

What Madonna and Others Can Teach Us: It's Good to be Jewish!

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An earlier generation looked at the burden of being Jewish, and shrieked *gevalt*. “*Shver zu zain a yid: It's hard to be a Jew*” was their rallying cry, and a comment frequently expressed. So hard, in fact, that many opted out once the Emancipation occurred in the 19th century, and made leaving the fold a possibility. They felt burdened by the requirements of being a part of a covenanted people governed by an extensive and pervasive legalistic system, known as halacha, by the commandments and expectations imposed upon them by a demanding God. Another factor, of course, was the scourge of anti-semitism, with all its ugliness, and the limitations it placed upon them which restricted the possibility for advancement in work or society. “Who needs this?” they said. I am always conscious of the fact that those of us here are a remnant of those who made the choice to dare to be Jewish. Some 2,000 years ago, there were 4 million Jews, meaning that today, there should be over 200 million of us. But alas, history has not been kind to us.

While anti-semitism appears to be on the rise around the world, and according to the latest demographic studies, we may not be holding our own, as our numbers continue to decline, nevertheless, it seems, that in 21st century America, at least, there are some people who want to opt in, and who find Judaism and being Jewish appealing.

A recent article in *Newsday* and the *Washington Post* talked about a hot new fashion trend started by Jason Saft, a young mid 20 year old who walked the streets of New York with a t-shirt he had designed. The word “Jewcy” was boldly emblazoned across the front, with the letter “w” distinctively looking like the Hebrew letter shin. The reaction? “I was mobbed,” he said. “People were coming up to me on the street, Jews and non-Jews, saying, ‘I have to have that shirt.’” Saft had discovered and tapped into how hip it is to be Jewish in America.

Although not too long ago, it was not fashionable to be openly identified as a Jew in America, and people would go to great lengths to hide their identity, suddenly, it is in. Klezmer music is in demand and experiencing a revival, and often, neither the audiences nor the performers are Jewish. Interest in the study of classical Jewish texts, especially kabbalah is the latest fad to sweep the country. The reigning fashion king is a nice Jewish boy, named Ralph Lauren. In what is too bizarre not to be true, the biggest pop star of our era, Esther, better known as Madonna, is in Israel, as we speak, in honor of the Rosh Hashanah holiday.

How far we have come.

350 years ago a small group of 23 Jews first set foot on the shores of this country. Settling in what was then known as New Amsterdam, the Sephardic Jews who left

Recife, Brazil sought refuge from the latest onslaught of the Inquisition. Since Brazil was no longer in Dutch control, but had fallen into the hands of Portugal, Jews fled rather than face persecution. The initial reaction of Governor Peter Stuyvesant to the uninvited guests was to send them back, but he awaited word from the owner of the colony, the Dutch West Indies Company. In the meantime, he sequestered and imprisoned them.

He eventually received his instructions: Release them at once, and give them safe harbor. What Stuyvesant probably did not realize when he asked for guidance was that a significant number of the investors in the company and members of the board were themselves Sephardic Jews, who naturally and immediately felt a kinship with and for their fellow Jews.

Certain things do not change. Part of the hallmark of being a Jew is the sense of kinship and of belonging to a people, a people who cares for each other, even if divided by an ocean. Much more than just a religion, we are a people with a distinct culture, outlook, shared values, customs and history.

Most of our ancestors arrived in this country not 350 years ago, but within the last 120 years. They came here from a culture very different from the one we currently know. Back in the days of the founding of this country, most Jews lived in Europe or in Moslem lands. Life was very different back then.

So what has become of us over these past 350 or 120 years? In America, the challenge has been to preserve our identity in a society that is not hostile to us, but precisely in one which has been so open. Here we can dare to ask: what kind of Jews do we want to be, what kind of Judaism do we wish to create, and what kind of identity do we wish to have.

A story may illustrate our pattern and the extent of our acculturation.

A young man left his shtetl at the beginning of the last century, promising his family to return after he had made good in America, the Goldene Medina. At first he struggled to eek out a living. But after a few years, he got the hang of things, and became very prosperous, even wealthy. Rich enough to buy a ticket back to his native Poland, where he would now surprise his family and bring them all with him to America.

