maybe you can have that discussion over lunch or dinner today. What do you think we are? A religion? A tribe? Some combination? How would you answer the question *pourquoi vous etes juif*? How would you explain to the Palestinians in negotiations what being a "Jewish state" actually means, what being Jewish actually means? How would you explain it to a potential convert?

Whatever we think about these profound questions, let's be grateful that we're alive to talk about them and celebrate another new year, together. We're alive as a people, as a tribe, as a faith, as Jews -- after 4,000 years. We may not know why, but we're grateful that we are.

Shanah Tovah.