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Beyond Identity

Have you ever had the experience of thinking of the perfect comeback to an argument once it is too late to deploy that snappy comeback in real life? This happened to me several years ago when I was sitting on an inter-denominational rabbinic panel and my Reform colleague said, “I believe in Reform Judaism because I believe it is the form of Judaism that is most compatible with multi-cultural democracy. If I were to ever lose my faith in multi-cultural democracy, I would become Orthodox.” I don’t remember what I said in response, but what I should have said was, “on the contrary, only Orthodoxy, with its thick web of observance, can sustain Judaism in an embracing multicultural environment.” That conversation was three or four years ago, I’d like to ask him how American multicultural democracy is working out for him...but I hear he’s now learning in a kollel in Lakewood.

I grew up on the Upper West Side as the child of two psychoanalysts whose social-network, with the exception of two lawyers who were both married to therapists, was made up entirely of mental-health professionals. At my bar mitzvah, every guest above the age of 13 was either a relative, or a mental-health professional (those two lawyer-spouses being the sole exceptions). At our wedding, every guest in my parents generation was either a relative, a mental health professional, or a guest of the Tillinger family (one of the lawyer-spouses had since passed away).

There were a handful of gentiles in my parents social and professional networks. I considered them somewhat exotic and I can only imagine what it was like for them to be non-Jewish analysts in New York City during the golden era of New York City psychoanalysis and the decades that followed.

It is only in recent years that I have realized how dated, and archaic my childhood was. I grew up in a culture that was almost entirely Jewish and that was also fiercely secular and largely empty of any Jewish content rooted in Torah or Mitzvot. Because my parents were psychoanalysts I experienced a semblance of the sort of ethnic childhood in the 1980s on the Upper West Side that people my great-grandparents generation experienced on the Lower East Side a century earlier. But, as American multicultural democracy has matured, and the multiculturalism has grown more dominant, ethnic enclaves of all kinds, including Jewish ethnic enclaves have vanished.

To take just one, somewhat facile but telling metric, intermarriage rates were quite low for many decades in the United States because many American gentiles did not want to marry Jews and even in the absence of prejudice, our social lives did not intersect. Today, Jews are consistently the most admired religious group in the United States, our neighborhoods and professions are integrated, and we assimilate and intermarry, no more and no less, just like the Irish and the Italians and the Mexicans and the Chinese.

The conclusion of the Sefer Shmot, the Book of Exodus, this Shabbat gives us an opportunity to contemplate what it means to be Jewish and what was entailed in the formation of the Jewish people.

Ramban, Nachmanides, writes in his introductions to the Books of the Torah that Sefer Shmot is a continuation of the Sefer Bereishit, the Book of Genesis., in other words, the first two books of the Torah are linked together more than the other books of the Torah. Sefer Bereishit describes the creation of heaven and

earth, and then segues into the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs which comprise the creation of the Jewish people. *Sefer Shmot* continues that story and describes how the Children of Yaakov become the Children of Israel, not just a family or tribe, but a nation with its own identity and purpose.

But *Sefer Shmot*, Ramban reminds us, ends in a sort of cliffhanger. *Sefer Shmot* is called by the rabbis, *Sefer Ge'ulah* "The Book of Redemption" which is not a bad translation of "Exodus." The book describes our enslavement in Egypt and our redemption and freedom. However, the "Book of Redemption" ends before our redemption is complete! The book ends in the middle of the desert years away from our return to the land that God had promised to the patriarchs and matriarchs!

Ramban answers his own question, famously, by explaining that the final scene in *Sefer Shmot*, in which God's presence rests upon the *mishkan* and the Jewish people surround the mishkan, is a status that is "like redemption." To be a people without a homeland, without homes, just tents, and yet to be able to erect those tents to form a community surrounding, and surrounded by, the presence of God - that is "*nechshav ge'ulim* - considered redeemed." And so, for Ramban, the Book of Redemption ends with the Jewish people still in exile, because it is enough to have completed the *mishkan*.

