

Lessons the Jews of Budapest Can Teach Us

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The late Jewish novelist Saul Bellow, winner of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes for literature is acclaimed by many as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. His novels deal primarily with the struggle of Jewish characters to assimilate and adapt to the world around them. One of his few works of nonfiction, entitled "To Jerusalem and Back" which I read while in college recorded his impressions of Israel and Israelis, about their decency, humanity and dedication to the pursuit of peace.

Aware of his background I was surprised to read in a lengthy piece in the Washington Post about his son, Adam who is editorial director of a conservative publishing house. In the 29th paragraph of a 34 paragraph article he is quoted as saying, "Liberals, especially liberal Jews, are scared of conservative Christians." What surprised me is not that he is a conservative, nor that he isn't fond of liberal Jews, but that the article continued, "Bellow no longer practices Judaism."

No longer practices Judaism?!

I am not related to the guy, and don't know him, but I was disturbed and saddened by the comment, since I feel the pain and take personally the loss of any Jew. I couldn't help but wonder how the grandson of immigrants from Russia, whose father is so strongly associated with the Jewish experience, who edited a wonderful anthology of Jewish short stories, who translated into English Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yiddish story, Gimpel the Fool, "no longer practices Judaism."

Another individual clearly identified as Jewish is Stewart Konigsberg, better known as Woody Allen. At the end of an interview with Dave Itzkoff of the New York Times in September of 2010, Itzkoff innocently asked if it was appropriate to wish him a happy Jewish New Year. The filmmaker told the Times reporter, "No, no, no. That's for your people. I don't follow it. I wish I could get with it," inexplicably adding, "It would be a big help on those dark nights."

"That's for your people..." Funny, I always thought we are his people and that he was one of us. But for Woody Allen, apparently Judaism is little more than a convenient punch line for jokes and a source of parody and ridicule. After reading the interview with him I couldn't help but wonder if all his jokes about Jews over the years were laughing at us and not with us. I suspect Bellow dismisses Judaism as little more than liberal political ideology.

Unfortunately, all of us know individuals who no longer associate with Judaism or who cease to identify as Jews. The loss is ours, ... and theirs.

Half way around the world, against inconceivable hardships a few months ago I witnessed something very different. I saw a hunger to be Jewish.

As chairman of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Jewish Federations of North America I led a mission of rabbis to Budapest this past year where I witnessed the viability and tenacity of Judaism, exhibited in the refusal of young people to allow kaddish to be recited on behalf of the Jews of Eastern Europe. I encountered youth who did not grow up Jewish, who are proud to be Jews, eager to learn how to practice Judaism, and saw how our contributions to Federation support those efforts. A number of the young people I

met at the vibrant Jewish community center and a thriving Israel cultural center had all discovered they were Jewish when they were teenagers or in their 20's, and, to use their words "by accident."

Not uncommon was the story of an elderly grandparent who felt the need before dying to reveal to children or grandchildren the secret they had hidden and were afraid to share, that they were Jews. The most dramatic story of all was told by a young woman who recounted that she went to take an old tablecloth which had not been used from the cabinet and put it on a dining room table. Her grandmother jumped up and grabbed it, telling her she could not use it as a tablecloth. "Why not?" she asked, only to learn that it was not a tablecloth at all, but a prayer shawl used by Jews, known as a tallis. "Why would you have a tallis?" she asked her elderly grandmother. And the grandmother answered, "Because it belonged to your grandfather. He and we are Jews, and so are you."

Imagine the impact those words must have when one hears them for the very first time. Imagine growing up thinking you are one thing, with a particular assumption and then finding out you are something else. What do you do with that information, especially in a country which still harbors anti-Semitism, where being a Jew may thwart the possibility of upward mobility, could jeopardize your acceptance by others and endanger your very life?

In each case the revelation led to a desire not to distance themselves from Judaism, but rather the exact opposite. They choose to embrace being Jewish. They search for ways to learn more about their heritage, often leading them on a journey to discover their roots and to proclaim their Judaism. Many go to Sarvasz, a Jewish camp, funded by the Joint Distribution Committee through our contributions to Federation, as they seek to explore, express and reclaim their identity. Although they face tremendous discrimination and anti-Semitism, including being taunted with derogatory jeers at soccer matches, defiantly they seek each other out, at coffee houses, and elsewhere. They cannot understand why, but they are attracted to and are most comfortable when they are with other Jews.

