

Earlier this year we lost a giant, a proud Jew, Idl Yitzhik, the former mayor of New York, Ed Koch. Koch was to say the least, a colorful figure who succeeded another Jew, Abe Beame. Elected after several terms as a progressive Democratic congressman, he liked to describe himself as a "liberal with sanity." He is credited with invigorating New York's economy and saving the city from bankruptcy while promoting New York so tourists would want to come back, along with many other accomplishments during his 12 years as mayor.

An opinionated, outspoken brash politician, always willing to speak his mind, he did not shy away from controversy or from taking a stand on issues, whether consequential or insignificant. In 1987 he refused to allow the New York Giants to have a parade permit to celebrate their Super Bowl victory because they played their home games in New Jersey. During a subway strike he shouted words of encouragement to New Yorkers who were walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, and ultimately succeeded in breaking the strike. When the price of movie tickets went up drastically and suddenly, he took it upon himself to deliver movie reviews to let New Yorkers know what films were worth seeing and which were not worth the price of admission.

He was the walking definition of chutzpah. After he was defeated by David Dinkins in his bid to serve a fourth term, New Yorkers would often stop him on the street and ask him to run again. He was known to reply, "The people threw me out. Now they have to be punished."

Michael Bloomberg eulogized him at his funeral, "Tough, loud, irreverent and full of humor and chutzpah, he was our city's quintessential mayor. More than anything else, he understood that New York was more than just a place; it was an attitude." One of the most notable things about Koch and his attitude was how proud he was of being Jewish. He wore it on his sleeve. Conscious of his high profile when he choked on food in a Chinese restaurant years ago, he told reporters it was watercress he had eaten, even though in reality it was pork.

Koch reminds us of the guy who was so Jewish he was upset he was at St. Andrews hospital. He told his family he wanted to move from St. Andrews to the local Jewish hospital. His family asked what the problem was, was it because he was not getting good medical treatment at St Andrews? "No," he said, "they treat me well." They asked if the nursing staff wasn't good, and he said they were fine. They asked, "Is the food not good here?" "No, I can't complain about the food or anything here." Perplexed, his family asked him if everything was fine where he was, why then does he want to move to Mt. Sinai hospital. He says, "Because there I can complain!"

Koch denounced Louis Farakhan, and called out Jesse Jackson for anti-Semitic statements at a time when most other politicians were afraid to take such a stand. If other politicians had the advantage of being born with a silver spoon in their mouths, the son of Polish immigrants was born with a bagel and shmear in his mouth. The ultimate kibbitzer, he knew how to work a crowd and could schmooze with anyone, asking his trademark question, "How'm I doin'?"

He realized that part of the power and beauty of America is not so much that it is a melting pot where we give up our cultural identity and ethnic heritage, but that America is exceptional because it is a mosaic where our diversity is to be celebrated for it contributes to the beauty of the tapestry that makes us a unique nation. Precisely because he was so Jewish he was able to relate so well to non-Jews. He

had a deep respect for Catholicism and Cardinal John O'Connor was one of his closest friends, coming to console him on the day in 1989 when he lost his bid for a fourth term.

Koch epitomizes the classic Lenny Bruce routine from the late 1950's, early 1960's.

"If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish, even if you're Jewish.

Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish, even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish, but lime jello is goyish. All Drake's Cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel rye is Jewish and, as we all know, white bread is goyish. Instant potatoes, goyish. Black cherry soda and macaroons - very Jewish.

Negroes are all Jews. All Italians are Jewish. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Baton twirling is goyish, very goyish. Trailer parks are so goyish Jews won't go near them."

Celebrate is a goyish word. Observe is a Jewish word. Mr. and Mrs. Walsh celebrated Christmas with Major Thomas Moreland, while Mr. and Mrs. Bromberg *observed* Hanukkah with Goldie and Arthur Schindler from Kiamesha, New York."

Usually endorsements by most politicians do not mean very much. But Koch's was sought after because of his tremendous influence. The source of his influence and credibility with voters came from trusting he would tell it like it is and because he was a staunch lover and unequivocal defender of Israel. Willing to cross party lines, a candidate's position on Israel was often the criteria for how he would determine who got his support.

Underscoring his Jewish pride, he once said in a newspaper interview with the Forward, "I'm about as Jewish as you can get in terms of traditions, obligations and pride". He was fond of quoting a passage from Deuteronomy, "Justice, justice shall you pursue." Sandee Brawarsky who interviewed him many years ago wrote in the New York Jewish Week after he died that he identified as a Conservative Jew and did not feel particularly comfortable at Reform services, where he felt "naked without a yarmulke", even though his funeral took place at the cathedral-like Temple Emanuel in Manhattan.

