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Judaism in a Changing World - September 16, 2023
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This morning I want us to consider a journey that began a couple of hundred years ago and ended in the 1980's. It's a journey described by Rabbi Danny Schiff in his new book, Judaism in a Digital Age, which begins with the premise that 40 years ago we arrived at a new stage in world history leaving Modernity behind as we entered The Digital Age, a period defined by the exponential growth and progress of technology which has changed the way the world works in countless ways and will continue to impact humanity and our culture for years to come.

As Schiff sees it, this Modern Age began at the end of the 18th Century, when Napoleon invited the Jews of France to become full citizens in his Empire. In exchange for this status, our rabbis were required to answer 12 questions affirming that from then on, our primary **civic** loyalty would be to the laws of the state.

For the Jews of France, the opportunity to become full citizens was so enticing that rabbis from every movement answered those questions and participated in a gathering called The Great Sanhedrin which accepted Napoleon's offer. No

longer would practicing Jews be forced to live as a people apart from their society. Instead, we accepted the opportunity to become citizens of our birth country; a decision which transformed Jewish identity from that of a separate nation, into a 'religion' that could coexist in the framework of a larger society. This shift was an impetus for the arrival of the Reform and Conservative movements – which changed the way Judaism was practiced and viewed by the world at large.

As we're painfully aware, despite the dramatic change in the relationship between Judaism and the state at the end of the 18th century, there's a big difference between being admitted into a society and being accepted. So, while Napoleon might have opened the door to a new era, the terror and sorrow our people endured in Europe continued in the centuries which followed.

But here in America, our situation was different. While we've recently experienced a significant rise in anti-Semitism, it doesn't alter the fact that we belong here. Indeed, according to the two most recent Pew Surveys on Religion, the first released in 2017, and the second in 2022, Judaism continues to rank as the highest regarded religion in America, which is a significant change from the environment our grand and great-grandparents lived in.

In their America, they were restricted from living in communities just down the road from here. They were blacklisted from fields of employment and from joining

certain organizations and clubs. But today those red lines have been erased. Where a century ago, our community needed to build universities to train Jewish doctors, and hospitals to employ them, as well as country clubs for business leaders and professionals to socialize. In today's world, these institutions and organizations are no longer required. Doors that were once bolted shut have opened.

What accounts for these significant changes in attitude? According to Rabbi Schiff, it was the success of the Reform and Conservative movements which gave us with the ability to maintain our Jewish identity while participating in the world around us; an integration that's been so successful that we no longer need these movements help to us gain entry into American life.

And this is the reason, Schiff says, that so many congregations are struggling. It's not about demography or shifting population centers, but rather, because the gates of America opened to us – they opened wide. And we've been fully accepted into secular society and participate no differently than our neighbors. We no longer need help to gain access.

Therefore, the reason that congregations are struggling is not because they've done something wrong; but rather because Reform and Conservative Judaism

have been so successful at paving the road for Jewish integration into American life that we're simply not needed anymore.

And this is even more the case for our younger generations who've grown up with the freedom to pursue any and everything they're interested in. Today, they and we, hold the access key in the palm of our hands – our cell phones. And according to statisticians, the unprecedented availability of 'everything under the sun' will only continue to grow as technology transforms the world in ways that are incomprehensible to us today.

Consider the changes we've already seen and perhaps no longer even notice. As Schiff describes it, today's Digital Age is an interconnected world that "has erased the tyrannies of time and distance, leading to remote work and long-distance collaborations that were once fantasies. [It's created] a worldwide ethos of sharing, collaborating, and crowdsourcing that's produced remarkable leaps forward; a world in which phones and social media have reshaped human interactions, [business,] politics, relationships, families, and sexuality; [where] algorithms have been deployed that invisibly mold human choice. Privacy has largely evaporated. Authority structures have been challenged. And much, much more. In short, [we live in an age where] human existence has been remade with breathtaking speed."

Compare this to the way the world was at the dawn of the Modern Era, when the invention of the printing press revolutionized the sharing of information, and those who needed to get someplace quickly relied on a horse and buggy. All of which is to say that, **not only has the status of American Jews changed drastically over the years, but so too has the world itself.**

So where does this leave us? If religion is to be relevant in this era of radical change, if Judaism is to continue to have a meaningful role in our lives, then it needs to address today's world. It needs to provide insight, ethics, values, and guidance for the world as it is, instead of the world as it was during the previous era.

Schiff's provocative book, which is incredibly well-written and researched, dovetails with some of my own thoughts about the challenges facing Judaism. But if you're interested in his recommendations, you'll have to read it for yourself. It's not that his thoughts aren't worthy. They are. But there's a critical piece of information missing from his analysis. As I see it, Schiff's book responds to the challenges wrought by the Digital Age through the lens of the diaspora, through our eyes here in America, and fails to consider the impact that Israel has and will continue to have on our Jewish future.

Now I realize that it's not possible for a rabbi to mention Israel today, and not provide a critique of its self-inflicted wounds that have not only led to unprecedented protests against the current government, but also to a dangerous shift in culture that's emboldened right wing settlers and increased violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, all during a time of surging terror attacks in Israel itself.

