

Daydream Believer and the American Jewish Future

It is important for everyone to know that *we* shouldn't be here. And by that I don't mean that we shouldn't be celebrating the holidays on Zoom (though I wish we weren't), or that we shouldn't be living in Washington or the United States. I mean that we shouldn't be here at all as Jews on planet earth in 2020. Rumors of our demise were spread by all of the wise men throughout the generations. Hegel thought that Judaism's contribution ended with the advent of Christianity. Spengler said that we were in the winter phase of our culture. Toynbee, the giant of British history, insisted that the Jewish people were a fossil, an extinct society. I don't think anyone ever expressed the pure shock of our survival and the delight of it better than the southern Catholic writer, Walker Percy. "Where are the Hittites," he asked. "Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite...even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here?" Indeed, there are no Hittites, let alone Moabites or Amalekites, but here we are. To paraphrase Mark Twain, what is the secret to our immortality?

This question is a profound mystery, one puzzled over by our greatest scholars, rabbis, philosophers, and mystics. Perhaps we are here for the simple reason that God made a promise to Abraham as we read this morning: "I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven." Perhaps we are here to be a light unto the nations. Perhaps we are chosen, though chosen for what is not exactly clear. Perhaps our existence is the very thing that makes the case for God. I don't know the answer, but I am

reminded of Twain's unanswerable question every time I catch a glimpse of the numbers tattooed on my grandfather's forearm. The fact that everyone didn't just throw in the towel, walk away, and disavow God and Judaism, but did the opposite, reviving, renewing, rebuilding, and reimagining is an earthly miracle far more miraculous than the splitting of the Red Sea. Today we are all living this miracle. Like Isaac who narrowly escaped the blade of his father's knife, we have all confronted our mortality this past year and here we are. So what are we going to do with the gift of another year? What are we going to do with the miraculous gift that we are still here? What are our dreams for the American Jewish future, a future that we want to build for ourselves and for our children?

Simply ensuring we survive until 5782 is not enough. If that is the goal, we might as well give up now. The point of Jewish survival is that there is something profound that we are fighting for. Something bigger than me, bigger than any of us, and that is...Judaism. Jewish civilization. A unique set of ideas, religious beliefs, literature, culture, and practices. It is a peoplehood. It is a place and the homecoming to that place. It is a commitment to make the world better and more just. I wish I could tell you that the answer to these questions is some newfangled concept, shiny new technology, program or social media campaign. It's not. The way into the future - into the New Year - is a 2000 year old strategy that these days feels almost radical. The way ahead is by drilling down deep into our roots, by doing the very hard but holy work of deciding what deserves to be watered, what deserves to die out, and what new things should be planted. To talk about this audacious topic, eight dreams for the New Year that we have been gifted in the span of twenty minutes, requires not a small amount of chutzpah but I hope you will indulge me.

Years ago I was taught that to the Greeks the *beautiful* was holy, but to the Jews the *holy* is beautiful. The message of this idea is that we are different. Being different is not a value neutral proposition. Being different is good. If we look at our lives today, can we say that Jewish culture in America is meaningfully distinct from its surrounding culture? Like the rest of American society, we see an American Jewish culture where too often the decorated and the honored are not those who are doing the most but those who have the most. We see an American Jewish culture that puts the self ahead of the group. We see an American Jewish culture that thinks an Ivy League degree is more impressive than being a mensch. And we see an American Jewish culture, this congregation excepted, honestly, that has taught more than a generation of young people that a B'nei Mitzvah theme is something other than Torah. So this is where I want to begin. We are different. We *should* be different. The great Cynthia Ozick put it perfectly in her 1970 essay: "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wide part, we will not be heard at all." So if you walk away with only one idea from this sermon, and you take a schluff for the rest, let it be this first overarching dream for the future of Judaism in America: Judaism is a counter culture...and that is the source of our strength.

