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A World without Jews

In the book of Exodus, Chapter 12, God declares the Hebrew month of Nissan to be the “first of the months of the year (Exodus 12:2)”. But here we are in shul, on the first of Tishrei, marking the beginning of the Jewish year, clearly not Nisan. The Mishnah helps to explain this conundrum by listing more than one New Year. The first of Nisan is when we celebrate the New Year for the kings and festivals, and **the** festival of Nisan is of course Pesach. During Nisan we celebrate the pivotal event of our redemption from slavery: we relive the exodus and rejoice in our peoplehood...and yes, in the fact that we are a tribe.

The second new year....takes place on Rosh Hashanah, today, Tishrei, when we declare that this is the day that the world was created by God. There is a universal flavor to our liturgy. We rejoice that our sovereign has been crowned and that God rules over all. And it is during the month of Tishrei that we celebrate the birth of the first human being, Adam, the one from whom we are all descended.

There is a profound message here...the particular...the exodus... and the universal **stand side by side**.

My colleague, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove writes:

“Embedded deep within the foundation of Judaism exists a tension—.....is our faith, our Judaism, universal or particular in its orientation....is our greatest concern as Jews the condition of our collective and shared humanity, or are we meant to focus on the particulars of our own peoplehood?”

This is an eternal question for all Jews, and we all answer this question differently. But voices have bubbled to the surface in the Jewish community that reject one part of this dualityour ethnic, national, tribal identity....that I find very troubling.

Twenty-seven years ago, 1991, Leslie Fiedler, a preeminent American literary critic of his time, published a collection of essays entitled

Fiedler on the Roof: Essays on Literature and Jewish Identity. He ends his book by reflecting upon his own relationship to Judaism.

“I have never in my life put on *tefillin* or attached a *mezuzah* to the doorpost of my house. Nor have I ever joined a Jewish congregation or fraternal order....Not a single one of my eight children has at the present moment a Jewish mate; nor, for that matter, do I. Most of those kids, it is true, still think of themselves as in some vestigial sense Jews. But of my six grandsons only three have been circumcised – and one of those primarily because such ritual wounding is a part of the ancestral traditions of his Ashanti father. In any case, there is no one to say *kaddish* for me when I die. I am, in short, not just a minimal Jew – but as I have only recently become aware, [I am] a terminal [Jew] the last of a four-thousand year line. **Yet whatever regrets I may feel, I cannot deny that I have wanted this, worked for it. From childhood on, I dreamed of a world without ethnic or religious divisions, though I knew that this meant a world without Jews.**”

I didn't remember this essay until I read the American novelist, Michael Chabon's infamous commencement address to the graduating class of rabbis, cantors and educators at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles this past June. I was shocked by the Chabon message, but I shouldn't have been.

Here are just a few words from his address:

“I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers. I am for mongrels and hybrids and creoles, for syncretism and confluence, for jazz and Afrobeat and Thai surf music, for integrated neighborhoods and open borders and the preposterous history of Barack Obama. I am for the hodgepodge cuisines of seaports and crossroads, for sampling and mashups, pastiche and collage. I am for ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity, muddle, complexity, diversity, creative balagan.”

Clearly, Chabon—advocates the eradication of all boundaries and distinctions.

He also takes particular pleasure in criticizing Israel, and his words are dripping with sarcasm and anger. But this is not his main point, nor is it mine.

Chabon continues and says: “An endogamous marriage is a ghetto of two.” Using purposely, emotionally charged language, he criticizes the decision of 2 Jews to marry one another. Ironically, Chabon is happily married to a Jewish woman, and seems to enjoy living in his little ghetto. If he is really against a Jewish ghetto of two why did he marry a Jewish woman?

Marrying Jewish is not something he wishes for his children, as it is the beginning of an immoral and evil attempt to distinguish, separate, and create what he calls “gated communities”. He continues: “And what if every Jewish parent thought that way? I can hear some of you saying. What would happen to Judaism if all, or even most, of the world’s Jews married out of Judaism? Judaism might disappear from the face of the Earth, forever! “

This, in fact, is precisely what Chabon desires. The audacity, thechutzpah of Chabon to deliver this message to a group of future rabbis, cantors and educators, who have chosen to devote their lives to furthering Jewish values, is astounding. Reading Chabon reminded me of Fiedler, the only difference being that Fiedler has regrets about a world without Jews...and Chabon doesn't. Ridiculous, preposterous...but as one of my colleagues said, we cannot dismiss this trend of thought, and if we do, we ignore it at our own peril.

