

Survival Tools for Reform Judaism Yom Kippur Morning 5779

Whenever the Religious School students are in this Zwerin Sanctuary, or I'm in a rehearsal with B'nei Mitzvah students, or a group of adults are on a tour, they are all wowed by the "magic ark doors." Young and old alike vie for the thrill of who gets to press the button and cause these doors to slide open. And when they do, I remember back to when I grew up and our family were proud members of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. Now, in those days, the mid-1960s, it was made quite clear that one only comes up to the *bimah* when invited by the Rabbi. And when it was your class's turn to meet with the Rabbi on the *bimah*, the thing we'd want to learn first is how he magically opened the Ark doors. In those days, theatricality ruled. At the time of the Torah service, the Rabbi stood facing the *Aron Kodesh*, the Holy Ark, threw his arms out wide and bellowed, "Sh'ma!" And then instantly the Ark doors would slide open to reveal the Torah scrolls. The choir would, with perfect timing, ring out with a thunderous *Sh'ma Yisrael* and we'd all join in. Like Moses parting the sea, our Rabbi could open the Ark doors with a sweeping and dramatic gesture. I know that I was not the only kid who secretly snuck into the sanctuary, climbed the many steps to the top of the *bimah* and stood before the Ark frantically waving his arms shouting "Sh'ma! Sh'ma!" to no avail.

Only later did we learn that there was a little, hidden button that the Rabbi would step on to activate the doors. While that discovery was a bit like noticing the wires that helped Peter Pan fly above an audience, it didn't matter. It was still cool. And many years later when I became their rabbinic summer intern, I'd open those doors to my heart's content!

Like most large "Classical Reform" Temples, we had huge Friday night services but seldom a Shabbat morning service. The Rabbis wore flowing black robes and stood about hundred feet above the congregation (or so it seemed). There was not a great deal of Hebrew in the services. Only a few kids became Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But we all went through Confirmation.

Like a lot of things, Reform Judaism changed a great deal in the late '60s and '70s. Society itself was becoming more open and less formal. A dynamic, creative spirit was making an impact on everything from music and dress to politics and philosophy. A new and refreshing egalitarian spirit opened the doors to greater participation and leadership for Jewish women in the Temple. And, in 1967, Israel was transformed from a beleaguered strip of land filled with refugees to a modern, viable nation. In the course of a single and miraculous summer week, Israel went from being a tiny State whose very existence was threatened daily and violently by her Arab

neighbors, to a homeland of remarkable strength and vitality. After the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israel no longer was merely a beneficiary of our American pity, one that we sustained with coins dropped into a tin box. Israel had become a powerful and proud Jewish nation. Suddenly, Reform congregations began to study more about Israel and organized trips to Israel. American Jews saw their Israeli cousins as strong, proud men and women who stood up to the bullies and anti-Semites. They did not shrink from taunts and threats. They did not hide their Jewishness.

The 60s were a time when other groups were also throwing off the shackles of social ostracism and prejudice. Black pride, Brown pride, Women's liberation, Gay pride. So, we Jews began to stand up as well. And as we did, we had to rediscover, re-imagine and re-immense ourselves in the foundations of Judaism: God, Torah and Israel. Traditional observances became more popular; more of us began wearing a *kippah* and *tallit*. Regular Shabbat morning services were offered, even when there wasn't a Bar or Bat Mitzvah! Our services had more Hebrew and soon we got a new prayer book that reflected our comfort with Jewish tradition and ritual. Our ancestral culture seemed to be reborn. And along with it, Reform Judaism grew into the world's largest Jewish denomination.

For some, that meant going full nostalgia, joining Orthodox communities in an attempt to replicate the old-world Judaism that was, fifty years ago, widely thought to be on its last legs. But old-world Judaism also maintained old-world attitudes about women, hierarchy, and change. It was and still is a strict and fundamentalist reading of Judaism that seems out of character with the creative, innovative, intellectual and iconoclastic spirit that are at the very soul of Judaism.

Like many of you, I went for a “gap year” in Israel after college. We weren’t looking to become Orthodox, but we were interested in learning more about living a traditionally observant lifestyle. I lived and studied on a kibbutz and then at *Livnot U’Lehibanot*, an intense work-study program in Tzfat; others studied at Pardes or Hebrew University, or at dozens of other fabulous programs. We came back not necessarily to become Rabbis, but we did want to teach in religious school and volunteer at our Temples. And we all shared a similar passion for Judaism that we wanted to share with our friends and families. We knew that Judaism’s gifts of spirituality, its profound wisdom, and the sense of family and ethnic pride were our inheritance, our *yerishah!* We wanted our friends and family to better understand that God, Torah and Israel are the foundation of our Jewish identity and are our most important survival tools.

