

The Secret of Jewish Survival

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

In 1897, Mark Twain wrote the following short essay published in Harper's Magazine about "The Jews:"

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor; then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and the Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Mark Twain's words, though written over a century ago, still ring true today. We may not be as generous as he was in describing ourselves; nevertheless, there is something quite remarkable about the Jewish people, our contributions to the larger world and in our continued survival under the most trying of conditions. What's our secret? What makes us so tenacious? What's so special about our tradition that its values can endure and be so useful for so long?

Only God knows for sure the secret of our survival. Nevertheless, tonight, during this Holy of Holy times I think it worthy to at least ponder these questions, and offer some tentative answers. The first thing that comes to my mind is memory. Judaism is all about memory. These holy days themselves are full of references to memory. One of Rosh Hashanah's other names is Yom Hazikaron, The Day of Remembrance. Yizkor, perhaps the most meaningful part of Yom Kippur literally means, "to remember." And, during all these services we repeat, over and over again the refrain, *zokrainu l'chayim*, remember us for life. The Baal Shem Tov put it well when he said some 200 years ago "memory is the source of redemption and exile comes from forgetting." (Sparks Beneath the Surface, p.100) We are redeemed when we remember because it is only in memory that we have any clue about who we are and what we are here for.

Recently, I saw a movie that painfully illustrates how important memory is, and how lost we are without it. It's called *Memento*, and it is about a man with no short-term memory. He forgets everything he just heard, learned, did. He could make love to you and a minute later not know

who you are. He could kill you and a second later not recognize the body or his hand in its demise. He is utterly lost, used by those who know him, tormented by the fragments of his life he can piece together by having them literally tattooed to his skin! Much of today's culture is like the movie. Cultural memories are fast eroding. Our focus on memory however, is one of the things that keep us alive. For us, memory is the tie that binds the chain of Jewish tradition from Avraham Avinu to the present. Memory is the glue that holds the pieces of our lives together in a meaningful way.

In the book, *The Last Navigator: A Young Man, an Ancient Mariner, the Secrets of The Sea*, the author, Steve Thomas, sets out to discover how the Polynesians were able to navigate the Pacific without any instruments. Somehow, these ancient mariners were able to navigate thousands of miles of uncharted waters without any of the tools of navigation we take for granted. This is what he reports: There was no powerful mathematical model one could apply...nor were there primers and instruction books in case one forgot something. The Palu had only his senses and his memory. So critical was memory to navigation that it defined his notion of courage.... "To navigate you must be brave and to be brave you must remember. If I am brave, it is because I remember the words of my fathers." (Source thanks to Rabbi Larry Kushner, Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5758)

The Palu used their memory to navigate the Pacific Ocean; Jews use our memories to navigate the seas of time. Memory, valuing and cultivating memory is one of our secrets of survival. But it is not memory for memories sake that has kept us alive, it is a memory grounded in enduring values that I believe is the key to our continued relevance as a people. The values that make up Judaism are many. Tonight, I want to highlight just three that I think are essential and especially relevant today:

1. The prohibition against idol worship.
2. Monotheism
3. The belief that all human beings are *bnai adam betselem elohim*.

It would be fair to say that the Torah is obsessed with idolatry. Besides being one of "The Big Ten," the Torah repeatedly warns against the evil of idolatry and interestingly enough, over and over again, the people succumb to its allure. What's the big deal about idolatry? You're probably picturing some primitive person bowing down to a statue or figurine and you're thinking you're off the hook. "One God, no idols, no problem, right?" Not so fast. The big deal about idolatry has little to do with actual idols and more to do with values; idolatry is when we make something of ultimate concern that is not of ultimate value. Idolatry covers worshiping an inanimate object, but it goes far beyond that as well. Lately this country has been experiencing the excesses of idol worship in a big way. What am I referring to? Does the name "Enron" or "World Com" jog your mind a bit? How about "Arthur Anderson?" The idol mixed up in these company's failings and the aftermath, of which we are all feeling, is money.