His mother was surprised to see that he no longer had a beard. "Mama," he explained, "in America, its not fashionable to have a beard." Next, she noticed, he no longer wore a head covering. "Mama," he replied, "in America, people don't wear hats, and certainly not yarmulkes." A bit worried, she asked if he still kept kosher and Shabbat. Once again, she was disappointed to hear her son explain that in America, kashrut and Shabbat are impediments to business, and so he no longer observed these mitzvoth either. She was an understanding and accepting woman, and didn't raise any objections. A little later, though, she leaned over and asked her son, "Moisheleh, now I'm starting to get worried. Tell me just one thing – in America, are you at least still circumcised."

It is no longer necessary to go to such lengths to hide or obscure our Jewish identity. You can order kosher food on an airplane, or in the army. Presidents of Ivy League colleges are Jewish, there is a minyan in the U.S. Senate, and every major Democratic Party candidate for President expressed some claim of Jewish ancestry during the primaries this year.

We have become so comfortable and a part of the fabric of America, that author Jonathan Rosen wrote in a recent article in the *New York Times*, it is “as if Ellis Island had displaced Mt. Sinai as the epicenter of Jewish identity and the farther the generations moved from the experience, the paler their “Jewish” energies become.”

His point is that we are no longer immigrants in America. We are at home here. Unfortunately, however, we are immigrants to Judaism, to the world of our origins, and to the world our ancestors left.

Remember the Lenny Bruce routine? If you live in New York, you're Jewish, even if you're not. So what about those who are not Jewish, but who want in? What does it all mean and portend for us? Hollywood stars studying kabbalah has at least led some Jews to think perhaps there is some wisdom or insights in Jewish writings that merit investigation. Non-Jews studying Jewish texts doesn't bother me, especially if it causes Jews to take a closer look at their own tradition. And how can we object when such sensitivity is shown. Madonna who refrains from eating certain non-kosher foods has asked Jews not to violate the High Holy Days to see her. Her PR agency has requested that only non-Jewish photographers cover her visit and that journalists covering events while she is in Israel for the holidays wear white and not bring writing utensils or cameras to the press conference. She has even stopped performing on Friday nights --- maybe she got an advance copy of yesterday's sermon!

This is not what bothers me. What concerns me though is the disturbing trend among non-Jewish 13 year olds wanting to have a bar or bat mitzvah. An article appearing earlier this year on the front-page of the *Wall Street Journal*, reports of one “faux mitzvah” party at a beachfront banquet hall with a Hawaiian surfing theme, a DJ and two professional dancers. A New York party planner who organized one such party that cost \$ 75,000 is quoted as saying, "Parents will call us and say, 'My son's been to over 20 bar and bat mitzvahs, and I just want to do something nice for him.'”

An interesting and insightful quote from the article: “A generation ago, when bar mitzvahs were simple affairs celebrated with a glass of Manischewitz, the idea of a copycat rite wouldn't have occurred to anybody. But, starting in the late 1960s, parties with themes became popular, and by the end of the '70s in some areas, competition was raging to make them ever more elaborate.”

While there is nothing necessarily wrong with this, I am not so sure it a good thing. On the one hand, it is nice to know that others looking on the outside want in. It is nice and somewhat flattering. But on the other hand, what does it say about Jews and about what

it means to be Jewish in America? Are we that vacuous? Do others look at us and only see materialistic, opulent, over the top celebrations?

Maybe I would feel a little better about the whole thing if they were not just mimicking our parties, our celebrations, and our ostentatiousness. But the truth is, perhaps we are the ones at fault, because this is what we project rather than the centrality of torah, of commitment to a covenant and of the obligations and responsibility that accompanies becoming a bar mitzvah.

Don't they realize it is hard work to be a bar mitzvah. I am reminded of the Alan King shtick when he talks about the preparation for his son's bar mitzvah. "After the first week, the maid was singing the haftarah; after the second week, the dog was singing the haftarah, but my son was still working on it." The truth is it is more than just learning to chant in a foreign language.