Fiedler and Chabon are not unique. A few years ago, a Reconstructionist Rabbi named Brant Rosen, suggested that “Given the global realities of our 21st century world, I wonder if there might be new models for Jewish identity – ones that value tribalism less than a deeper sense of engagement and kinship with the world outside.” And for the past decade, scholars like Professor Shaul Magid of Indiana University, have argued that we live in a post-ethnic era. Ethnicity and nationhood are myths that are broken, they no longer describe the Jewish community and this is not what we should strive for.

I never imagined that I would ever have to give a sermon arguing for endogamy, for distinctions and for the continuation of the Jewish people....but I feel I must.

Before we became a religion, we were a tribe. And when we were exiled, we slowly developed a religion, a faith that was portable from Babylonia, to Egypt, Spain and North America. But we were never simply a religion, and we were never simply a tribe, ethnic group, and people. We were always both. I like that balance, I think we need to maintain that polarity; otherwise we lose the essence of who we are.

Last month Rena and I had Shabbat dinner with our four children, their significant others, and my nephew from New York, who just graduated from Stanford with a degree in mechanical engineering. Henry is not religious, but he has a Jewish girlfriend, and on one of his many trips to Israel, told us that he intends on marrying a Jew. We asked him what he thought of Chabon's talk and ideas.

He told us that in the higher educational circles he travels in, and among his high school friends, there is a strong antipathy towards Israel. But you all already know about that issue. More significant, most of his Jewish friends do not feel a sense of belonging to, or solidarity with Israel or the Jewish people. They are citizens of the world, and their global passport is their iPhone X. Henry said, "look, I love Israel, I want to marry a Jew, I am part of the Jewish people...but I am also a global citizen." Perhaps Henry's position is the answer to Fiedler and Chabon.

We are losing that sense of kinship, camaraderie that once existed. Amotz Asa-El, my favorite columnist and senior editor of the Jerusalem Report, reminds us that Jews are losing their solidarity for each other. The bonds that used to bind Jews into a unique hodgepodge of Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Israeli and Diaspora...are loosening. The concept of Jewish peoplehood, something worth defending, has become meaningless.

And today, many Jews have embraced a universalistic approach to Judaism and Jewish values. The goal is tikkun olam...not the tikkun of yourself, of Israel, of the Jewish people. I am not arguing against tikkun olam as our world needs repairing; but social justice without Jewish

ethics(?) rituals, customs and peoplehood....is a Judaism out of balance.

The debate is an old one; Do Jews spend too much time worrying about their own tribe, people and ignore the troubles of the world around us? Or, do we spend too much time on universal issues, without even knowing the Jewish narrative?

I grew up in a home in which my parents were very involved in the civil rights movement. When a book was written about the broken alliance between Jews and African Americans, a chapter was devoted to my parents who marched with MLK and Jesse Jackson. My father believes in standing up for the underdog...and he hates all forms of racism and prejudice. When the book was being written, I asked him why he felt so strongly about civil rights, and he promptly answered, "growing up in Nazi Germany, I saw and experienced the consequences of degrading and demonizing a group of people."

But my parents belonged to a synagogue, a JCC, American Jewish Congress, and we observed the holidays and Shabbat at home. I believe that my parent's concern for others stemmed from the values and morals they imbibed from their very Jewish families and their belief in the fundamental principles of Judaism.

The bedrock of social justice, of tikkun olam, or fighting against racism and fascism....for Jews...has always been based on the particular....on Judaism. In 1963, in Washington DC, MLK delivered one of the greatest speeches in human history....I Have a Dream. His rhetoric is soaring, and his presence is mesmerizing...he is the modern day Moses trying to lead his people to the Promised Land. But do you know who spoke just before MLK, who introduced him? A German Jew named Rabbi Joachim Prinz, a Jewish refugee who had been ordained in Germany.

Rabbi Prinz was a gifted orator, and when he preached in Germany before escaping the Gestapo in 1937, thousands would attend. The same happened when he became the Rabbi of a large temple in New Jersey, Bnai Abraham. Listen carefully to his choice of words when he introduces himself on the steps of the Washington monument in 1963:

“I speak to you as an American Jew.” Not a Jewish American, not a religious leader, not a refugee of Hitler...and he was all those things. But as a Jew. Rabbi Prinz emphasized in that speech and elsewhere, that his concern for African Americans was based on the Torah...love your neighbor as yourself, texts that are central to his Judaism. And because of his Judaism, Prinz couldn't be silent.