No doubt, the dollar is America's idol of choice. It's not that money or the accumulation of wealth is intrinsically bad. Quite the contrary, Judaism sees prosperity as a blessing and offers

high praise for those whom accumulate wealth and share it with those in need. Money becomes an idol when it alone is the object of ultimate concern, when the accumulation of wealth becomes an end in itself, a god to worship, an idol to bow down to. The unraveling of Enron, World Com and others is an example of the “N” stage of idolatry when, like a cancer, the perverted values of greed have eaten away the bulwark of decency upon which our society is built.

This is what happens when you make something of ultimate value that is not of ultimate concern, ones whole way of seeing the world becomes distorted like an alcoholic who finds any way to justify getting another drink.

In a way, this is all obvious to us. We know greed is bad, we can see that America worships the god of “greenbacks.” What’s hard for us, what’s not so easy, is seeing ourselves as one of them, one of those “primitive” folk making supplications to a modern idol of one kind or another. Somehow, it’s the other guy who has the money problem, or it’s the other person who worships her career. Somehow it’s always somebody else. And this is when it is time to tell the truth – we are all idol worshippers. All of us, somewhere in our lives, make something of ultimate concern that is not of ultimate value. Our money, our jobs, our bodies, our hobbies, some are worse than others, but all of us are prone to this basic human problem.

Let’s check ourselves right now, see how we hold up to the avoda zera litmus test. Imagine it were we, not those poor miners in Pennsylvania that were trapped in that old mine. There we are, huddled together in that dark, cold, quarried hole deep below the surface. The water’s rising, the air is failing. What would we scribble on those notes to our families? What would our ultimate concerns be as we face the cold waters of death? I bet you one thing, I doubt our stock portfolios would be high on our list. Nor do I think we would be beating ourselves up about not spending more time on the job. How would we fare? How do the priorities of our lives match with what our ultimate concerns should be?

Judaism is obsessed with idolatry because idolatry keeps us from living full, meaningful, holy lives. One of our secrets to survival has been, and still is, our vigilance in fighting idolatry of all kinds. Our vigilance has kept us vital and at times brought light to otherwise dark corners of the world. In fact, now more than ever, we need to share what we know about idolatry. Now, more than ever, the world needs to hear from us. That making things like money, power, or prestige into gods to worship is the ultimate folly. Now more than ever, the Jewish world needs to cry out against the false gods of our age. Now more than ever, we need to champion what we know to be eternally true; values like justice, equality, love and kindness – not money – are of ultimate concern and God, our creator and sustainer, is the symbol of these ultimate values. It could be that the reason for our survival as a people is for just these trying times.

No idols, is one of our enduring values, remembered l’dorv’dor. Related to our aversion to idols of all kinds is our belief in monotheism, perhaps the greatest gift we’ve given to the world. We take monotheism for granted, we can’t imagine for example, anyone taking seriously say the Greek Pantheon. We just assume if there is a God, She is one.

In reality however, even for us, monotheism is a very challenging concept. As idolatry is not just about worshiping inanimate objects, monotheism is not about just believing in one God. Behind the term, behind the verbiage is a profound and unlikely concept. What monotheism really means is that our world, in spite of all the conflict, disharmony and chaos, could be whole, could be one. One God ultimately means one unifying force tying everything together, one giant web of life, The World Wide Web of all life with God at the center. The world could be one, we all could be one, no wars, no bloodshed, no pollution, no hate, no strife, this is the ultimate meaning of monotheism. Seeing it that way, our dogged belief in one God uttered twice a day for the last 2,500 years or so seems like a shout in the void, doesn't it? Nevertheless, this message is needed more than ever today.

Whether we want to face it or not, we are in an environmental crisis. Global warming, even our anti-environment president has had to admit that yes, perhaps there is something to the hubbub about climate change. The ozone layer, well they can now see the holes in it, and folks living in places like Australia are really feeling the affects. Then there are our oceans, these vast, seemingly impenetrable bodies of water that cover most of the earth. Turns out, they are not as monolithic as we think. In fact, they are being polluted and depleted of fish at an alarming rate. Some scientists have gone as far as to say that our oceans are dying, and if they die, we die. Then there is the local scene, the loss of wildlife habitat, the ever-growing water shortage; the on-going ruin of the coastal streams like the Russian and Navarro rivers. The list is endless and too frightening to comprehend. What's amazing to me is how oblivious we stay— me included— to how dire this crisis is.