Some claim that the old principles simply are not enough in this 21st century. What is needed is something much more modern, something catchier, and something marketable. Because, they say, in the non-Orthodox circles of Judaism, “God, Torah, and Israel” sounds hopelessly old-fashioned.

Okay, as a sixty year old, I have no problem owning a fondness for some things that others may deem “old-fashioned.” But don’t confuse me with that guy who thinks that things were so much better way back when. The truth is, things are, in so many ways, far better now than ever before. You name it, from medicine to science, from travel to communication, things are better now. And most people in this 21st century exhibit far greater openness and levels of social tolerance. Yes, we still find pockets of prejudice, bigotry, racism, homophobia, misogyny and anti-Semitism. But in the “good ole days” those social poisons were tolerated as an accepted part of the culture. Prejudice wasn’t just accepted it; was institutionalized. Yes, there still are those groups of creeps who rally and march their backward bigotry. But it is far less than it was just a few decades ago. Today, when a politician or any other leader is found in the company of racists and bigots, someone records it and shares it and the consequences are swift and effective.

So, I do not harbor unrealistic nostalgia for the good ole days that weren't. But this generation and the ones to follow us will continue to face tremendous challenges. Our task is to make sure they are ready.

How did our people, our faith, and our heritage survive during 2,000 years of exile and wandering? Our Jewish ancestors found spiritual strength in the knowledge that God is in every place and is always waiting for us to join in sacred partnership and covenant. They nurtured themselves through intense study of the most sophisticated collections of wisdom, law and lore known to humanity. And they supported one another by forging bonds with Jews in every land. And by doing so, they were able to navigate the most ferocious, vicious, and mean-spirited storms that the civilizations of the Cross and the Crescent could throw at them. In short, it is because of God, Torah and Israel that we are here this morning. We survived because we felt in our *kishkes* those ancestral bonds that united us a family, as *mishpocha*. And we pledged that wherever our family members were, if they needed help, we'd respond. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, all of Israel, are responsible for each other* (Babylonian Talmud *Shevuot* 39a). The fear is that those pillars of our faith, heritage and family are now eroding.

There are countless theories and reasons and excuses made for the erosion, but the choices each of us makes are ours alone. And the consequences of our choices will forever impact the future of our people.

You probably have read articles in various Jewish newspapers, journals or blogs that are *shrying gevalt* that non-Orthodox Jews are in crisis. Though the vast majority of Jews are not Orthodox, our numbers are falling. The latest polling data has even been widely reported in the secular press: non-Orthodox Jews are shrinking demographically due to our low birthrate and we also are becoming less engaged in Jewish life. I will not bore you with the statistics from the latest polls. That data is easily accessible if you want the depressing details. Suffice it to say that the numbers are not pretty. Apropos to the need for up-to-date and local data, we are in the midst of a new polling effort to measure the Greater Denver Jewish community. This project is sponsored by Rose Community Foundation and will provide information that will help Jewish organizations plan. (If you see a CSU Fullerton or Cal State Fullerton caller-ID on your phone, pick it up and participate in this important survey.)

We can already anticipate some of findings: though there are some 100,000 people who identify as Jews in the Greater Denver area, too few affiliate with synagogues, too few engage regularly in Jewish life.

And most tragically, too few will have their children or grandchildren identify as Jews. Studies have demonstrated that a high percentage of those Jews who are not affiliated with a synagogue will, within a generation or two, no longer have any connection or identification as Jews. We will not stop the decline, we won't even slow down the losses simply by catchy new phrases and marketing. What we need is to reclaim our share in the heart of what it means to be Jewish: God, Torah and Israel. And we need to stake our claim on these pillars of Judaism using the best of our Reform Jewish qualities, namely, our intellectual honesty, our natural openness to diversity, and our intense concern for social action.

On Rosh HaShanah, I spoke of our sacred partnership with God that rejected idolatry and superstition. We have also spoken about the bonds we share with Israel, both the people, the family of Israel, as well as Israel the national homeland of 7-million Jews. But what about the modern understanding of Torah?