My nephew spoke about being a global citizen. He said I'm a Jew but I also consider myself a global citizen. My father told me that in the 1940s, when he began to study at the University of Chicago, he was exposed to some of the great thinkers of the world, a world-class faculty at U of C. This young college freshman that had barely escaped Stuttgart, Germany, in 1939 with his entire family to the US, was breathing the winds of change in a post World War II world. The United Nations was being formed; enemies were busy making peace, and **he decided he wanted to be a citizen of the world**. He was dazzled by everyone else's narrative...and not so interested in his own.

I was fascinated, as are all children, when they learn a tidbit about their old man, but also shocked.

“So Dad”, I asked him, “how did that work out for you?” “Not so well”, he answered. He quickly came to the realization that trying to be a “citizen of the world” ...made him feel like someone floating in the air, with no roots. He began to go to Hillel where he felt comfortable being a Jew. Going to Hillel grounded him, giving him the foundation that allowed him to reach out to others and get involved in the civil rights movement. He likened being a Jew to being a tree; the more entrenched you are in your Judaism, the deeper your roots. A tree with strong roots, can reach to the heavens and spread its universal message. And of course, at Hillel he met my mother!

Early on in life, my father learned an important lesson...the dignity of being different. Syncretism, the SAT word for melting pot, dilutes the individual flavors or spice, the essence of who we are. And when that happens and you go out into the world...you have less to offer.

That dilemma is at the heart of the tension of a Jew living in an open, pluralistic society. But I am deeply concerned that in this age of inclusiveness, and openness, identification with your own people and religion is frowned upon. Some scholars argue that the Jewish people

are living in a post-ethnic, post-modern world and we either need to jettison our tribal identity, or create a new thinking. Our younger generation is opting for citizenship in the world, rather than being a dual citizen in your own particular world, and in the world, the universe. That is the crisis...this loss of dualism.

One of the greatest Jewish thinkers and activists was Abraham Joshua Heschel. Known for his books and teaching, Heschel is remembered primarily because of a picture taken of him walking arm in arm with Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy, giants of the civil rights movement, walking from Selma to Montgomery. In the midst of a crowd of black men is someone unmistakable....a Jew, with a long flowing white beard....Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He doesn't need to say anything...just his presence cries out "I'm a Jew, and when there is injustice we don't cry gevalt....Jews pursue justice".

Heschel's attempt to serve as an agent of change, his social activism, tikkun olam...does not stand alone. It flows from his yiddishkeit, his Torah...rooted in his knowledge of rabbinic texts that demand action.

At that same Friday night dinner table, as the discussion wore on, my laid back 28 year old son Eran, wisely said "Abba, I believe that the current climate of universalism over particularism won't last; the pendulum will eventually swing in the other direction". I think he is right, but in the meantime we must be able to answer and explain things to our children, and most especially, our grandchildren.

It's human nature to be tribal. The point of reference for so many of us is the group we belong to, the other individuals in the world who think similarly to how we do. Whether we despise our political leaders and their positions, or not, makes no difference...we seek out people with like opinions, from the same city, or ethnic group so we can feel connected. We join with others as we root for our favorite sports teams, and when we are away from home for an extended period, we seek out landmen.

I once gave a sermon entitled "stereophonic Judaism." I argued that unless we maintain a polarity between law and legend, between observance and belief, we are missing half of our narrative. We must begin with learning our narrative, our story, our customs, and our laws. Unless we know who we are, we will have nothing to contribute to the

world. Our world needs fixing, the universal pulls at all of us, but we can't go out onto the battlefield of injustice empty handed. We need Jewish tools in our toolbox. And the Jewish tools that you all have and should use to fix the world are the 613 commandments.

There is a beautiful teaching in Mishnah Avot: It is an aphorism we can use to guide our lives in the coming year.

- **If I am not for myself, who will be for me?** Rejoice in our religion and in our status as a people.
- **But if I am only for myself, what am I?** Let us rejoice in our membership in and commitment to humanity...and remember that we were all created in the image of God

And if not now, when? Now is the time, this is when we must do it.

This year is 5779...תשע"ט The last two letters, Ayin/Tet, can be interpreted as an acronym for the Hebrew words **Ayin Tovah**. The year of טובה עין. This Hebrew expression means the act of looking at the world with a positive outlook, generous outlook. Let us look at the Jewish people, with an *ayin tovah*, so that we see the goodness in what our people are...and what they can become.