This point was later emphasized by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch in the 19th century who pointed out that our collective identity was created when we received the Torah in the wilderness, years before we ever had a land of our own which, by intention, was the opposite of every other nation, empire, or tribe, which devised laws only after they had developed collective life in a specific location. Our identity comes from our laws, Rav Hirsch wrote, unlike other nations whose laws are meant to protect a collective national life.

There has been a lot of discussion this week about Jews and American Jews and accusations of dual loyalty. In my opinion, twice each day we declare when we recite the Shma that a Jew has only one loyalty and that loyalty is to God. But, as Hillel once said about another simple answer to a profound question, "the rest is commentary, now go and study." We must be loyal only to God but the implications of that loyalty and the ramifications of that loyalty are not always simple to discern and indeed require a lifetime of study and practice.

For Moshe, loyalty to God meant chastising his people while protecting them against Divine anger. For Yirmiyahu, loyalty to God meant speaking out on behalf of his fellow Jews against the tyranny of the king. For Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, loyalty to God was manifest in his constant efforts to defend the Jewish people from God's own judgement. But loyalty to one another, with no goal and no external referent is an ethical culdesac. Jewish identity alone with no content and no purpose cannot survive in a world of freedom and opportunity.

Indeed, I have found that the less content there is, the more an outward focuses identity needs to be reinforced. This dynamic plagues contemporary Modern Orthodoxy but that is a topic for another morning.

Each time I reflect on Ramban's comments about the nature of *Sefer Shmot*, I notice different details of what is contained in a "somewhat redeemed" life akin to our ancestors surrounding the mishkan. Some years I am drawn to their example of placing the Torah, for them in a literal way (the mishkan housed the tablets of the law), at the center of our community. Some years I note how living around and with the mishkan demanded a life that was filled with rituals and mitzvot with intricate and beautiful details and whose details themselves had details of details.

Today, I wish to conclude with another aspect of a community built surrounding the mishkan.

Our parashah began with these words:

אלה פקודי המשכן העזרת אשר פקד על-פי משה עבדך הלוים ביד איתמר בן-אהרן הכהן:

“These are the records of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of the Pact, which were drawn up at Moses’ bidding—the work of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest”

And the commentaries note the absence of a “vav” prior to the word “these” which we might expect from similar grammatical forms “*v’eleh hamishpatim*.” There, in Mishpatim, Rashi teaches us a lesson in rabbinic midrash that the letter “vav” says that what follows adds to what came before. After *Parashat Yitro* and the ten commandments, the Torah says “*v’eleh ha’mishpatim*” - and these are the laws, that follow and add to what was told before. Without the “vav” with only the word “*elah*” what follows is separated from what came before.

Rabbi Hayim ibn Attar, known for his book the *Orach Chaim* (ha Kadosh) follows in this path and explains what was different about the accounting of the mishkan.

אלה פקודי וגו'. אומר אלה לפסול כל מנינים שבעולם כי כל מה שימנה אדם מקנינים המדומים אין מניינו מנין ושמור מורה עליו מה אתה מונה, אבל מנין זה עומד לעולם, והטעם להיות מנין המשכן המופלא אשר שכן שם אלהי עולם ה':

The Torah uses the word אלה to emphasise that the only true accounts are those following. Whatever a person counts when he wants to determine the total of his possessions on earth are only apparent possessions; their count therefore is also only apparent, deceptive.

This account, this tabulation, was the only true tabulation. It was the first time anything that mattered was measured out in human history.

Just yesterday I heard a story told by my teacher Rabbi David Ebner. This was a true story that happened to his father, who was a congregational rabbi several generations ago in Long Branch, New Jersey. A woman came before the elder Rabbi Ebner and explained that she wished to be buried along with a lumpy pillow. He asked her to explain its significance. She shared that she had supported herself by running a boarding house, providing housing for those who could not afford any other option. She kept none of the profits of this business and after providing for her own basic needs, would donate whatever money remained to various charities. Her only insistence was to receive a receipt from the charities. She took those paper receipts on which were written when and how much she had donated to each charity, and used them to stuff that pillow.

We are judged not by the power we have but by the power we create. We are measured not by what we have, but by what we give, and to what we give. If we choose wisely, and give for things that matter, we redeem our community no matter where we may live.