A twin to our environmental crisis is the fact of globalization. It's fantastic to me to think how the religious inspiration of our "primitive" ancestors still rings so true today. We really are one. More and more we are able to see the truth of the shema. Technology, trade, and sadly, greed, are collapsing almost every barrier between one continent and another, one society and another, one culture and another. We really are becoming "one" whether we want to or not. 9/11 and its aftermath has really awakened us to this new reality. Up until 9/11 we felt only the benefits of globalization, now we see the dark side as well. We see that globalization empowers all kinds of people for good or bad. We see also that living in a truly global village carries with it an immense responsibility. We see for example, that as the richest, most powerful player in this global village, justice and fairness require us to contribute on a global scale to the needs of the web of life we are integrally connected. We also see that, like any organic system, what we do here in America has an affect almost everywhere else.

There is a story, a midrash, an ancient sacred Jewish legend, which speaks directly to our situation today:

A group of people is traveling in a boat. It's crowded, so everyone finds his or her place. Some are in the bow; some are in the stern. It's a crowded ship. The boat sets out and not too long into the journey, one of the passengers pulls a drill out of his bag and starts to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. The other passengers turn to him in anger and disbelief. "What are you doing?", they demand. "You'll sink the ship and we'll all drown!" The man turns to them and says, "I paid for my ticket and you paid for yours. My ticket covers this seat and the floor beneath it. I can do what I want with it!"

We hear this story and we think, “What an idiot, how can he be so pigheaded, so selfish, so stupid?” That’s our first reaction, but if we take a moment and ponder the deeper truth of this story we begin to realize that in one way or another we all act like the passenger drilling a hole in the boat. We all do things for our own gain, ignoring the harm it does to others, not realizing that ultimately we too will be affected. After all, when that boat sinks, the man with the drill is going down too!

What a great time to be a Jew. What a great time to be able to teach the truths of monotheism to the world. What a great time to shout out with all our might: shemah yisrael adonai eloheynu adonai echad! What a great time to reflect on this eternal teaching ourselves. What a great time to ask ourselves how we can more fully live at one with ourselves, and those around us.

This day is called Yom Kippur, which in English is translated as The Day of Atonement. Perhaps we could also see this time as the day of “at-one-ment”, the time we really focus on becoming more at one with the world around us and ourselves.

The last enduring value on my list tonight is integrally related to the other two. It is the profound Jewish conviction that we are all, black or white, old or young, male or female, gay or straight, equal before God.

We are all, as the Torah teaches, *bnai adam b'tzelem elohim*, children of Adam, children of the earth, coming from the same source, created with the same spark of Divinity.

What a concept! In spite of our physical differences, in spite of our religious differences, in spite of our cultural differences, according to the Torah, we are nevertheless ultimately one people before God. The ultimate equality of all humanity is expressed well by this passage from the Talmud: All humanity comes from Adam to teach us that to destroy one person is to destroy a whole world, and to preserve one person is to preserve a whole world; that no person should say, ‘my parents were superior to yours!’ (Mishneh Sanhedrin, 4.5) To further stress the universality of humanity, the Talmud goes so far as to say that the greatest verse in the whole Torah is: Zeh sefer toldot adam...adam bidmut elohim asa oto. “This is the book of the generations of Adam...in God’s image was Adam made.” (P. Ned. 9:4) Why? To illustrate how fundamental the equality and sanctity of all life is in Judaism.

As we look at the world around us, in light of this fundamental Jewish teaching, we can’t help but despair. Let’s start with Israel. When will the suicide-murderers realize that the innocent men, women and children they are killing are God’s creature just like them? When will the hate-mongers in the Arab world realize that Jews are God’s creatures just like them? Conversely, after what has happened in Israel these last two blood-soaked years, how will the Israeli public, how will we, begin to believe and accept the fact that the Palestinians are also, *b’nai adam b’tzelem elohim*? I don’t have any great wisdom regarding the horrible situation in Israel. I can’t boast a vision that will see us clear of the bloodshed and violence currently marring almost everyday of life in Israel. The one thing I will say is this, until both sides can see each other as *b’nei adam btzelem elohim*, there is no hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. What about the home front? How does this concept of ultimate equality before God apply to our lives here in Northern California? A little over two summers ago Northern California had an explosion in hate-related

crimes; two Synagogues in Sacramento were firebombed, a gay couple was murdered outside Redding, Jewish preschoolers were gunned down in a small Southern California town, and a Filipino postal worker was murdered.

