

RECAPTURING JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

INTRODUCTION

This past summer I read a book entitled The Finkler Question about a character named Julian Treslove and his two best friends who are Jewish. One of them, Sam Finkler, is stereotypically secular and marginally Jewish. Having met in school, Sam Finkler was the first Jew that Julian had ever met; to Julian all Jews were "Finklers." It seemed less contentious to say "the Finkler Question" or "the Finkler Conspiracy." Julian, the non-Jew, comes to consider himself Jewish, but can't seem to make a commitment to convert. He displays all the conflicts and neuroses of the stereotypical Jew and falls in love and lives with a Jewish woman, but can't ever seem to resolve his search for a true Jewish identity.

The Finkler Question is a true reflection on the question, what does it mean to be a Jew? Julian struggles with all the different images of Jews as he confronts what it means to be Jewish. The book's characters include apathetic and self-hating Jews; it includes hypocritical religious Jews and as well as those who protest against Israel. So many times I would find myself embarrassed by the representation of the Jews, knowing that each character represented real Jews that I knew, and every time I turned the page I would say, "I hope non-Jews are not reading this book." Not much hope of that since the book won the most recent Man Booker Prize for the best literature in the United Kingdom.

What draws Julian to feel Jewish? As the story unfolds, we finally realize that it is his personal connection to suffering. For him, the idea of Jews being a suffering people, connects his need for personal suffering. The Finkler Question challenges all assumptions of what it means to be Jewish, like;

- The Jews have been persecuted and therefore we must remain Jewish, or
- The Jews are a small group therefore we must survive, or
- Israel can preserve the Jewish people in Diaspora or
- The hypocrisy of unethical religious Jews

Although the book's characters are English, reading this book made me really question what the American Jewish community will look like in the next generation and to what degree we will survive as a people. In contemplating the question, I have come to believe that we need to rediscover the relevance of Judaism and understand its impact on the Jewish people. To do this we must better understand the relationship of ritual and culture to peoplehood and ask the question, "is there anything special to being part of the Jewish people?"

As the rabbi of a vibrant synagogue community I am blessed to see families who take Judaism more seriously than the average unaffiliated American Jew. I interact daily with individuals and families for whom their Jewish identity means something. But every now and then I get glimpses of the true decay taking place.

I see it at lifecycle events, in particular funerals, when I experience the Jewish condition of the unaffiliated relatives of our congregants. The youngest generation has had minimal Jewish exposure and as they think about marriage and creating a family,

Jewish tradition is not in the equation at all. They reluctantly attend the Passover seder that has relevance only to their grandparents and the question of Hanukkah will be delayed until they get married and will then decide whether to celebrate Hanukkah or Christmas based on who they marry.

How many of you look at the character of Jewish life in America and wonder what the future will bring?

WHAT IS DIFFERENT

Much has changed during the twenty three years I have been a rabbi. It is hard to believe that the "next generation" I used to refer to, is no longer theoretical, but are alive and breathing adult Jews. The parents that I used to speak to about Jewish parenting issues are now grandparents. There was always speculation about what the fourth generation of American Jews would look like. Without the strong Jewish identity of the first generation, at least as Jewish grandparents, would being Jewish be important to the fourth generation?

How many of your children have strong Jewish identities? If so they are in a minority of American Jews.

All kinds of predictions were made about this generation as they relate to Jewish life.

Some trends were expected and others were not. For example, we knew since the seventies that the rate of intermarriage was rising. What we didn't predict was that intermarriage would increase between 1970 and 1996 from 13% to nearly fifty percent.

While we have a number of wonderful intermarried families who are dedicated to creating and nurturing a Jewish family, the sad truth is that they are the minority. For a long time the conventional wisdom was that Jewish guilt would prevail for those who intermarried and they would raise their children as Jews. In the meantime the National Jewish Population Study of 2000 dispelled that myth. The survey indicated that only one-third of Jews who intermarried were raising their children as Jews. What is happening to the other two-thirds? One-third are being raised as Christians and the other third with nothing.

As a result of intermarriage and the general assimilation trends of American Jewry the numbers of people who self-identify as Jews is declining. This is not a sermon about intermarriage, because what was most disturbing to me is the increase in the demographic category designated "Jewish parents, but no religion." That is, those who were born Jewish, but claim that Judaism is not their religion. From 1990 to 2009 this category increased from 15% to 25% of the adult Jewish population. More than one and a quarter million Jewish adults said they had Jewish parents, but Judaism was not their religion. What does it mean to say that Judaism is not your religion? I deal with many people who come to my office to deal with some issue and open with, "Rabbi, I'm not religious, but...". Of the Jewish people I know who would not call themselves "religious", they still identify their religion as Judaism. What does it mean to be so cut off from Jewish tradition that you are born of Jewish parents, but claim no religion?

