

## JEWISH PASSION

### INTRODUCTION

The big buzz words in the Jewish community for the last couple of decades have been Jewish identity and Jewish continuity. Namely, how do we get people to feel Jewish and ultimately help assure the continuity of the Jewish people. But what does it mean to have a Jewish identity and to be a part of Jewish continuity?

I think that it is fairly obvious that in most families Judaism has become less important with each generation. There are of course a number of exceptions among our families who have found a new strong connection and I'll touch upon that in a moment. But in general, each generation finds Judaism less important and less relevant. What are the symptoms? Fewer people who know the Hebrew prayers, observe rituals or holidays, and fewer families who feel less compelled to be part of a synagogue after their youngest child's bar mitzvah. Like most, if not all Conservative synagogues, our religious school students now attend only two days a week rather than the three that was the norm until a few years ago. And now I see a new trend on the horizon, parents who will want a one day a week program.

But in truth, I see these issues only as symptoms of the greater issue. Many people believe that the goal of religious school and even Jewish rituals is to create a Jewish identity. But I believe that Jewish identity reflects a basic, minimal relationship. I hear very often from parents that "they want their children to know that that are Jewish." I'm not sure what this means. What does it mean to know that I am Jewish? Is it like knowing that I'm male, or I have Polish ancestry? We want our children to be well rounded and identify with sports, music, literature, theater, politics and to be socially aware. In this model being Jewish is just one of a number of connections that contribute to the larger identity of the child. But this type of Jewish identification cannot inspire Jewish continuity. Instead, we must discover a passion about being Jewish that will make it relevant and therefore worth passing on. Our children can't be passionate about everything. And so like us, they will be passionate about only a couple of things. What do we want those two or three passions to be? Education? The arts? Sports? Is being passionate about being Jewish in the top three? How about the top five?

Forget about our children, where does it fall in your prioritized list of identification? Are you passionate about being Jewish?

### MODELING PASSION

I ask because, whatever we are passionate about our children tend to be passionate about also. If we are excited at baseball games our children tend to be into baseball. If we love music our children tend to love music. How do your children know you are passionate about something? Sometimes, it might be because someone calls and your child says, "Sorry dad can't come to the phone he's watching the game." But when is the last time your child said you couldn't come to the phone because you were praying or occupied with some other Jewish experience? Does Shabbat dinner have priority over a ringing phone?

I believe that much of the Jewish identity that exists in Jewish Americans today is a result of Jewish grandparents for whom Judaism was important. These grandparents may not have been the most observant Jews, but they sounded Jewish. Not just in their

accents, but also in what Judaism meant to them. They felt that being Jewish was one of the most important parts of their identity. They knew the importance of observing holidays and knew how to do it. They did not just have a Jewish identity; they were passionate about being Jewish.

I want to argue that Jewish identity is not enough to guarantee Jewish continuity, it requires Jewish passion.

## SOURCE OF PASSION

So what makes people passionate about Judaism?

Jewish passion is not derived from feeling obligated to the memories of those who perished in the Holocaust. Jewish passion does not come from the guilt that our parents lay on us. Neither does not come from living it for our children. Jewish passion derives from a personal connection in which there is relevance.

It is not uncommon for a child to complain about having to attend religious school. Given the alternative possibilities of sports, athletics, extra curricular activities, im'ing, computer games and television, what child would prefer to be in religious school? It is normal to question about attending religious school. But when a child questions religious school, I believe that it is in the model of the haggadah question, namely "what does this mean to you?" The child wants to know what religious school means in the Jewish life of the family. If that answer, as I've heard it, usually by a father, is "I suffered through it, so will you" then there can be no passion about Judaism.

Jewish passion cannot be created by a religious school education and observing a couple of Jewish holidays a year. Last year I spoke about becoming a once-a-month Jew for those who were not yet there. But now I am advocating Jewish passion.

So what is the source of Jewish passion?

## MEMORIES

Sometimes passion begins with memories. One of my favorite questions to ask people in an intimate Jewish educational settings is "what are your positive Jewish memories?" Why is this an important question? Because I believe it determines how easily someone can find a passion in Judaism.

I was once studying with a congregant, a very successful businessman whose family is active in the Jewish community. His children attended Jewish day school and summer camp and the house was even kosher. We spent some time together because he struggled with his connection to Judaism. I finally asked him to share with me some positive Jewish memories from his childhood. He thought for a couple of minutes... but he couldn't think of any. I think he was as surprised as me that he could not think of any. Here was someone who wanted to find Jewish passion, but couldn't because there were no positive Jewish memories to help him begin.

But having no positive Jewish memories can be good sometimes, especially when becoming passionate about Judaism means overcoming Jewish baggage. It sometimes requires overcoming negative associations and experiences. Sometimes these negative associations deal with the way religious schools ran thirty years ago or restrictions placed on an individual. Sometimes they deal with a mean rabbi or a bad experience in synagogue.