Perhaps nothing is more unusual than what I recently read about Csanad Szegedi, a far-right wing Hungarian politician and member of the anti-Semitic Jobbik Party who has risen to prominence by complaining about the Jewishness of the political elite, accusing Jews of desecrating national symbols and of "buying up" the country. Szegedi abruptly resigned his positions with the Jobbik party in July and suddenly apologized for the disparaging comments he had made against Jews and the Jewish community. The radical turn was precipitated by the discovery that his maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors who had an Orthodox Jewish wedding after the war, but who subsequently decided to keep their true identity secret from their children and grandchildren. Their attempt to obliterate their true religion was successful, as their descendants only recently learned of their Jewish roots. The former anti-Semite has been in touch with a rabbi and is making plans to visit Auschwitz where his grandmother was interred so he can pay his respects to her and martyrs of the Holocaust.

Much as I was saddened to hear how many had masked their Judaism and hid it from their children, it is hard to blame them. The twentieth century was particularly unkind to Jews in Europe, especially those who lived in Eastern Europe. Not that previous millennia were all that better, but the double whammy of fascism and then communism took a severe toll on Jewish life in Europe.

"In the Garden of the Beasts" tells of the masterful deception and the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany. The Nazi effort to eradicate Jews and Judaism was all too successful. Comprising only 5% of the population, by 1910, only decades after being emancipated, 50% of Hungary's lawyers, businessmen and physicians, and a large proportion of its scientists, industrialists and leaders of arts were Jews. Yet

by the end of the war, 550,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered. The Holocaust is so much more than the annihilation of six million Jews. Those few words do not do justice to all the shattered worlds, untold suffering and degradation. The wonderful novel, "The Invisible Bridge" depicts the paradise Budapest once was for Jews and chronicles the decline of a prominent affluent, relatively assimilated Hungarian family who suffer numerous abuses and humiliations and who ultimately become destitute. As the Jews were marginalized and ostracized, there was a massive seizure of property and theft of assets. In Hungary, Jews were conscripted into forced labor brigades where they were severely mistreated and abused. Anyone with any Jewish lineage lived in fear that their origins would be uncovered.

Towards the end of the war, shortly before the liberation of the ghetto, Hungarian Nazis, known as the Arrow Cross militia rounded up Jews and brought them to the edge of the River Danube ordering them to take off their shoes so that their bodies would fall into the river and carry them away. They tied them together so that the weight of those falling in the water would carry others with them in order to save bullets.

The fate of the Jews did not improve after the war. One thing the communist regime which replaced the defeated and despised fascists had in common with the Nazis was their antipathy towards Jews and contempt for Judaism. Although the war was over, Jews could not resume a normal existence. The communists continued to repress Judaism and to oppress Jews. Even the power of memory was taken from us, as no memorials were built to testify to what the Nazis had done to the Jewish population. In their attempt to wipe out any vestige of Jewish identity if there were any memorials at all, they were for anonymous victims of fascism. Jews who identified as Jews faced discrimination in their employment and could not advance in academic settings.

With hatred of Jews so pervasive, who can blame them for hiding their identity?

The remarkable thing is that somehow, somehow despite all these attacks from so many directions, Judaism survives. The light refuses to be extinguished and the spirit lives on.

I came back from Budapest touched and inspired by the indomitable spirit of these young people, their hunger, and desire to learn more so they could expand their knowledge and deepen their connection and commitment to Judaism. One can't help but note the irony that a generation after Jews were sent to concentration and extermination camps parents send their kids to a Jewish camp, so they can discover who they are.

When I came home and told my family what I saw, about the remarkable renaissance in the face of such tremendous animosity and hostility, my daughter Margalit asked me a simple question. She asked, "Why?" She wanted to understand why they persist in being Jewish, knowing the whole world is against them? Why are people willing to risk so much and fight so hard to be Jewish when it is so difficult, when it would be so much easier just to walk away from it all? For that matter, one may ask how and why is it that over the millennia so many of our ancestors willingly chose martyrdom rather than submission? The question was profound and penetrated to the depth of my very soul. I have thought about and been haunted by it ever since. I ask myself - what is it that these people have discovered that is so compelling about Judaism? Since I did not ask them I can only speculate and imagine how they would answer.

It is not as if it is easy to be Jewish in Europe today. Efforts to eradicate Jewish practices have not let up. German courts and municipalities try to make circumcision illegal. The practice of kashrut and other vestiges of Jewish customs are challenged as the assault and attempt to eradicate Jewish observance continues with not so subtly masked anti Semitic measures put in place across the continent.