This brings me to my second dream. To revive Judaism as a counterculture in America, we should think like Zionists. When I say Zionists, I don't mean anything about Israeli policy or the State of Israel. To think like Zionists means to fundamentally change our mindset from passive to active, from opposition to creation, and from crouching to pride and courage. To think like Zionists means to believe that we truly have the ability to shape history. I sometimes joke that the great symbol of American Jewish life in 2020 is the panel discussion. Don't get me

wrong, it has a time and a place and can tickle our intellectual curiosity. But let's be honest, it is frequently boring, bureaucratic, and uninspiring. And I say this as someone who has sat on and facilitated countless panel discussions. It is no wonder that many young Jews say they are more inspired by a woman's march or a climate protest. We have become way too boardroom and way too bureaucratic. What if the symbol of American Jewish life in the coming decade is the rally, as it was during the movement to save Soviet Jewry? What if it is a bonfire or something completely different that makes us uncomfortable? I don't know what the answer is, but I know we need a radical new mindset. One that takes nothing but pride in Jewish life and engages with it joyfully and creatively. Not as an obligation to be met but as an honor and a privilege to be enjoyed. This is what Zionism did. It fundamentally reshaped minds and hearts. American Jews need a similar sense of self-confidence and moral purpose. This begins by thinking with the audacity of those who imagined that Jews could actually return to the land of King David.

Speaking of that land, here is dream number three: we need to reclaim Zionism. Seventy-two years ago when the State of Israel was established, the New York Times wrote: "The declaration of the new state by David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the National Council and the first Premier of reborn Israel, was delivered during a simple and solemn ceremony...and new life was instilled into his people." Note how Ben-Gurion is described. Not as Prime Minister of the new State, but as Prime Minister of reborn Israel. Those two words make a difference. Is Israel's story the story of Jewish restoration, the repatriation of an indigenous people, or, as we are increasingly told by world opinion, another variation of white European colonialism? One of the biggest lies about the Jews in the 21st century is that Zionism is racism. This is a lie we must

fight relentlessly with the truth. Israel is not an alien outpost in a strange land. It is an historic *tikkun* - an historic fixing.

The reason this is difficult for so many Jews and non-Jews is because it is a story that defies all the rules of history. It's as if the Seminoles went back to Florida en masse and reclaimed their land. That just doesn't happen in the history of exiled peoples. And yet, that is exactly what happened, with all of the attending moral and political problems. Many Jews of my generation tell me they have not lived through 1948 or 1967; they only know Israel as Goliath, not as the historic David. But to say this is like saying we can't understand the evils of American chattel slavery because we weren't alive to witness it. All of Judaism is based on the ability to relive our history, to see ourselves as having left Egypt, and then every moment since. To give up on Zionism because of its current baggage is to turn our back on the yearning of thousands of years and half of the prayers we recite everyday. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions about Israel. What people are not entitled to is to pretend that anti-Zionism means what it did in 1920s Poland. Israel is not an abstraction. It is not a theory. It is a place that contains the largest population of Jews on planet earth. A politic that denies Israel's rightful existence as a Jewish state, whether stated explicitly or euphemistically, is a politic that is deeply anti-Semitic in effect, if not in intent. Israel is part of the Jewish body. More than that. It is the heart of the Jewish body.

This takes me to my fourth dream. *Kol Yisrael Aravim ze l'zeh* - all Jews are responsible for one another. Is this a lovely theory or is this a lived reality? This love needs to be made real. We need to regularly tell our fellow Jews that we would do anything for them. And this includes the Jews who don't look like me, especially Jews of color. The color of one's skin should not

cause us to assume someone is a Jew by choice, is just visiting, or, God forbid, is just the “help.” Jewish solidarity cannot be a value on life support. It is among the most important values we have and is essential to authentic Judaism. This year we will have a unique opportunity to focus on diversity within the Jewish community, especially on Social Action Shabbat and in February when we welcome Rabbi Sizomu of the Ugandan Jewish community. It is time to overcome our biases and fully see the beauty of every Jewish soul.

As you all know, Judaism requires community. And this brings me to my fifth dream, one that I think can heal both us and our country: *bowling together*. *Bowling Alone* was that book written twenty years ago by Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist. I don't think he imagined how bad it would actually get. Even before Covid exasperated the issue our nation faced a loneliness crisis of epic proportions. It is a crisis that drives people to make desperate and at times irrational decisions. Judaism has an answer for this and the answer begins with a verse in Genesis: *lo tov heyot ha'adam levado* - it is not good for a person to be alone. Dependency in our culture is a bad word, but being dependent on other people is good. Judaism teaches us that. It makes us better, kinder, and more tender people. Judaism's very operating system, you can't do it alone, is an anecdote to the loneliness and isolation all around us, in our community and in the broader culture. Every year, but especially this year, we *need* to depend on each other.