Many years ago, I met with a couple to plan a wedding. We spoke about the wedding ceremony and their Jewish histories and during the hour meeting I sensed that the groom-to-be had a rather negative attitude about Judaism. At the very end of the meeting I asked him where this anger came from. He shared with me an experience that had taken place twenty years earlier when he was ten. He belonged to Adat Ari El and one Yom Kippur he snuck out to go to the donut shop with a friend. As he walked into the donut shop he stopped suddenly when he saw his dad... who also saw him. His dad said to him, "what are you doing here?" And he shot right back at his dad, "what are you doing here?" His father then said, "get a donut and a drink and we don't tell mom about this. The groom-to-be then said to me, "Judaism is just a bunch of hypocrisy." Without some positive Jewish experiences, this gentleman was never going to overcome this memory.

So personal memories can have a lot to do with feeling Jewish passion.

### V'SAMACHTA B'HAGECHA

But how do we know that there is supposed to be joy or passion in being Jewish?

They are built into the fabric of the Bible. In the book of Deuteronomy we are commanded "v'samachta lifnay Adonai elohecha..."- "rejoice before the Lord your God." Our relationship with God is grounded in joy and celebration. While the Torah also speaks about love and fear of God, these reflect the different ways in we can relate to God, but when it comes to experiencing God that should be with joy.

We are also commanded, in the Torah "V'samachta b'hagecha"- "you shall rejoice in your festivals." Our holidays are not supposed to be about obligation and burden, but rather we are supposed to find the joy in them. You want to feel joy and celebration? I hope you felt it here on Rosh Hashanah. If not, come here for Simchat Torah or Purim. What is the rabbinic model of joy? In the Talmud, our rabbinic compendium of Jewish life and law prior to the sixth century, we find a description of how Sukkot was celebrated before the Temple was destroyed. In the Temple they would celebrate a ritual called Simchat Bet HaShoavah, a special ceremony of water drawing related to the idea that we are judged for rain on Sukkot. It was like a big mardi gras, with drinking, dancing and juggling... and this was the description of the rabbis.

And it is the prophet Isaiah who said, "v'karata l'shabbat oneg"- "you shall call the Shabbat a delight." Isaiah knew that Shabbat was not just about the restrictions of the Torah. He knew that people would never find joy and passion in Shabbat if it was all about what you couldn't do. So Isaiah exhorts us, "make it a delight." It is from Isaiah's words that the tradition Oneg Shabbat- the eating delicious deserts on Friday night.

What a shame that many people can't find this joy of Judaism today.

### HASSIDISM

But the battle to find joy in Judaism is not a new one. In spite of the Biblical and Talmudic models of the joy to be found in Judaism, medieval Ashkenazic Judaism began

to focus on intellectualism. Talmud study was emphasized rather than joyous experiences. Intellectualism reigned over passion. This set the stage for a Jewish revolution in the early eighteenth century. It was Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, who brought Jews back to joy and passion. He taught that man's relationship with God depended on immediate religious experience, in addition to knowledge and observance of the details of the Torah and Talmud. The Baal Shem Tov found the joy of God in every life experience and this led to a new model of Jewish passion. He believed in the words of the Psalmist "ivdu et Adonai b'simcha"- "worship God in joy."

## PASSION

So how do we find that passion today?

One way to create early positive Jewish memories and demonstrate Jewish passion is to send a child to Jewish camp. Many Aliyah families send their children to Jewish sleep away camp in order for them to experience Judaism in a fun way. Where else can keeping kosher, observing Shabbat and even praying be considered "cool."

Another way in which people find a passion for Judaism is to visit Israel. How many of you have visited Israel? Keep your hands up. As a result of your visit, how many of you feel more passionate about being Jewish? Why is it that a trip to Israel does more than just create a connection to the land and the people, but also to one's own Jewish status? Because in essence it is a religious journey. Sometimes people don't even know it. It helps transform the intellectualism into the spiritual, the cognitive into the affective; it brings to life something that is deep inside the Jewish soul.

How do people find the Jewish joy? Perhaps you can be inspired by other people. Have you ever really watched Hazzan Stein lead prayers? It is not a performance, it is out of a deep joy and connection. He has a rare Hassidic soul that inspires Cantor Harris and me all the time.

Many of you find joy in your Passover seders. Powerful memories are created at the seder. Whether it is a traditional seder or a creative one, Passover is a prime opportunity for creating passion. I believe that the Passover seder can serve as a Jewish barometer. As the seder goes, so goes the Jewish character of the family. Can family members follow in Hebrew anymore? Is the seder getting shorter and shorter? Is it harder to finish the second half of the seder? Yes there is a second half. Is the joy gone? Is it becoming an empty ritual? If a family can't find joy in a celebratory meal and meaningful rituals of the seder, then I believe hope is waning.

Shabbat, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, Purim, Jewish lifecycle events... all these and more have the potential for joyous celebration that can lead to being passionate about being Jewish.

