

Why Be Jewish?

*Rosh Hashana Morning 2008
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There are several versions of a story about merchants carrying their wares with them to a far away land. While on the boat they bragged to each other about how well they would do. But before they landed the ship capsized, and although the passengers were saved, all the merchandise was lost. When they arrived in the distant city, with no goods to sell, they were all financially ruined, except for the poor *melamed*, the teacher of Torah who proceeded to the beit midrash, the study hall. There he found students eager to study, who paid him for the lessons he gave. The story ends with a rhyming phrase to make its point, "Torah is the best *sechorah*: Torah is the best merchandise."

In light of the recent crisis on Wall Street and the current condition of the financial markets, some may identify with the passengers on that ill-fated ship.

A variation on the theme tells of the simple *melamed*, a poor teacher in 19th century Czarist Russia who always tried to devise schemes to become wealthy. He whispered to a friend, "You know, if I were the czar, I would be richer than the czar." His friend responded, "You are crazy. The czar owns everything - How could you possibly be richer than the czar?!" "Easy," the simple Jew replies, "I would teach Torah on the side."

I think about these stories when I consider the nature of the merchandise that I have to offer and its value. Not too long ago I was speaking with someone in the electronics business about the latest upcoming innovations in his field. With great enthusiasm and excitement he told me of products that had not yet hit the market and of the increasingly sophisticated level of technology being developed. Listening to him describe 3-D television and other things that will soon become the latest "must have" toys, I couldn't help but think to myself, "what do I have to offer this guy?", or for that matter, anyone else who would be fascinated by the latest electronic gadgets. In other words, I was thinking and asking myself, what does Judaism have to say to people in the 21st century, in a world filled with conveniences, contraptions and contrivances? What does our ancient heritage offer a society driven by consumption and consumerism, to individuals who have access to the best and latest cutting edge advances?

The question is an important one, and perhaps the most important and fundamental one facing us as a community today. We are certainly not the first to ask it, but in a day and age when affiliation is optional, assimilation is rampant, and more and more choose to opt out of being Jewish, those of us who are concerned about our long term viability must confront the issue head on, and be able to answer the question: What does Judaism have to say to us, and what does it have to offer the next generation, our children?

Kirk Douglas' latest autobiographical work, "Let's Face It" describes how in his later years he has come to embrace Judaism. He regrets not having practiced the faith of his

ancestors when he was younger. He even muses about the decision early in his life to change his name from Issur Danielovitch. He writes that his son "Joel is married to a fine woman, Jo Ann. They both go to a Catholic church every Sunday. I approve of that." While I applaud his pride and am pleased that he studies Torah every week with a rabbi, I only wish that he would understand that his inability to transmit Judaism to his children is unfortunate, and that being a Jew means not just having Jewish grandparents, but more importantly, having Jewish grandchildren.

Parents who send their children off to college want them to remain connected to the Jewish community, to their roots. But how can we explain to them the value of being Jewish, when we ourselves can barely articulate why Judaism is important to us?

Clearly there is inherent value in being Jewish and being a part of the Jewish community. To strengthen the Jewish community of Dothan, Alabama, a small town in the heart of the Bible Belt, an organization is offering \$ 50,000 to every Jew who moves there. They want to recruit Jews to live in this overwhelmingly Christian town of 58,000 because they don't want their community to die out nor do they want to be the last Jews in their community.

We ask people not just to purchase tickets for the high holidays, but to join and be a part of the community. Despite our urgings, there are those who say they don't use the synagogue, so why should they have to belong to it and support its upkeep? Synagogue membership is important precisely because it means belonging to and supporting the Jewish community. We want individuals to look at being a member of the congregation as the portal whereby they are members of the larger Jewish community, and not just consumers of the services we have to offer.

Too many of us do not recognize the inherent value of our faith and heritage. This coupled with Jews not realizing how precarious our existence is presents a serious problem. Consequently people do not recognize the impact and magnitude of the decisions each Jew makes on the very survival of our heritage and faith.

It is easy to assume that the decisions we make don't matter because there are times when it seems as if the whole world is Jewish. Take for example this announcement posted on the MTA Long Island Rail Road website announcing that eight additional eastbound trains from Penn Station were added yesterday, between 2:09 PM and 3:48 PM for customers traveling early in observance of Rosh Hashanah.