My next two dreams are all about Jewish knowledge and the importance of Jewish literacy. Dream number six is affordable Jewish education. Serious Jewish education in America right now is for two groups of people - the rich and the poor who get scholarships. This is a scandal and it has all kinds of repercussions. It means that those who are most committed to raising Jewish families are incentivized to go into certain careers in order to afford Jewish

camps, schools, and trips to Israel. There is a tremendous amount of capital in the Jewish community. It is spent in all kinds of ways. Some of them better, some of them worse. But I can think of no more important funding priority than educating the next generation of Jews. Money should not be a barrier to Jewish education at any level. There are people in the broader Jewish community for whom funding something like this would be a rounding error and we should put pressure on these individuals. An important first step is the generosity of the Agudas Achim Mens' Club in heavily subsidizing every teen who wants to travel to Israel. I encourage *all* teens to take advantage of this opportunity.

Fluency in Hebrew, the language of our people, is frequently talked about as an important goal and a key to unlocking the treasure trove of our people. It is the language of the Torah and the beaches of Tel Aviv. But what makes a Jew fluent in *Judaism*? It is not Seinfeld, bagels or hummus although I heartily endorse all three. For Judaism to be carried forward, and this is dream number seven, we need to make Jewish literacy a priority. There is no shortcut. How many American Jews can tell you what the *haskalah* is? How many can name three Jewish philosophers or tell you the year the Temple was destroyed or who Golda Meir was? Part of the reason no one knows these things is a sign of our success in this country. We have been allowed to melt, and perhaps we have melted too much. If these basics are not being passed down, Judaism becomes thinner and thinner. And when it becomes thinner, it becomes less attractive, less seductive, less rich. E.D. Hirsch, in his book *Cultural Literacy*, argues for a common American language in the form of civic nationalism. What made the book famous was the index in the back that listed 5000 things (names, dates, concepts) that Hirsch insisted that every

American needs to know to be literate. What would that list look like for ourselves? I think its very existence could spark an incredible conversation.

My last dream, at least for today, is a simple one. One word. And that word is pride. A young Jewish teen recently wrote to a colleague of mine: “Judaism is one of the most life-changing and incredible aspects of my identity and my life. Judaism for me is dinner at my grandmother’s house. It is blasting Israeli pop music until late in the night at Jewish summer camp with my best friends dancing our hearts out. Judaism is always having a community I can count on.” The reason this young woman and so many like her are proud of their Jewish identity is because of Jewish camps, schools, shuls, and role models. They are able to advocate for Judaism because they were taught that their Judaism is a source of infinite pride. The virtue needed more than ever for the Jewish people is pride. Pride in who we are. Pride in where we come from. Pride in the improbable nature of our story. Pride in what makes us different and in what that difference can do to shape our souls, the souls of the Jewish people, the soul of this country, and the entire world.

So these are my dreams for 5781. Judaism as counterculture; think like a Zionist, reclaim Zionism, we are responsible for each other; bowl together; affordable Jewish education; Jewish literacy; and pride, unadulterated and unapologetic. There are many more on the cutting room floor that perhaps you would pick. I encourage you to add your dreams to the list and let me know. My goal this morning is not to offer new certainties for the year ahead. It is rather to suggest that we need a radical new mindset. This is only the first stab of the initiatives that can come from that shift. Despite all our challenges, we are still the luckiest Jewish diaspora ever. But a little too much of that luck has made us lose sight of who we are. We are the inheritors of

Abraham's iconoclasm, Ruth's compassion, Rabbi Akiva's faith, the Maccabees' audacity, Theodore Herzl's prophetic vision, Hannah Senesh's sacrifice, Abraham Joshua Heschel's spirit, and Natan Sharansky's optimism. We are a people descended from slaves who are still kicking and who have brought into the world ideas that have changed the course of history. One God. Human dignity. The sanctity of life. Freedom. And even the weekend. That is our inheritance. That is our legacy. We are the unlikeliest story in human history. The greatest Jewish force in the world is the force of who we are. The question is: do we believe it and can we rise to this pivotal moment. I believe that we can. I believe that we will. And I believe that we must.