But when children terminate their commitment to Judaism with a big bash, and parents tolerate this, and say nothing, what more can we expect. When we do not practice anything Jewish in our lives, what can we expect? When the only time we attend Shabbat services is when we are invited to a bar or bat mitzvah, how can we expect non Jews to think there is little more to Judaism than having a great DJ or band when you turn 13?

If we believe this is acceptable, then we should not be shocked when the mirror is held up and this is what others see in us.

I want to tell you on this Holy Day that while simchas are great and important, there is much more to being Jewish than having lavish blow-out parties. And there are plenty of other reasons it is good to be Jewish and aspects of Judaism that are deserving of admiration and imitation. It is good to be Jewish because of the kind of people we are, the ethics we have, and especially when we act upon the teachings of our sages.

If you are in trouble or in danger – It is good to be Jewish.

Take for example, Ethiopian Jews who were cut off from the rest of the Jewish world for 2,000 years, but who said they wanted to come home and be reunited with the rest of their people. No questions were raised about whether or not this influx of impoverished illiterate people would be good for Israel. Rather, Israel and Jews around the world responded, immediately by rescuing them and bringing them to Israel, the only time in the history of the world black people were taken en masse out of Africa to freedom and not as slaves.

That's not all we do. Jews living in the Former Soviet Union receive a hot meal and other support, because Jews around the world through their contributions to their local Federations care about them. We see it as our responsibility to see to it that these elderly indigent people are taken care of because ingrained into our conscience is the notion, "*Kol Yisrael areivin zeh b'zeh*: All of Israel is responsible for one another."

Somehow, I wish these were the Jewish values that others were more aware of and would aspire to emulate and imitate. We and the world would be far better off if we were recognized for our work helping our fellow Jews and others in times of need. There are all kinds of Jews, and much that divides us, but when it comes to saving Jewish lives, or rescuing others, nothing is of greater importance.

Indeed, there are all kinds of Jews –

Modern, ultra & just plain Orthodox Jews, Charedim, Misnagdim, Hasidim, Conservative, Conservadox, Reform & ConForm Jews, Jews in kapatas, Jews with sheitels, black hat, kipa s'ruga, kipa only in shul/hat in shul/ no shul at all Jews, converted Jews, FFB: Frum from birth Jews, BT: Baalei Teshuva, Satmar, Agudah, Beta Yisrael, payos in front of the ear Jews, payos in back of the ear Jews, Mizrachi Jews, Jews by choice, Bathrobe on Friday night Jews, Ten Lost Tribes Jews, cardiac Jews, lox and bagel Jews, gastronomic Jews, Kosher Jews, Biblical Kosher Jews, Vegetarian Jews, Traife Jews, Irish Jews, Black Jews, White Jews, 3-day-a-year Jews, Rav Nachman Jews, Rav Shlomo Jews, Neturei Karta Jews, Chofetz Chaim Jews, zaftig Jews, skinny Jews, Lakewood & Ner Israel , JTS, RRC, HUC, Y.U. Jews, BJ Jews, Celebrity Jews, Generation X,Y & Z Jews, NCSY Jews, Solomon Schechter Jews, Kahane Jews, Feminist Jews, Chauvinist Jews, traditional Jews, egalitarian Jews, non-egalitarian traditional Jews, Kaddish-zuger Jews, political Jews, intellectual Jews, “I’m not a good Jew, but I’m a good person Jew” Jews, secular Jews, Federation Jews, social action Jews, Israeli Jews, American Jews, Persian Jews, Russian Jews, Galitzianers, Litvaks, Polacks, single Jews, married Jews, wish I was married Jews, South of the Border Jews, Southern Jews, Italian Jews, Bald Jews, Hairy Jews, Canadian Jews, Latino Jews, Ladino Jews, Hungarian Jews, Czech Jews, Jews on the Hungarian-Czech Border Jews, Ashkenazic Jews, Sefardic Jews, Yemenite Jews, Zionists, non-Zionists, anti-Zionists, post-Zionists, Jews with an accent, Anglo-Saxon Jews, French Jews, German Jews, Greek Jews, Chinese Jews, Wannabee Jews, Shayna Panim Jews, Meesekite Jews, Closet Jews, Shnorrrers, Tzadikim, Baynonim, Reshaim, Chacham-Tam-Ayni Yodea Jews, Chevramen & Forbisseners, kvetching Jews, Guta Neshama Jews, Vizhnitzer, Ger, Gerer, Kohanim, Levi'im, Yisraelim, Machers, Mavens, Manchester, Melbourne, Jerusalem and Toronto Jews, and probably a few others we may be overlooking.