LAST AMERICAN JEW

In the 1970's we utilized a camp program called The Last American Jew . The goal was to get the campers to not take their Jewish tradition for granted and inspire them

to embrace their Jewish identity. I found a copy of it in my old folders. The idea was to present it in a dramatic reading and then discuss it with the campers. Here's how it goes:

My name? My name is not important.

Who am I? I am the last Jew. The year is 2124, the place is the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. I am in this museum, in a cage on exhibit. People pass my way, day in and out, staring, pointing, and even sometimes laughing. On the walls surrounding my exhibit are the remnants of a Jewish culture; a tallit, a Torah, the books of the Talmud. Each day, as I sit here watching the people pass, I wonder to myself how six and a half million people who existed as Jews a little over a century ago could have possibly vanished.

You can imagine the ending. But the truth is, American Jewry will not die, the only question will be how many will survive and what will we look like? In truth American Judaism has become more vibrant than ever; Jewish studies departments in universities, Jewish books being published, Jewish Day School and summer camp attendance, even the number of people observing some Jewish rituals have increased. But the question to be asked is, "will your family be part of that Jewish future?"

I now know who is the Last American Jew. It is the Jewish individual or family who holds the Jewish identity of their extended family in their hands. It is the last one willing to make the Passover seder for the extended family. In the 2000 national Jewish population study, 67% said they attended a seder, but how many would have done so if it had not been arranged by their family? We don't have those statistics. The Last American Jew is the family that makes the point of getting the extended family together for Hanukkah and "break the fast". It is the last family that belongs to a synagogue and invites others to join them for the High Holy Days. It is their efforts that bring their extended families together for Jewish experiences because no one else is willing to do it. Upon their shoulders rests not only the Jewish identity of their children, but of their extended families. These are the last American Jews and I wonder what will happen when they are gone. No survey has focused on how important "the last Jew" is to the Jewish life in America.

JEWISH IDENTIFICATION

We don't even know how to talk anymore about Jewish identity. A generation ago we talked about religious, cultural and secular Jews.

What has happened to them?

The secular Jews have passed very little of their Jewish identity to their children.

The cultural Jews, have passed on some of the culture, through rituals, learning and concern for the Jewish people and Jewish causes, but have not been able to translate the passion of being Jewish as they feel it.

The religious Jews, the one who are committed to tradition, they are the only group that is growing and able to pass on their passion consistently.

We are struggling with Jewish identity so much that we have created the word Jewishness to loosely define any way in which someone might consider themselves Jewish. It is an attempt to by pass any standard definition of Judaism as a religion or culture, as a means of identification.

JUDAISM HAS MADE US BETTER AMERICANS

What has changed?

In the 1950's and 60's Jews wanted to be like all other Americans and accepted for religious identity on par with their Christian neighbors. There began an attempt of Jews to portray themselves as an important mix in American society. Rather than denying their Jewish identity, Jews suggested, as expressed by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, that "to be a better Jew is to be a better American." In 1955, Will Herberg tried to convince Americans that Jews were an important part of the American social equation in a book entitled, Protestant-Catholic-Jew.

In the America, as we knew it in the latter part of the twentieth century, Jewish distinctiveness was no longer relevant. We no longer had to fight for acceptance based on our commitment to religious behavior. We seldom had to respond to cultural anti-semitism. And as far as many Jews are concerned today, the democratic values, as reflected in America, are in tune with our own Jewish values. In truth, for many American Jews being Jewish offers nothing different from being an American.

SOVEREIGN SELF

More than ever before American culture today is eroding the last vestiges of Jewish identity for many American Jews. The last nails in the coffin have been the emphasis on the individual as the "sovereign self" and the attitude of Jewish peoplehood is a racist idea to many of the younger generation. In the context of a religious life, to tell your child that he or she should marry someone Jewish makes sense, but in a cultural context it can sound racist. I can't tell you the number of parents who tell me that when they speak to their children of marrying someone Jewish, the standard reply is "that is racist." How much has the concept of Jewish peoplehood eroded in the last generation? In a Jewish survey responses to the statement "I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people"; for those 65 and older 72% answered in the affirmative, while for those under 35 it was 47%. In one generation a decline of 25%.

The parallel phenomenon is the idea of the sovereign self. There is an overwhelming desire in the American culture to find ourselves. According to Jewish sociologists the Jews are equally inclined to have this attitude. While there is a great search for finding our own personal meaning, as a result we have lost our sense of Jewish community. It is the belief that we are bound together, not by one common belief or attitude, but rather by the concept of Peoplehood that unites the disparate nature of Jews. The Jewish search is not for oneself, it is the search for community. Our ideal was not the solitary loneliness of a silent guru sitting atop the Himalayans, but rather our search has been for a minyan; a community of support and caring. Our rabbis were brilliant in requiring that the ideal form of Jewish prayer took place among at least ten people. It is only through community that we can feel something greater than ourselves and be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Many sociologists argue that the greatest affliction of our society is aloneness; the move towards texting rather than talking, from facebooking rather than dealing face to face. The antidote for aloneness and the answer to Jewish continuity is community. For many of you coming to services during the High Holy Days is your attempt to feel that sense of community. And while once a year may help perpetuate a sense of Jewish community that someone is raised with, it will not instill that sense of Jewish belonging on the next generation.