The Reform Movement fully embraces the best of modern academic Biblical studies, as well as the spiritual insights brought by men and women. At the core of the best of current scholarship is the understanding that the Torah did not suddenly appear to us at Mount Sinai as if by the pressing of a magic button. The truth is far more impressive.

The Torah was compiled over many centuries during times of great turmoil. Parts were from the earliest stories of our Hebrew ancestors. Parts were experiences remembered and recorded by the slaves who escaped from Egypt. Parts were from those who led us during our wars of independence against the Canaanites and Philistines. Parts were the traditions brought by the refugees of Northern Israel when they streamed down to Judah in order to escape the Assyrians. Parts of the Torah were redacted under the reign of religious reformers who contributed to the evolution of our faith even as they were besieged by neighboring empires. And all was finally compiled, edited in the 5th century and presented, as a Torah that we would recognize, in Jerusalem to the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon.

I find this far more inspiring than the cherished myth of a single revelation at Mount Sinai: a magic button that was pushed to reveal our Torah. Rather, the Torah came to us as a sacred expression of our evolving, reforming, tenacious, creative and ingenious people and faith. What is truly inspiring is how our people sought understanding during times of chaos and corruption; of how they established laws of the highest moral and ethical standard, honestly recorded their failures along with their victories in order to teach future generations that God is found in the indomitable spirit of those who refuse to quit.

In these days of social and political unrest, these uncertain and chaotic times, modern Jews will do well to explore the wisdom of our ancestors who learned more than a few timeless lessons in eras far worse than ours.

While Reform Judaism needs God, Torah and Israel to survive, I also believe that the future of the Jewish people depends on Reform Judaism. We should be alarmed at the prospect of a future Judaism without the openness, the diversity, the inclusiveness, and the intellectual and academic strengths of Reform Judaism. We should be terrified about the future of Judaism if it is dominated by fundamentalist Ultra-Orthodox Jews. We should be horrified about the future of Judaism that devolves into an insular cult that vainly recreates medieval shtetls and ghettos. If thousands of Jews want to live that way, okay, *Zie gezunt*, let them be happy. But theirs isn't mainstream Judaism and we must get off our *tucheses* to make sure it doesn't become the dominant form of Judaism.

The problem is not just here in America. Indeed, besides security, the number one problem facing Israel today is the relative weakness of Reform Judaism. The Ultra-Orthodox are dominating and even corrupting Jewish life in Israel, and most Israelis are outraged. Most Israelis are looking for and need a positive, modern, inclusive, thoughtful and open-minded alternative. They need Reform Judaism!

The truth is that the future of Judaism and the Jewish people depends on a strong Reform Judaism that lives up to our ideals; one that makes a full claim on our collective responsibility to study, teach and enrich our ancestral inheritance of God, Torah and Israel. To accomplish this our commitment must rise. We must take ownership of the heart and soul of Judaism. Unfortunately, there are significant challenges. There are groups that have no synagogue, no Rabbis, no formal school, and some of them do not even have a Torah! The attraction of such a watered down version of Judaism is obvious: it's cheap, it has no standards: it stands for little and delivers as much. The future of our people cannot depend on such groups.

I'm optimistic that we can prove wrong the polls and the so called experts who are writing the obituary for Reform Judaism. My hope is strengthened by the tens of thousands of young Reform Jews who are going to Jewish camps, visiting Israel, advocating for Israel, learning Hebrew, learning Torah, and getting involved in the Jewish community. Scores of our Sinai kids are *madrikhim*, teachers' aids for Religious School. So many of our Temple Sinai kids are involved in social action projects in this community and around the world, bringing to the highest ethics of Judaism to people regardless of faith, race, nation or sexual orientation.

My hope for the future is uplifted by many Jewish philanthropists who give generously to help Jewish families, synagogues, and support Jewish organizations. Will there will be fewer of those philanthropists in the next generation? Not if we role model charitable behavior to our children and grandchildren. And I'm encouraged by the growing Reform synagogues and communities in Israel.

These are all important building blocks, but we have major challenges and a long way still to go. Yes, I worry about the poll data that projects such a dismal decline for Reform and non-Orthodox Judaism. But guess what? The polls are often pretty wrong! Let's prove them wrong. Let us revitalize our faith, our heritage and our bonds with our people. Let us reclaim our *yerishah*, our inheritance: God, Torah and Israel.

Ken yehi ratzon.