It's against this backdrop that hundreds of thousands of Israelis have joined in protest, calling on their government to live up to the ideals of their Declaration of Independence, standing up for an Israel that can do better, not only better for Israelis, but also for Reform, Conservative and Liberal Jews here in America and across the world. These protestors, from all sectors of society, have earned, deserve and need our respect and support.

So, while I fully realize that Israel today is literally a hot mess, and that's without even touching upon the conflict with the Palestinians, it doesn't change the fact that **it's still not possible for us to define our Jewish future without taking Israel into account.** Its mere existence changes the nature of Judaism, redefines it; a point which seems so obvious that it's almost inconceivable that Rabbi Schiff failed to take it into account.

Now to be fair, for the vast majority of the past 2,000 years, our people were quite successful at creating Judaism outside of Israel. It was an historic feat that no other people have replicated. But 75 years ago, the world changed. And while, for much of that time we American Jews saw ourselves as playing the role of 'big brother' – aiding Israel's survival, Israel has grown more self-sufficient and much stronger over the years.

Today, Israel is the fastest growing Jewish community and contains close to half of the world's Jewish population. But demographics aside, its also the only country in the world where Jews who consider themselves liberal or secular, and not religious; where their lives are still enmeshed in the Jewish calendar, where Judaism is a part of their children's daily education, present in their own social lives and entertainment, as well as in the natural landscape and physical environment. Judaism is present in the language they speak, the books they read, the values and ideals they hold dear, as well as the sacrifices of body and soul they make for the survival of our people and the land. And these are the Israelis who call themselves non-religious.

So, while it's necessary for us to reshape Judaism so that it's relevant, meaningful, and enriching, so it can provide guidance in this new age by tapping into the wisdom of our sages; it's also vital that the Judaism we create take into

account the vibrant, living customs and practices that have been forged by secular and religious Israelis as well.

Not only must we take “Israeli Judaism” into account, we also need to place an obligation on ourselves to make it live in our American Jewish practice. Qualities such as learning Hebrew and maintaining some form of Shabbat observance; Standing Together with our people and fostering a sense of Belonging; Observing Holidays – some that we know well, and others that we’ve never paid attention to; Educating our Children, and Ourselves about our Story, Values, and Responsibilities to each other. And most challenging of all – recognizing that there are times when we are called to make a Sacrifice for something that’s greater than ourselves.

Each of these are hallmarks of “secular” Israeli culture. But if you asked me, I’d say they’re religious commitments that are a step up for many of us who belong to a congregation, let alone for most of those who don’t.

As an aside, if we were to take on these obligations – these mitzvot, more than building a bridge that connects us with our Israeli siblings, more than creating an enriching Judaism with insights for tomorrow’s world, we will also receive a personal benefit. Let me explain.

Against all odds, and despite the tremendous challenges that Israelis face, year after year, when the annual Global Happiness Index is published, Israel consistently ranks in the top ten. (This year, 2023, they were ranked number 4. By the way, American, number 15.) How can this be explained?

Israelis are inexplicably happier than us, than most of the people of the world, because they have a sense of purpose which comes from obligating themselves to a cause that's greater than themselves; from knowing that their actions make a difference to others and will have significance even after they're gone. Some might call this a sense of satisfaction; others appear to call it 'happiness'. I'd call it a recipe for a life well lived.

We live in a time of change, that calls us to look at the world through new eyes. One of these 'changes' is the many ways that technology transforms our world and even us. Another is the natural evolution of the religion of the Jewish people, that's happening among our siblings in the land of Israel. The Judaism that we practice tomorrow, the world religion that we are a part of needs to be cognizant, aware of both of these components for our relationship with our siblings in Israel to remain whole.

There is work to be done in our congregation, in our homes, in ourselves and our children; work, not merely for the transformation of Judaism, but for ensuring that

it continues to be the religion of our people wherever we live – here in America – or there in Israel. A religion of meaning and guidance that binds us together.

In the Torah we read that Jacob's children – the children of Israel – were not united. Yes, they all had the same father, but they grew up in different circumstances and lived different lives. It was a pattern that repeated itself when they were about to enter the promised land, and three tribes decided to remain outside. It happened a third time after the reign of King Solomon, when the Kingdom united by David split into two.

We do not need to repeat the experiences of our biblical ancestors and allow a division to come between our communities. We can uphold the same customs, keep the same traditions, cherish the same values (some which they need to learn from us.) We can take on the same obligations, uphold the same responsibilities, and build a people that is b'yachad – a people that is united and whole.

One of our most familiar songs is Hiney Ma Tov. The translation, as we know, is: Behold how good and pleasant it is for siblings to dwell together. The Hebrew word for 'dwell' is 'Shevet' – which sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for 'tribe'. Which suggests that, not only is it good and pleasant for siblings to dwell

together, it's also good and pleasant when the tribes of siblings are united and strong.

May this be our fate. May this be the fate of our people Israel, wherever we live.

Amen.