In response to these crimes, the Hate-Free Community Project of Santa Rosa was formed. Its inception was actually at an interfaith service we held at Shomrei Torah right after the attacks.

The idea behind the project was and still is to educate the community through seminars and guest speakers, about hate-crimes, their causes and how to prevent them. The hope is, through education we can prevent such crimes from occurring in Santa Rosa. Our goal is 60% of Santa Rosa's definable groups, businesses, non-profits and religious organizations. When we hit 60%, we will proclaim Santa Rosa a Hate-Free Community. When we started the project, we naively thought that we could complete the project in a year. Some two years later we are still a long way from completion. In fact, in many ways we are struggling. For example, it was easy to get the liberal religious community to commit to the trainings. That was my job, and in 6 months 90% of the interfaith community joined. What about the other denominations? What about the Catholics for example, who make up 1/3 of all religious Santa Rosans? In spite of a lot of effort, including a meeting with the Bishop, the Catholic Church has yet to sign on to the project. The same is true for all the more traditional or fundamentalist Protestant churches. So far, not one has agreed to be a part of the project.

You see from our liberal perspective it is self-evident that all people, regardless of their race, regardless of their sexual orientation, regardless of their religious background, are equal before God. We take this fundamental Jewish belief to heart. Unfortunately, much of the world, and a big chunk of Santa Rosa do not.

Up until recently, I had a rainbow sticker on my car. I displayed it out of my own commitment to pluralism. I also stuck it on my bumper to show my solidarity for Lesbians and Gays who have been regularly harassed for displaying the sticker. After being harassed myself a couple of times, and threatened with a knife once, I peeled off the sticker. I, frankly, was afraid, especially for my kids. As many of you know, I wear a kippah pretty much all of the time. Wearing a kippah these days is an interesting thing to do. It used to be that wearing a kippah was a curiosity for people. They'd stare; occasionally ask a question, nothing too annoying or threatening. Since 9/11 and especially since things in Israel have heated up, what it means for me to wear a kippah has really changed. Most people are still curious, but now there is often an air of hostility associated with it. Now I wonder sometimes, is it safe to wear a kippah in public? I believe it is, but there have been a few incidents, one in Sacramento and one San Francisco where identifiable Jews, i.e. Jews wearing a kippah, have been harassed, and in one case beaten.

Zeh sefer toldot adam. "This is the book of the generation of Adam ...whom God created in God's image." Our rabbis teach us that this verse is more important than any other found in the Torah, because its message of the universal humanity of all people. It's an essential message that each person has infinite value, that all life is precious; all people deserve dignity and respect. I believe it is one of those eternal truths that have helped keep us alive. I also believe that now, more than ever, it is our mission as Jews here and abroad to champion this redemptive teaching to the world. Over 100 years ago, Mark Twain mused over how such a small, persecuted people

could contribute so much to society and survive the vicissitudes of so much history. God knows the true story. Still, I bet our penchant for memory along with the enduring values embedded in our memories has something to do with why we are still around.

What would the world be without us shouting into the wind? Who would take our place as the truth-tellers, the ones willing like Abraham before us, to smash the idols of every age? Where would we be without at least the idea that in God's oneness the world could be made whole? What future lies before us without the vision that all people are truly equal and blessed before God, infinite in value, worthy of dignity and respect? I can't say for sure why we're still around. What I do know is this – we are needed as much now as in any time in our history. Blessed is God, The Ground of All Being, who has made us Jews, or who has brought us into the folds of the Jewish Community. May we have the strength and the courage to bring the eternal truths of Judaism to a world in sore need of our help in the years to come.