It reminds me of the joke about the two old men sitting on the beach in Miami. As they surveyed the crowd, one asked the other, "Max, how many Jews are there in the world?" His friend responds, "About 12 - 14 million." "And tell me, Max, how many Chinese people are there in the world?" Max answers, "Over a billion." "So, Max, look up and down the beach. Tell me, do you see one single Chinese person here?!"

Although it may often appear that the whole world is Jewish, it is not. We constitute, less than .25% of the entire world population. Let me repeat that statistic, because many Jews do not even realize how miniscule our numbers are: .25 % - that is less than 1 %;

not even ½ %, not even a third of a percent. The implication is that we cannot assume that Judaism will survive. What each Jew does has a tremendous impact on our viability.

Judaism is recognized as the first monotheistic religion, as the religion which spawned the world's two other great monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. But Judaism is more than just a religion. It is a culture and a civilization that entails being a member of a people.

In twenty first century America our identity is not imposed upon us by outsiders who define where we can and cannot go. In a free and open society, we make choices about everything from how we want our fast food hamburgers to customizing our coffee lattes and the ringtone on our cell phones. It should come as no surprise that our attitudes and allegiances toward religion are also a matter of choice. A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life this past spring said that over a quarter of adult Americans have left the faith of their childhood, either choosing a new faith, or none at all.

We must answer questions our ancestors never confronted, for not being Jewish was not an option available to them.

I would contend that there are three primary reasons which correspond to the benefit we derive from being Jewish. To sum it up in a few words: Judaism is a way of life that gives us an identity, values, and a sense of meaning.

You are a part of a people who have a definite history, and in whom you can be proud. In fact, a recent survey of American Jews indicated that between 96 - 97 % of all Jews are proud to be Jewish. This is truly amazing. Since when do we agree with such unanimity on anything??

We are proud because of our achievements and our contributions to the world, which far exceed our miniscule numbers. What we have done is all the more remarkable not just in light of how small a people we are, but also when we consider how we have been treated by the nations of the world.

After the Holocaust, when 1/3 of our people was annihilated, this decimated people did not turn bitter or develop a theology of hatred. We did not withdraw or turn our back on the world, or become suicide bombers, but instead continued to search for meaningful ways to have a positive impact, to heal the rupture, to ameliorate pain and suffering, and to work for *tikun olam*, repair of the world. We responded by creating a homeland to take in refugees from around the world.

To be sure, there have been those throughout the ages who have spurned their Judaism and turned their backs on their identity. Amos Elon wrote a book entitled, The Pity of It All about German Jewry from the late 18th century until the onslaught of the Holocaust. He describes the lives of those who abandoned their religion because they saw it as a burden to their personal advancement. They were willing to forego centuries of who and what they were so they would not be held back from advancing in their careers.

Ultimately, in Nazi Germany their fate was no different than that of those who remained Jewish, but how sad that they did not see or appreciate the beauty inherent in Judaism, and its values.

Some of you may have caught the column in last week's Washington Post called "Date Lab" about a nice Jewish girl who went out on a date with a nice Jewish guy, originally from Israel. She basically freaked out because he took her to a kosher restaurant and felt uncomfortable and self-conscious.

From my own experience as a rabbi I know that when I work with people who convert they help us see things we take for granted. It sometimes takes an individual coming from the outside to hold up a mirror and describe what attracted him to our faith for us to appreciate what we overlook. Dana Jennings, an editor at The New York Times who recently converted to Judaism, found a depth in Judaism he did not find elsewhere. "What won me over to Judaism was the insistence that our sacred texts were still vivid, still alive, the idea that the Torah and the Talmud were meant to be wrestled with the way Jacob wrestled with the angel." Describing the "energy" he finds in Judaism, he wrote, "I was moved by a tradition in which we are still in dialogue with our greatest teachers. We Jews speak of the ancient sages Hillel and Rabbi Akiva as if we just had an espresso with them at Starbucks. We refer to Moses Maimonides, the brilliant 12th century rabbi and physician as if he still made house calls. We don't dwell on saints and martyrs, but on flesh and blood men and women."

I made a reference a little while ago to kids going off to college. Perhaps I am thinking about that since my youngest child started college this September. But the interesting thing was when we went to visit some college campuses this past year every time, after taking the tour I would ask him, "what else do you want to see or do?" And every time he said the same thing - "Dad, I want to see the sports facilities, and of course, the Hillel House."