Belonging must mean something...otherwise it cannot be passed from one generation to another. I always believed in the power of the Jewish Diaspora world to make a difference, but given the sociological changes in America, business cannot be as usual.

ANSWERS

What has to change?

First of all we need a new language to talk about Jewish identity.

For some families the concept of Judaism as a religion continues to find relevance and relationship. The language of God and rituals is an important way of living out the Jewish values that have sustained the Jewish people. It is this path that helps lead to a life directed towards sanctity. As the Torah teaches us, "you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Whether it is the sanctity of life, tikkun olam- repairing the world, or the concept of sacred time, Judaism as a religion continues to offer people a better way to live life. And while the traditional language of the Jewish religion speaks to some people, we must also translate it for the next generation. We must talk about different perceptions of God and what it means to live out God's will. If necessary, we must find new meaning in mitzvot, like Rabbi David Hartman who views mitzvot as being the human attempt to perceive God's will and be "God intoxicated", rather than a set of rules that God has imposed upon us. If the Jewish religion is to remain relevant we must reinterpret it for our generation, just as each generation did before us.

But for many people, the religious model doesn't work. Like the congregant who recently came to me because she felt hypocritical belonging to a synagogue when she is an atheist. We had a long talk about God, but more importantly I had to assure her that not only is it OK to belong to a synagogue as an atheist, but that this is the only place now where Jews of different beliefs can experience a sense of Jewish peoplehood. She came to understand that she shared much more in common with her fellow congregants than even her atheism could diminish.

For this reason, we must acknowledge that there is also another way to understand Judaism; that is as a culture rather than a religion. I would argue that to translate Judaism as the religion of the Jewish people does not fully do it justice. Judaism, as articulated by Mordecai Kaplan, is a "dynamic, religious civilization." For Kaplan, rather than being commanded by God, Jewish ritual and law are the folkways of the Jewish people. Just as any people require beliefs, a sense of belonging and social behaviors, Judaism is just that for the Jewish people. For Kaplan we are a people and it is our rituals and beliefs that define our values. Just as we Americans have the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, the Star Spangled Banner and so many other cultural rituals, Judaism has Shabbat, holidays and kashrut. Therefore, rather than seeing Judaism as just the religious life of the Jewish people, it represents our entire culture.

What we have learned over the last generation is that the Jewish people cannot survive off the deeds of the previous generation and previous attempts to use guilt to be Jewish have not worked. Jews are not willing to embrace their Jewishness in order not to give Hitler a post-humous victory and many Jews don't see Judaism as being relevant in their lives.

Bottom-line, this is why we must rediscover the relevance of Judaism. According to the Torah what was the purpose of establishing a unique covenant with Abraham? To create a

higher level of expectations for life. When most people look at the pagan ways of the ancient world they can see the importance of Judaism as a way to live a better life. But what about today? For many people Judaism does not offer that answer. But in truth Jewish tradition requires a greater degree of responsibility and accountability; we must acknowledge that Jewish values are important and they can only be preserved through a commitment to Jewish peoplehood. America is dedicated to the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is about individual rights and protecting them. What is lacking? What is not inherent in our American culture? To begin with, what about an obligation to help others. Our concept of tzedakah teaches that helping others is not an option of kindness, but rather an obligation of righteousness. Did you read the article last week about the Japanese survivors of the Tsunami who have turned in to the authorities more than 79 million dollars in cash that was found amongst the rubble? That would never happen in America. But unlike America where the value "finders keepers" prevails, Jewish tradition requires that something lost must be returned. In the midst of a culture that has lost the value of respect for parents, teachers and elders, Judaism affirms these as essential. In a culture as hurried as ours, there is no greater message than the Shabbat that time is sacred. In a world in which people are oppressed there is no more important message than Passover. These values are expressed and lived through the calendar and rituals of the Jewish people; they are inseparable. Jewish values are lived through our rituals and they are preserved through the experience of community. Without a strong Jewish community, these values will be gone. The prognosis of the American Jewish community is not yet certain. What is certain, is that it is up to us to believe enough in Jewish tradition...to be passionate enough about what we have to offer...that it means enough to us...to do our work to reaffirm and rededicate ourselves to the secret of Jewish continuity: Jewish rituals in the context of Jewish community.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be a "Finkler"? The writer Thomas Cahill wrote this about the Jewish people, "The Jews started it all—and by 'it' I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and Gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings ... we would think with a different mind, interpret all our experience differently, draw different conclusions from the things that befall us. And we would set a different course for our lives."

Abraham Joshua Heschel said that the "Jewish people are a messenger who have forgotten their message", on this Rosh Hashanah, may we find our message again, let us reclaim the Jewish soul through our rituals and community and make a difference as we always have.