His perspective on public policy was formulated by his understanding of Jewish ethics and teachings. His Judaism led him to work to improve the lives of his fellow New Yorkers. He understood the imperative taught by Jewish sources that we have an obligation to the broader community to make the world a better place, and to serve society. How can you not love a guy like this? I suspect his brand of Judaism is one many of us can identify with.

He made all of us proud to be Jewish and blazed the trail that made it possible for others to openly display their Jewishness, and for an observant Jew like Joe Lieberman to run for vice president without having to compromise his practices or his principles. With Koch showing how it is possible to be so comfortable in his skin as a Jew, many celebrities did not hesitate to sprinkle their speech with Yiddish. I still remember years ago when Larry King wrapped up his interview with Neil Diamond and they wished each other on the air, "*Zei gezunt*," Yiddish for "go in health." I loved when Johnny Carson, who was most definitely not Jewish, talked about his accountants "H and R Goniff".

Contrast how Mayor Koch lived his life with Henriette Allen, wife of Redskins coach George Allen and mother of Virginia's former Senator and Governor George Allen. How sad that she felt she had to hide

her Jewish past from her family. Her children grew up never knowing that her father, Felix Lumbroso was a Tunisian Jew imprisoned by the Nazis during the German occupation of Tunis. They were denied the privilege of knowing that she came from a proud Sephardic family that included an 18th century rabbi, Itzhak Lumbroso, whose commentary on the Talmud was the first Hebrew book printed in Tunisia. So afraid of the reaction if her secret which she had hidden for six decades would get out, she asked her son when he found out her true identity whether her friends would still like her? She even asked her son, "Will you still love me?"

Koch lived his life very differently. He was so proud of who he was that he wanted his epitaph on his tombstone to loudly proclaim he was Jewish. With the shema in Hebrew and a big Jewish star on his tombstone, in typical Koch fashion, he is buried in Trinity Church non-denominational cemetery because, among other things, he wanted to be sure it was accessible on the subway line. Inscribed on his tombstone are the last words of Daniel Pearl, who as he points out, was murdered by Moslem terrorists, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish. I am Jewish." He even said that every Jew should proclaim this every Yom Kippur.

So I want to take up Koch's challenge and suggestion. Are we willing to be as publicly demonstrative as he was, and what does it mean to be able to make this declaration about being a Jew?

One definition of being a Jew is on display in the Bravo cable TV show "Princesses: Long Island". The stars do not hide their identity, although maybe we would be better off if they did. The reality show, which I must admit I have never seen, follows a group of single Jewish women in their late 20's who sprinkle Yiddishisms throughout and speak of Shabbat and Manishevitz wine. While it opens with Jewish proverbs and outwardly appears to embrace Koch's approach, unlike Koch's form of Judaism, being Jewish is little more than a superficial aspect to who they are. Unfortunately the show apparently plays into and perpetuates some of the worst stereotypes about Jews.

Perhaps even more grotesque and disturbing is the video of the kid from Dallas, Sam Horwitz' Beyoncé like bar mitzvah performance with professional dancers. The blatant over the top ostentatiousness is hideous and disgusting and has absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Sadly, it is a natural extension of the trajectory of how bar mitzvahs are celebrated in America today.

Contrast it with the description of Charles Angoff who was bar mitzvah in the early 1900's and wrote the following memoir:

I was Bar Mitzva on Thursday. My father woke me up at 6:30 in the morning and took me to shul. There were about thirty people at the service. I was called to the Torah for the first time – and that was my Bar Mitzva.

Some of the other congregants came over to me and wished me a mazel tov. My father bashfully put his arm around me and also congratulated me. Then he and I walked a bit, and he went off to work. I turned toward home feeling terribly lonely. I had become a full, mature Jew – and most of Boston was asleep and didn't care. The few people who passed me on the street didn't care either.

When I reached our house, as soon as I put my hand on the doorknob my mother opened the door and threw her arms around me and kissed me and hugged me and kissed me again. Her arm around me, she took me to the kitchen, and there on the table was the Shabbes tablecloth. To my mother it was yom tov.

She had the usual bobkes on a platter, but there was also a platter of the kind of cinnamon cakes I liked, and a smaller platter of ginger jam, another favorite of mine. Also a cup of coca. "Eat, Shayel, eat," said my mother. I suggested she have some cocoa too. "No. I'm not hungry" she said. I ate.

I was conscious that she was looking at me with great appreciation of what had happened to me. Her oldest son was now a full man in Israel. I was embarrassed, but I was also delighted. I finished my cocoa, and mother said, "Have another cup." The last time she had suggested I have another cup of cocoa was when I was convalescing from a cold that had almost turned into pneumonia. I had another cup. When I was finished with my special breakfast, mother said, "Father had to go to work. He had to. You understand."