For him it wasn't even a question or issue, because it is such a natural part of who he is, which is why he said, "of course, Hillel." And that is what I would want all of our children to feel. They may have other interests, but being Jewish should be an inherent, natural, integral part of their essence. Part of the success of the Birthright Israel trips is because for the first time in their lives, kids are exposed to the energy and vitality of a people very much alive. They see Judaism and Jews through a different lens, as a people, culture and nation. The encounter leaves them realizing that there is something invigorating and exciting about being part of such a vibrant, dynamic, interesting people.

My son, Micha told me about an experience he had on a date. Shortly into the conversation at dinner, the young woman said she had never been to Israel, and went on to say she had no interest in going either, because it really wasn't important to her. The moment she said that her heritage meant nothing to her was the moment he lost interest in her. Why? Because he understands that who he is, and his very identity is defined by being a member of this people.

This is what Natan Sharansky is talking about in his most recent book, Defending Identity. He contends that identity gives life meaning beyond life itself. "It offers a connection to a world beyond the self...a sense of life beyond the physical and material, beyond mere personal existence." Having grown up as a secular Jew with no exposure to his heritage, when he discovered Judaism, he found purpose, which in turn gave him strength to endure the hardships he confronted.

He tells a story about Napoleon inquiring about why the Jews were crying one day. It was explained to the ruler that the Jews were sad because it was Tisha B'Av and they were mourning the destruction of the Temple. He is said to have responded, "A people who still feels anguish and weeps over the destruction of their culture 2,000 years ago will endure forever."

To be a Jew is to be connected to something eternal, something larger than yourself. It means to be connected to our history, our ideas, our destiny, to each other, and to belong to a people, with all of our *mishegas*. Yet the essence of Judaism transcends identity and a tribal sense of belonging. Being Jewish entails much more than belonging to an ethnic clan that enjoys lox and gefilte fish.

One of our distinguishing characteristics is our unique set of ideals and values which determines our outlook and perspective on life, our approach to various situations and issues, and even our sense of humor.

Take for example the story about the rabbi, minister and priest captured by an Indian tribe in the Wild West who tell the three, they are going to be skinned alive and their skin will be used to make a canoe. Each is given a last request. The minister asks for a knife. Not wanting to give them the pleasure of killing him, he takes the knife, slashes his throat and dies. The priest takes the knife and does the same thing, dying instantly. Unlike the minister and priest, however, the rabbi asks for a fork instead of a knife. As the tribesmen look on with bewilderment, the rabbi starts poking himself all over his body with the fork, and screams at them, "I hope your *farshtunkeneh* canoe sinks!"

The truth is that in all seriousness, we do have a distinct sense of humor, which reflects our unique Jewish values and experience. Mel Brooks once equated being Jewish with being the quintessential outsider, and wrote, "The people who had the greatest reason to weep learned more than anyone else how to laugh."

The Talmud, however, makes it amply clear that the hallmark of being a Jew is more than this. It claims that our values, primarily, having compassion for others is what distinguishes us. The rabbis legislated this into commandments, which became our way of life, a way of life I want to be sure we do all we can to preserve. As Rabbi Elazar said, "whoever does acts of charity and justice is considered as having filled the world with lovingkindness."

Take as one small manifestation of our approach to life the difference between Halloween and Purim. On both holidays kids dress in costumes. On Halloween children go from door to door asking people to give them candy. On Purim kids also

dress up in costumes. The difference is though that instead of asking others to give them something, children and adults distribute *shlach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim*. We mark the holiday celebrating our being saved from destruction by an evil tyrant not by asking strangers to give us sweets, but by giving treats to others and gifts to the needy.

Jews are known as leaders in the fashion world, but we might not realize that there is a Jewish dress code, saying we should be modest in our dress as well as in our speech. An example of a value that cannot be enacted into law is the commandment to return lost objects. Another one is the Biblical prohibition against standing idly by the blood of our neighbors. If we see injustice, our tradition compels us to act. Judaism teaches that the earth is not our own. The implication is that therefore we are obligated to take care of it, and also to help each other. Our compassion is mandated into laws requiring us to care for the orphan and the disadvantaged, to protect the stranger in our midst. We don't even have a word for charity. *Tzedekah*, the closest we have to it really means justice and righteousness, because helping others is inherently the right thing to do.

Finally, I want each of us here today to understand that the values and beauty of being Jewish leads to the third dimension. It offers us something that is otherwise missing in the lives of many. It provides a sense of meaning and purpose.

