Two Types of Jews
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Jewish life is complicated. Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Hartman Institute explains that we suffer from a fair amount of Jewish identity ambivalence that is best symbolized through the first two books of the Torah, Genesis and Exodus.

The Jewish story begins in the Bible, in the book of Genesis. God chooses Abraham after a series of tests and trials. God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. In Genesis 22 we read, “I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands on the seashore.”

We, Abraham’s children don’t have to do anything to gain that blessing. It’s not earned. There are no commandments to follow. Just by virtue of being Abraham and Sarah’s successor, we are blessed.

To make the point, all of the characters we meet in Genesis, all of Abraham’s descendants, are deeply flawed. There is not one tzadik, one moral hero in the bunch. Abraham and Sarah abandon their son Ishmael and leave him to die. Jacob steals the birthright from his brother; his sons attempt fratricide against Joseph, who paraded about in his Technicolor dream coat. Not much character here. But that’s the whole point of Genesis – the blessing is inherited, no matter what we do, we are chosen by the grace of God. We may not deserve it, but we are the chosen people.

Hartman calls this, the narrative of identity, or Genesis Judaism. We are bnai Yisrael, literally, the children of Israel, of Jacob, who is Abraham’s son. We are members of a Biblical family and that carries only one obligation, only one duty – to protect the lineage.

When we turn to the Bible’s next book, to Exodus, we find a different narrative.
In Exodus 19, we stand at the foot of Mt Sinai and accept God’s covenant:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully, and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This covenant is conditional. Something is demanded of us. Identity is bound to the fulfillment of religious and moral obligations. Jewish is not something you are; it’s something you do. Our identity is linked to our actions and the fulfillment of God’s expectations.

This Exodus Judaism, according to Hartman, is built upon a core narrative – we were slaves in the land of Egypt and God brought us out from there to a Promised Land. As slaves in Egypt, we experienced ultimate social invisibility. We were unseen, un-valued, inconsequential, socially erased. The bitterness of slavery stayed with us after we left bondage and so an exquisite social ethic grew from it. Egyptian slavery taught us to see ourselves in the other, to identify with the pain and plight of the other. This is an ethic of empathy: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Ex 23:5) Exodus Judaism demands a moral aspiration and to build a world where no human being is ever relegated to invisibility.

These two dimensions of Jewish identity — Genesis Judaism and Exodus Judaism live side by side in us, as they coexist side by side in the Bible...but not easily. The Bible’s drama flows from God’s struggle to impose Exodus Judaism on a people firmly planted in a Genesis Jewish identity.

In the late 19th century, each of these Judaisms gave rise to their own version of Zionism. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, was the quintessential Genesis Jew. He knew little Judaism, and practiced even less. Nevertheless, he carried a deep sense of Jewish belonging. He knew that Emancipation had failed Europe’s Jews, for even after giving up our unique identity and cultural ways, in the hope that we would be accepted, we were still despised and rejected.

Herzl’s moment of truth came during the trial of Alfred Dreyfus. Dreyfus was a
Jew who had reached the rank of captain in the French Army, and a posting in the General Staff headquarters. He was falsely accused of treason, of giving over secrets to the Germans. On the 5th of January in 1895, Dreyfus was convicted, stripped of his rank, and exiled to Devil’s Island. Herzl covered the story as a reporter for the Vienna New Free Press. What traumatized him over the trial was not the accusation of treason, but the mob outside that wasn’t shouting, “Death to the Traitor,” or even “Death to Dreyfus,” but “Death to the Jews.” If Jews were not accepted in liberal France, he concluded, they would not be safe anywhere.

Herzl lived with the burning awareness that the Jews of Europe were in immediate peril. Envisioning Auschwitz in his dreams, he launched a manic effort to secure a state for the Jewish people – an effort that would kill him at age 44.