As a synagogue how do we try and create joy and passion for our community?

We do it through music at our services. We do it through our Purim program and play. We do it through adult education and adult b'nai mitzvah. You want to know joy and passion, come to a Shabbat service celebrating our adult b'nai mitzvah. You will see women and men reclaim their Jewish right and role. Passion begins with knowledge and then grows with experience.

Many of our families with younger children are looking for this passion for their families. They are attending Tot Shabbat services and our new Family Fusion service.

They are coming in increasing numbers to Simchat Torah and Purim services because they want to feel joy and passion. They want their children to go beyond “knowing that they are Jewish” and actually feel that it is important in their lives.

I believe, that buried deep inside every Jewish person, whether born into Judaism or converted later, is a Jewish soul yearning to feel connected. But for many Jews, this desire is buried deep beneath their professional drive, intellectual pursuits, sports fanaticism and interest in the arts. The distracted and uninspired dormant Jewish soul is there, waiting to be resurrected. It is the soul, that according to rabbinic midrash stood at Mt. Sinai with the Israelites who left Egypt and all those who came afterwards. Without a sense of passion, what does it matter whether that soul is Jewish or not?

### MY PASSION

Where did I find my Jewish passion? Part of it came from a couple of summers at Camp Ramah and a youth trip to Israel, but I think my real foundation came from my Zaide. Born and raised in Poland he grew up in a religious home. His Jewish identity was unrelated to his thick Polish accent and he was not the most religious man, but when he participated in Jewish rituals it came from his heart. In my eyes he represented a link to “real Judaism.” When he led the seder it meant something to him. He was not a hasid, but when he prayed you knew he felt it. I can still remember watching him bow in prayer and sitting next to him during services and playing with the tzitzit on his tallit.

He was proud to be an American, but he did not sell his Jewish soul. In order to support his family he had to work on Shabbat in a liquor store that he owned, but he never forgot it was Shabbat. He wanted his children to be American and fit in, but he wanted Judaism to define their character.

Did you have a Zaide like this or a parent? The model of a Jewish soul? As a people are we selling our Jewish soul? We must reclaim our place in the chain of Jewish transmission and this can't be done through simply feeling Jewish. It can only be done when one feels passionate about being Jewish. How important is being Jewish to you?

### JEWISH IDENTITY IN RELIGIOUS SCHOOL

When dealing with parents who want their children to take Judaism seriously, I always tell them that their children must see that it is important to them. For example, how do parents portray religious school? Is it part of Jewish suffering or is it part of building their Jewish passion? How do we indicate the importance of something in our life? By asking questions. Do you ask Jewish questions in your family to elicit a Jewish discussion? Parents ask their children about what they learned at school, how about at religious school? And if they ask about religious school, why is it if the children say they learned nothing in elementary or middle school they don't believe them, but if the child says the same thing about religious school they believe the child? When do parents demonstrate the importance of religious school? On the night of open house. I love standing in front of the parents at open house. First of all I am saddened by the number of parents who take the Jewish experiences of their children seriously enough to come. Then I ask how many of their children were surprised that they left the house to come to the open house. “Open house?!? You're going to open house?” The children know how seriously their parents take religious school.

Recently a bar mitzvah boy shared his thoughts on this bimah about religious school. He said that he was not always thrilled about attending religious school, often giving his mother a very hard time about going, but after visiting Israel and feeling the passion of being Jewish he now understands its importance. He claimed that without the foundation of religious school that he would not have been able to fully appreciate his Israel experience and the passion he now feels for the Jewish homeland.

Knowledge must be given meaning. One without the other is meaningless. This bar mitzvah boy understood this and through his understanding gave meaning to his entire family. How do you find your joy and passion? Ask Jewish questions, talk about Jewish issues, do Jewish things, make being Jewish meaningful... then you will discover the joy and passion. But to do this requires a commitment.

From knowledge to meaning to passion. I tell Jewish families, "it doesn't matter where you are on the continuum of being Jewish, as long as it is a meaningful journey for joy and passion then it will have a profound impact on your family."

## CONCLUSION

Whether it is early Jewish memories, religious school or even Jewish day school, these experiences are only one part of the equation for finding the joy and passion of being Jewish. It would be like pouring the foundation of a house and never building the structure. To build the house one has to make a commitment to do something. It takes time and means that time will be taken from other endeavors. But if you want to live in a house you better make the time. Where's the passion, it's in the furnishing and decorating of the house. It is transforming the house into a home- it is making it yours.

Being Jewish cannot be seen as inconvenience that conflicts with real life. Jewish identity is not enough. Two years ago I spoke about finding Torah, Avodah and Gemilut at least once a month. But Torah, prayer and acts of living kindness are really just the beginning. Now I want you to find the joy and feel passionate about being Jewish. Find your Jewish soul and take it out for a test drive. See how much meaning it will add to life. And in the end, through your own passion, you will help ensure Jewish continuity.