Rick Warren in his best selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life* explains that everyone is driven by something. It could be a deadline, pressure, guilt, resentment, anger, fear, materialism, or the need for approval. He explains that knowing your purpose becomes the motivating and organizing principle of your life.

We Jews have a purpose. As Elie Wiesel wrote in his collection of essays, *A Jew Today*, "We are a people with a mission who has forgotten our mission."

What is that mission?

I can tell you what it is not. It is not only about being happy. Too many people today think that this is what life is all about. "I just want my children to be happy" is a mantra. But it is detached from anything meaningful. And what happens when we are no longer happy? Is it any wonder we have so many divorces and unhappy people? My son understood life is about more than just being happy. It is also has to do with values and knowing and being who you are.

Another reason Birthright has such an impact is because kids see young people their own age fighting to protect and defend the Jewish homeland. For the first time they realize that being concerned about more than one's own comfort and worrying about more than a retirement portfolio gives meaning and purpose to living.

What is our purpose? Genesis boldly teaches that every human being is created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Abraham is told by God that through him all the nations of the world would become blessed. Later the prophet Isaiah said that our role is to be a light unto the nations, or *laGoyim*. The sages had the audacity to believe that we are God's partners. They are all saying the same thing, encapsulated in the injunction in the

Book of Leviticus where we are commanded to be a holy people, to be holy individuals and thus to bring Holiness to the world. It then provides us with the way to live a life of holiness.

Our principles determine our morals and ethics which thereby guide how we relate to others, which in turn provides meaning and grants fulfillment. Having meaning gives purpose to our life, and having a purpose in life, gives meaning to our existence. I guess you can say being Jewish is like having a road map, or to use more contemporary terms, a GPS system, only not only does it tell you how to get where you are going, it tells you what the destination is, and why you are going there.

The converse of the story told by Sharansky about Napoleon being impressed by the devotion to memory is also true. A Palestinian terrorist gained confidence that they would be victorious in their goal of destroying Israel when he saw a prison guard eating bread on Passover. The prisoner asked him why he was not observing Jewish tradition. The guard replied, "I feel no obligation or connection to events that took place over 2,000 years ago." That was when the terrorist came to believe that the Palestinians would one day achieve their goal, because as he told an Israeli journalist, "a nation that has no connection to its roots can be eradicated."

I will admit there are times when I may question God's actions and existence. But I find in Judaism a way to make sense of the world, to help me cope and get through times of sorrow and difficulty as well as the means to mark and celebrate life's milestones. As part of a community, I am not alone, but with God, my people and the wisdom bequeathed by the sages.

Furthermore, I owe it to those who came before me to not be the last link in that chain of people who lived their lives striving to walk humbly with their God. As a result of the Inquisition and expulsion from Spain Jews were forced to hide their true identity and to take on pseudo names and false lives. Yet there were those who clung tenaciously to their identity, risking their lives despite the precarious fate and persecution that awaited them. Living in a free society, I feel compelled to make the choice to do what I can to honor their memory and to perpetuate our heritage.

When we complete a book of the Torah at Shabbat morning services we rise and proclaim, "*Hazak, hazak, ventihazek.*" We are asking to be strengthened, and the reason we ask for this is because our task is not yet completed.

A passage in the Talmud (Makkot 23b) tells us that 613 commandments were given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. David reduced them to eleven essential principles. Subsequently, Isaiah further consolidated them to six. The prophet Micah came and reduced them to three, when he proclaimed, "The Lord requires only that you do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." And then it concludes that Habakkuk reduced all the mitzvot to one principle, "the righteous shall live by His faith."

I think the rabbis were not just playing a game, but trying to help us not be intimidated or feel overwhelmed by the task before us. And that *sugya* has been the final, definitive

word – until today. To help you understand the essence of my message this morning, and to answer the question, why be Jewish? I would say that the efficacy of being Jewish can be summed up in three letters that represent three concepts. Be Jewish because Judaism is a framework and way of relating to the world that gives us values, identity and purpose, VIP. Understand that, just those three letters and as Hillel would say, the rest is commentary: Go and learn it. And I would add: Go and learn it and live it!

In the early morning prayers we thank God by saying, *Baruch atah adonai, elohenu melech haolam, she Asani Yisrael*": Blessed are you O Lord Our God, who has made me a Jew." May each of us do all we can to insure that this blessing will continue to be recited until the end of time.

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