In 1897, Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress to start the political process that might bring his vision to reality. Sitting in the back of the hall at that First Congress, was a Zionist with a different vision. His name was Asher Zvi Ginsburg, and he was a Russian Jew, who wrote under the pseudonym, Ahad Ha-Am, one of the people.

If Herzl was the quintessential Genesis Jew, Ahad Ha-Am was the archetypical Exodus Jew. He received a traditional education in Eastern Europe. He was a brilliant scholar who mastered the entire Talmudic tradition while still a boy. As an adult, he got the keys to the community’s library, where he taught himself a dozen languages, and read European literature, science, philosophy.

Ahad Ha-Am understood Judaism as a culture — as a vision of the world, a way of life, and a body of ideas. He perceived that Jewish culture was dying in Russia. In the Bible, Judaism was a moral code touching every aspect of life. He feared that in the Diaspora, Russia to be specific, Judaism would perish, because without a land to realize its moral aspirations, it would be reduced to picayune regulations on kashrut and holiday observances. The Diaspora, argued Ahad Ha-am, had choked the life out of Judaism. Only a Jewish state that could confront the real problems of contemporary life – economic justice, war and peace, the rights of individuals could save Judaism. The purpose of Zionism, in other words, was not to save Jews, but
to save Judaism. What we needed was not just a state where Jews could live, but a Jewish state, whose policies, whose culture would be shaped by the values and aspirations of Jewish culture. In a truly Jewish state, Judaism will come alive in new ways enliven the entire Jewish world.

We lived with these two kinds of Judaism, and two kinds of Zionism, until the Holocaust.

The Holocaust proved Herzl right. The Holocaust elevated survival above all other Jewish values. Survival became our prime imperative, our only mitzvah. One post shoa philosopher, Emil Fackenheim argued that a new commandment has been issued, not from Sinai but from Auschwitz and that commandment is to survive at all costs. Why does Israel exist? To protect the Jewish people and to imbue it with power, so that the phrase “never again” has some teeth to it.

Following the trauma of the Holocaust, the Jewish family around the world, was so deeply wounded, we desperately needed a symbol of life, of resurrection, of renewal. And Israel became that symbol. In a post-Holocaust world, turning away from Israel was unforgiveable. We could deny God, reject the divine truth of Torah, repudiate our traditions, believe in life after death or not and still be counted as a Jew. But denying Israel, as the Jewish homeland and attacking Israel for its policies would bring expulsion and exclusion from the Jewish community. Our support or our criticism of Israel has become the litmus test regarding whether we are in or out.

Genesis Jews see the world as unimaginably dangerous and see our primary duty to defend Israel. Survival is our mitzvah. All else, most especially Ahad Ha-Am’s call for a state rooted in Jewish moral aspirations, is secondary.

This was the case until the events of this summer. The conflict between the IDF and the Palestinians in Gaza have brought out the dilemma of what it means to be a Jew today. The National Religious Law that identifies Israel as a Jewish state, regardless of potential demographic shifts, has divided the diaspora Jewish community in unprecedented ways. Today we are shouting about what Israel’s character should be. Do we protect the family, as we would in the book of Genesis or do we protect our values as we would standing at Sinai?
It seems to me that age is a major determinate in which camp we belong. The young tend to be more critical of Israel for its failure to live up to Jewish values, while those fifty-five and up tend to be more in the survivalist camp.

There are those of us who remember the Six Day War. We grew up with an Israel that was vulnerable and endangered. There are those who were raised among the survivors of the Holocaust, whose stories are part of our own memories and psyche. There are those of us who have known anti-Semitism – the foul word, the prejudiced glance, and the closed door. We don’t take for granted that we are the first generation of diaspora Jews who have never feared a knock at the door in the middle of the night. For us, the instincts of Genesis Judaism to defend our family are strong. For us, the warnings of Herzl are poignant. We live with a constant undertone of insecurity. We know how quickly a liberal society can turn hateful. We have an exquisite sensitivity for the dangers that lurk beneath the surface of genteel society. Call it PTSD. I don’t know, but having been through the worst trauma in human history just a generation ago, we carry in our unconscious a quality of suspicion and fear. So many of us stand with the ADL, The Simon Wiesenthal Center, AIPAC and Federation.