With such diversity, is there anything we have in common? Pirke Avot associates qualities of mercy, compassion and benevolence with the Jewish people, and these are the distinguishing hallmarks of our identity and persona throughout history.

As if to reinforce the importance of these attributes, the Torah explicitly prohibits marrying the descendants of Moabites and Amonites because they refused to offer the Israelites bread and water when they were wandering in the desert, and asked for help. In other words, these people exhibited a total lack of consideration for others. They were condemned as the antithesis of B'nai Yisrael for they did not display any aspects of the qualities of hesed, of mercy or compassion.

Another significant characteristic is our obsession with memory and knowing and transmitting our past and our history. We are a people committed to telling our story to our children, so that the next generation will always know who they are, where they come from, and what it means to be a Jew. These are qualities to admire and emulate.

A story is told of a conversation between a Jew and a gypsy, one of the Sinti and Roma people in one of the Nazi death camps. Like the Jews, the gypsies were also marked for extinction. The two spoke of the common fate they shared, but the gypsy told his Jewish companion, “We shall both perish, but there is a difference. My death will be forgotten; but yours will not be. Your people will always remember you and recall your death and your life.”

To be a Jew is to be a member of an indomitable tenacious people, who will go to great ends on behalf of our fellow Jews, and who preserve the memory and tell the story of our history. This is part of what unites us despite our differences.

Natan Sharansky says that when he was in the Soviet prisons he was tormented by the prison guards who would mock and deride him by saying to him humiliatingly – “Do you really think you can defeat us? We Soviets are a mighty empire. All you have working on your behalf are a bunch of students and housewives.” And Sharansky would smugly, confidently and defiantly respond, “Yes, but they are Jewish students and housewives!”

He understood the power of a people motivated by love of their fellow Jews, by a people spurred on by memory and for whom the rallying cry, “Never Again” means never again will we allow our fellow Jews to be persecuted without our acting on their behalf. Never again will we sit by idly and not act on behalf of our fellow Jews, or others subject to persecution. Even now, our community is protesting the loudest against the slaughter and rampant killing being conducted by Arab militias in Sudan against black Christian Africans.

The Dubner Magid told a story about a father who was taking his child to cheder early in the morning in their shtetl. Suddenly, they hear some commotion and noise, and look up and see the poretz, the Polish nobleman and landowner is approaching the impoverished town, in a beautiful carriage pulled by a team of equally beautiful horses. The carriage comes to a stop right near the father and his son, and the servant opens the door and out steps the Polish nobleman, dressed rather opulently and exuding wealth.

After he left the village, the father says to his child, “Gibbe kuk main kind – Take a good luck, my child. Because I want you to know, irh nisht lernen, If you don’t study Torah, ah zah ponim vest tu huben --- that’s what you are going to look like!”

Rather than envy the wealthy aristocrat, the father looked beyond the external appearances and saw the emptiness and intellectual barrenness and shortcomings of the nobleman. He contrasted it with the world of torah, and of learning, and realized that Judaism is far richer than a world of opulence and wealth. He concluded, it is good to be Jewish. He came to this conclusion because of the kind of world he inhabited – a world

based on the teachings of the rabbis, a world of decency, predicated upon qualities of kindness, mercy, benevolence, respect and compassion.

May we also then take this message to heart. As we celebrate the 350th anniversary of our arrival in this country, may we cling to those enduring values which have nourished and kept us alive throughout the ages. In so doing we will continue to be admired by others. Let these be the aspects of being Jewish that others wish to associate themselves with, and to copy. Then shall we continue to serve our God-given role, to be a light unto the nations, for all time.

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