Why and how are they able to withstand the unrelenting efforts to demonize, humiliate and ultimately kill Jews? I believe it is worth asking, because the flip side is: why is it that we who live in a free society, where we need not risk anything, walk away from our people and traditions? What do they know that we do not? If we can understand why Jews remain Jewish in the face of adversity and persecution, it may help us formulate a response for those who live in an open society and who do not have to deal with such blatant hostility and overt anti-Semitism.

Granted, there may be an element of rebellion or defiance involved, but there is more to it than that. It could have something to do with being *mishpoche*, family. A new scientific book called "Legacy: A Genetic History of the Jewish People" by Harry Ostrer studies Jewish genetic diseases and concludes that we really are an extended family. Alternatively, one could say that it is God's will, divine providence, or heavenly intervention. Since most of the returnees to Judaism do not attend synagogue regularly and do not consider themselves particularly religious, and since this will not provide a response to disaffected, disenchanting American Jews I suggest we look at other factors to understand the resurgence.

The first observation is that they appreciate the sheer joy of being Jewish, and who can blame them? Let's face it. There is nothing like a Jewish simcha. Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav said, "*mitzvah gedolah lihiyot sameach*: it is a great mitzvah to be happy." Simhat Torah and Purim are particularly joyous celebrations, as are personal, family simchas. Nowhere is this more evident than seeing the smiles that come to people's faces when they hear the uplifting unofficial Jewish national anthem, Hava Nagilah. The wedding scene in the movie "Wedding Crashers" could have been of any ethnic group, but I think it is no coincidence that the director chose a hora at a Jewish wedding to portray unfettered joy.

And how about that nice Jewish girl from Massachusetts, Aly Raisman, the undisputed star of the Olympics who did her gymnastics routine to the tune of Hava Negilah? She explained that she specifically chose the tune because of its exhilarating exuberant spirit. She knew it would get the audience to join in and clap along with her. Capturing the joy of being Jewish, no wonder Jews around the world were collectively kvelling when she launched into her routine and the music came on.

Our unique spirit may be why even non Jews are choosing to have Jewish weddings. That's right. In a most unusual development, *Washington Post* reported last year on a young couple, neither of whom is Jewish who were married by a rabbi, under a chuppah, with a ketubah, and concluded the ceremony with the breaking of a glass. It has to be more than a rabbi trying to expand his market.

Jewish humor reflects this joy and conveys the way we look at the world. I came across some interesting classified ads of men in search of a match from Israeli newspapers. While I cannot vouch for their legitimacy or authenticity, since someone sent them to me in an email, I am sure they must be real and can't be fake or made up.

One ad contains a smooth pickup line: I take out the Torah on Saturday mornings. I would like to take you out on Saturday night. Another one says: 49 year old Jewish businessman, manufactures Shabbos candles, Chanukah candles, havdallah candles, Yahrzeit candles. Seeks non-smoker. Or my two

favorites: Jewish male, 34, very successful, smart, independent, self-made, looking for girl whose father will hire me. And saving the best for last -- Yeshiva bochur, Torah scholar, long beard, payos. Seeks same in woman.

You've got to love a people with such chutzpah. There is something to be said for the joy of being a part of this people, a community that takes the world and its obligations seriously, but not itself.

The second factor that draws the young Hungarian Jews I met to want to be Jewish may come from the power and intellectual stimulation provided by Jewish sources. Study of our sacred texts captures the morals and ethics of Judaism and reflects the insights into how Judaism approaches life. Many of you heard about the celebration a few weeks ago at the Met Life stadium in the Meadowlands where 90,000 Jews gathered for a Daf Yomi siyum, the celebration of the conclusion of the 7 years it takes to read the entire Talmud, a page a day. What you may not know is that a nation of 50 million non Jews studies Talmud regularly as well. Believe it or not according to an article in YNet news Talmud is required study for South Korean students and almost every home in South Korea contains a Talmud, or excerpts of it translated into Korean, meaning there are probably more sets of Talmud in Korean homes than in Jewish homes.

It has often been suggested that there is a correlation between our emphasis on study and Jewish texts and the disproportionate amount of the advances in science, literature, academics and other fields by Jews. South Korean Ambassador to Israel Young Sam Ma explained in an interview on Israeli TV, "We tried to understand why the Jews are geniuses and we came to the conclusion that it is because they study Talmud." Talmud study truly sharpens the intellect as it entails trying to discern the dialectic of various arguments.