But our children have none of these memories and none of these suspicions. They don’t live with our insecurities. Most have never experienced a moment of prejudice or rejection. America’s democracy, is supposed to be a permanent feature of their reality. The Israel they grew up with has always been overwhelmingly strong. In their experience, Israel’s problem is not its vulnerability but its power; the ethical dilemmas of occupation, and the conduct of warfare. The Israel they grew up with is neither mythical nor pristine. Their memory is of Sabra and Shatila, Baruch Goldstein, Yigal Amir, the Gaza wars, settlements and occupation – their Israel bears the faults of violence, extremism, intolerance, even brutality. They don’t resonate with our Genesis Judaism or Herzl’s brand of Zionism. They don’t see themselves born into the age-old Jewish family. They are born into the human family. They are universalists before they are particularists. And if they accept Judaism, it is not as an inheritance, a place at the family table. It’s about remaking the world. So they tend to support Jewish values based organizations like J Street, Truah and Rabbis for Human Rights, Jewish Voices
for Palestine. They are critical of Israel when Israel does not live up to the values we
here at Beth Or have taught them – equality, pluralism, the pursuit of peace, the
pursuit of justice. Israel is not a haven for the persecuted, but rather the sovereign
expression of a Jewish moral aspiration and a Jewish vision of the world.

The Bible is complicated, as is Jewish life. But the beauty of it is that both
sacred books, Genesis and Exodus are part of our story. We are both a people and a
family and we are called to live up to our values and be a “light unto the nations.”
Exodus, our values need a people to carry them out. Genesis, our family narrative
most take us beyond the mitzvah of survival for its own sake. Genesis must lead to
Exodus.

I have been asked for years, what do we need to do to engage the next
generation? Well, I think I may have an answer. We need to listen to each other. And I
ask that we start engaging each other and appreciating each other’s different
perspectives.

To those Exodus Jews in shul this morning, I ask, “with so much hatred directed
our way, what should Israel’s response be? When 50,000 Palestinians storm a border
and light it on fire, burn the south of Israel with missiles and incendiary balloons and
then try to cross the border with the purpose of killing Jews, what should the Israeli
army do? Should Israel facilitate an independent Palestinian State when 65% of
Palestinians still feel its ok to murder Jews as a form of resistance to the occupation?
And what do you think they mean when they say they want to end the occupation? In
many Palestinian’s minds, Haifa, Tel Aviv and Ashdod are occupied lands. What
should Israel do, when it cannot get her enemies to recognize her right to be?

To those Genesis Jews among us, I ask, “What should we do when liberal forms
of Judaism are suppressed in Israel; when women are not treated as religious equals at
the Western Wall and elsewhere? What should a Jewish state be like? Can Israel
survive as Jewish state but not as a democratic one? Can Israel continue to hold on to
the territories indefinitely and still be accepted in the international community? How
does defining Israel as the Jewish State impact her ethnic minorities and most
personally the rights of non-Orthodox Jews?
Jewish life is complicated. It always has been, and I suspect it will always be so. We all live somewhere between our Genesis and our Exodus identities. May we hear both truths from our texts and most of all from each other. May we at our Yom Tov family meals following this service have open and honest discussions about what it means to be a Jew and a lover of Israel.

In the past week, we dedicated two memorials at Beth Or. We have permanently retired our Holocaust Torah, which we can all visit in the Memorial Alcove. We also moved the Warsaw Ghetto uprising statue from the alcove to a new location in the Jayne Haines Memorial chapel. As you leave today, please visit them both and reflect on their messages. We must, as the Warsaw Ghetto piece teaches, defiantly and courageously resist those who seek our destruction and at the same time, it is Torah and its noble ethical values that guarantee our survival as a covenanted people.