"Sure," I said. "But we'll have a small reception on Saturday night, after mincha. We've invited the relatives and some friends. So we'll have a little reception."

"Oh," I said, too moved to say anything else.

She got up, came to me, patted my head and then kissed me slowly. "Maybe you're a little sleepy, Shayel. Maybe you want to sleep a little more. I'll wake you up in time for your school."

"Yes, I think I'll have a little more sleep," I said.

I didn't want any more sleep. I lay down on the bed. I was profoundly happy. Everything was good. Everything was very good."

I know we may never be able to recapture that spirit and we have traveled a long way from Shaya of Boston to little Sammy of Dallas. But with all my heart I want us to try to preserve those basic core values of what it means to be a Jew.

What after all, do we want non-Jews to think about what it means to be a Jew? What do we want our children to associate with being Jewish? The answer will depend on how we live our lives.

If we live a Judaism devoid of any meaningful Jewish content, we wind up looking like a mere parody of the faith and beautiful heritage our ancestors bequeathed to us. I worry about what happens when Jewish rituals and observance are absent and there is little more than the occasional adornment of Jewish accoutrements on a skeleton devoid of any significant manifestation of Jewish teachings or observance. I worry about the long-term viability of Judaism that is centered exclusively on materialism masquerading as ethnic pride. Being Jewish is more than Lenny Bruce's version of being loud and having chutzpah.

Too many lose Koch's understanding that Jewish ethics should play a role in how we act and do not appreciate how powerful a moral force in the world it is.

Just last month an El Al plane set to take off from Ben Gurion Airport returned to the gate to pick up an 11 year old cancer patient. The young girl was one of 30 Israeli children with cancer who were on their way to attend a Jewish camp in New York for children with cancer. Her passport could not be found and so despite months of planning and anticipation, she wasn't going to be able to take the flight with the other children.

With the plane in line and cleared for takeoff on the runway, another girl from the group who had been sitting next to her found the missing passport in her knapsack. Excited, she quickly told the

stewardesses who let the pilot know, who then notified El Al management who decided to do something almost never done. The plane turned around and went back to the gate to pick up the girl so she could join the group that was on its way to Camp Simcha. I like to think Jewish ethics of *hesed* and *rahmanus*, mercy and compassion, had something to do with the decision to do so.

That same month 17 Jews of Yemen were brought to Israel, because we believe “*kol yisrael arevin zeh be’zeh*, all of Israel is responsible for one another,” a message I have seen in my travels as Chairman of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Jewish Federations of North America.

Earlier this year I traveled to Europe – once with rabbinic colleagues to Ukraine and once with members of our congregation to Poland, Prague and Berlin. When we visited Berlin, we saw an exhibit about Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Jewish Enlightenment, a great Jewish philosopher and an important figure in Jewish history. He helped to usher in the modern age for Jews and is credited with having said, “one should be a Jew at home and a man in the street.” Yet his mission to integrate Jews into modern life had disastrous response in his own family. Most of his grandchildren had left the faith of their famous grandfather and within one generation had lost all connection to their Jewish roots.

I have officiated at funerals where the only Jews were me and the deceased. I will never forget the time I presided over a funeral for a Jewish woman who had died, and the family asked if I would mind if her niece who was a minister would participate and say a few words. I was the only Jewish person at the funeral, since all of the women’s children were raised as non-Jews. After the minister spoke, as we were about to get into our cars to leave the cemetery, I asked the niece how she was related to the woman who had passed away. I assumed she was related by marriage, or something. Imagine how shocked I was when she told me the woman I had buried was her mother’s sister, meaning that she was born of a Jewish mother. I said, “So then do you realize that means you are Jewish?” She nodded and knowing I only had a moment to say something to her before she left, I wanted to leave her with something to think about and so I said to her, “You are so sensitive and compassionate. I am sure you would make a wonderful rabbi.”

In each of the trips to Europe I came away seeing a glorious past that had been destroyed. I stood at Babi Yar, a site of mass extermination, and saw the ravine where 100,000 Jews were gunned down. I saw crematoria at Auschwitz and the remnants of the shtetl in Krakow, as well as the Jewish quarter in Prague. I came away not just nostalgic for a past that is no more, but for an appreciation of my obligation to maintain, sustain, preserve, perpetuate, live, pass on what was destroyed and a pledge to try to inspire you to want to do the same.

On this Yom Kippur I invite all of us to embrace Ed Koch’s suggestion. Let us loudly and proudly proclaim, “I am Jewish.” Let us live our life as Jews by helping to write the latest chapter in the longest ongoing and unfolding story of a people who walk with God, a people proud of who we are, of our past, and of our destiny.

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