The third factor, in addition to the joy of being a part of the Jewish people and the intellectual depth and sophistication of Judaism is that it provides a life of meaning. This is expressed and manifested by Jewish values. These values belie a unique perspective and outlook on life that frame things in terms of our obligations to care for others and our world. In addition to believing that Talmud study will make them smarter, the South Koreans believe the values contained in the Talmud are important and can serve as a guide of how to live life. Jewish values such as respect for family, honoring the elderly, observing the sabbath, the dignity of every human being, appreciating the importance of education are some of the things we may take for granted, but that they admire and find so attractive.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik put it this way, "According to Judaism, man's mission in his world is to turn fate into destiny – an existence that is passive and influenced, to an existence that is active and influential; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and speechlessness, to an existence full of will and initiative." Judaism offers the way to a meaningful life through a path of mitzvot, of walking with God, of living Jewish values and a Jewish lifestyle.

When we break a glass at the end of the wedding ceremony, at a time of tremendous personal joy to remind us of the suffering our people has known, generations are linked across the span of time. When we sing "*siman tov umazel tov*" at a celebration, we add, "*yeheh lanu ulechol Yisrael*," which means "for us, and for all the Jewish people" affirming that we are connected to something that is bigger than any one of us. It is because of this perspective that Judaism teaches that we are commanded to be responsible for the world we live in and to share with others. Our outlook is to not be self-centered, but to work for tikun olam, the betterment of all, which is why I teach our b'nai mitzvah that they are obligated to give some of what they receive as gifts to tzedakah.

I am constantly amazed, inspired and proud to be a member of this remarkable people which has given the world so much. Rather than be bitter and dwell on all the oppression and persecution we have experienced, we have managed to remain eternal optimists. I recall meeting an extraordinary individual over 20 years ago in the Negev, Menahem Perlmutter. With great enthusiasm he spoke of Israel's agricultural innovations and accomplishments, how they had made the desert bloom. He concluded with his personal story, how as a child he jumped off of a train headed for Auschwitz and made his way to Israel. He was so proud to be alive, to be a part of a people decimated by the Holocaust, who rose like a phoenix out of the ashes. He described it as the fulfillment of the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, who spoke of the Valley of Dry Bones coming back to life.

If history is any guide, we can anticipate that there will always be anti-Semitism. The question is -- how will we respond. The young people of Eastern Europe are not able to draw on positive role models from their families to nourish and nurture their thirst for authentic Jewish experiences. Yet they have decided, often at great personal risk, to cast their fate with the Jewish people. We owe them our support and encouragement.

A memorial in Budapest by the River Danube is of shoes to honor the memory of the people rounded up from the ghetto by the Arrow Cross. Each shoe is different, to show that each victim is an individual, a precious, unique life that was lost. We speak for them as well, and owe it to them to be sure that Judaism lives on.

The question I present to you today is – how about you, how about your children? Are you providing them with Jewish content that will sustain them and assure the survival of Judaism in a free and open society? Are you doing your part to perpetuate the Jewish community and people? (I invite you to join Symcha and me in March on a journey to Eastern Europe, or with your family to Israel in the summer to experience some of what I am referring to).

Earlier this summer we experienced a terrible storm, and most of us learned a word we had never heard before: "derecho." The strong rain and heavy winds that suddenly and rapidly descended on our area took a heavy toll, knocking down many trees. Downed power lines left tens of thousands of people in our area without power for several days. When I saw the damage the day after the storm, I could not help but notice that the fallen trees were very large, with big trunks and long branches. They all had one thing in common. The trees that had been knocked down and were strewn across lawns, houses and roadways despite their height all had surprisingly small, weak roots. Similarly, we may have beautiful, large homes, fancy cars and nice things, but unless we have roots we are as weak and ephemeral as the trees that fell in the storm, and can be uprooted just as easily.

Let us commit to strengthen our roots. Make a pledge in this new year: Do one more mitzvah, add something to your observance and the rituals you do, contribute more to Jewish causes, come to one more Shabbat service, take a class to learn more about Judaism.

Many of you are familiar with the custom of not turning your back when leaving the Kotel, the Western Wall. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach explained that you do not turn around and walk backwards, just as you would not turn your back on the czar, as it would be considered disrespectful, as if you are walking away. How sad he commented, that so many children turn around and leave their homes, but do not build a Jewish home. He said that the greatest blessing is for children not to walk away from you, but to walk backwards, to carry with them what you have given them. But they can only carry something with

them if you have given them this precious legacy of our Jewish heritage. These are the roots that will give them a foundation and is what will nourish and give them direction and purpose.

In the New Year may you be among those who choose to strengthen your roots and ties to this people, a people who refuse to allow those who seek its destruction to be victorious.

Amen

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