

From the Ghetto

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Quite the controversy has roiled the professional class of Reform Judaism these past four months. It shows no sign of abating. Rabbis still pen stinging op-eds in Jewish media. Red-hot passions still singe our social networks. Attempts to douse the fires have not succeeded. Every article, every editorial, every social media post seems to fan the flames anew. What a ruckus. Who knew that such low-key, easy-going, laid-back people as rabbis could be so intense?

It all started in May. Every spring, the three states-side campuses of the Reform seminary – the Hebrew Union College – conduct commencement exercises. Pulitzer prize-winning author, Michael Chabon, was the commencement speaker at the graduation ceremony of the Los Angeles campus last spring. Talk about interesting commencement speakers!

Picture this: In the presence of many hundreds of people, assembled in a cavernous, reverent sanctuary. Before giddy, wide-eyed, newly-minted or soon-to-be Reform rabbis, cantors, educators and other Jewish professionals – and in the presence of their beaming parents, grandparents, children, siblings and friends. At this moment of their highest joy, on the cusp of being let loose to fulfill their lifelong dreams of serving the Reform movement and the Jewish people – Mr. Chabon told these eager souls, the future leaders of Reform Judaism – who within weeks would be assuming their first full-time job in a synagogue – that he doesn't go to synagogue anymore. He hardly does any Jewish ritual:

“Since we put the last of the *bnai mitzvah* [of our kids] behind us,” he said, “my retreat from religious practice has become near-total.”

Why?

Because for him, Judaism, like every other religion, is a philosophy of separating people. “Judaism is one giant interlocking system of division,” he said. “We are not those people over there.” Chabon understands Judaism as imposing on every Jew the job “to maintain, through constant vigilance – to enforce – the division between [among other things] Jew and gentile...”

And this realization that Judaism is about division and separation – is the reason he can no longer participate in Jewish rituals. Even a Passover Seder is painful for him. “The whole Exodus story is all just a bunch of baloney,” he speculated. “It seems pretty clear that we just made the whole damn thing up.”

Mono-cultural places,” he said, “one language – one religion – one haplotype – make me profoundly uncomfortable.”

What is a haplotype anyway?

To students who were accepted to HUC in the first place under a policy that if they are living with a partner, that partner must be Jewish, Chabon said:

“An endogamous marriage [that is – a Jew married to another Jew] – is a ghetto of two,” I abhor ghetto walls,” he said. “Maybe a kinder or more charitable word would be ‘enclave.’ But you know what? I abhor an enclave, too, a gated community, a restricted country club...”

“I want [my children] to marry into the tribe that prizes learning, inquiry, skepticism, openness to new ideas. I want my children to marry into the tribe that enshrines equality before the law and freedom of conscience and human rights...There will be plenty of potential partners for my children to choose – a fair number [of whom] are even likely to be Jews.”

Now this would have riled me up anyway but the kicker is that the commencement ceremony was held at a synagogue in Los Angeles called The Stephen Wise Temple. How could I not respond!

Mr. Chabon is a wonderful writer. To read the speech as literature is a compelling experience. Such a bitter pill, made easier to swallow through the honey-coated tongue of a master wordsmith. But beyond form, Chabon raised important issues – he has a feel for where many Jews are today. Go online and listen for yourself. Some students were upset – one family even walked out of its own graduation ceremony and later wrote about it – but many gave Chabon a rousing ovation.

There is a larger issue here than one person’s speech. Chabon believes what many progressive Jews believe. He included in his address harsh criticism of Israel – now standard and expected fare in the stream of consciousness of progressive Jewish speakers. Denouncing Israel is no longer really about courageously speaking truth to power – it is more like throwing red meat to the progressive Jewish base. It would be courageous not to disparage Israel before such crowds.

But even more: Like so many today – Chabon conflates the Israeli policies he opposes with Judaism, itself. So goes the new progressive thinking: If the Jewish state is so objectionable – the Jewish enterprise itself is irredeemable. And those Jews who do not see it this way – are, themselves, morally compromised.

These critics always impress me as so self-assured in their grasp of human truth. No cloud of doubt ever seems to form in their moral skies. Their self-confidence about my moral duties is unflinching, unshakable and unwavering.

So – I thought to speak with you today from the ghetto – a hapless, helpless, haplotype, hopelessly hiding behind the impenetrable, insurmountable and indefensible walls of Judaism – a religion, like all the others, that promotes only separation and division. Receive these words from the ghetto as a gesture of respect. I do not expect everyone to agree with me. What would

be the point of giving a sermon with which everyone agreed? Think it through. That is enough for me.

Moreover, I have not seen any official Reform response to Chabon's challenge. I have seen one public response that focused on a commencement speaker's right to free speech, and our need to encourage the free competition of ideas, even if we disagree with them. But Mr. Chabon presented a serious challenge, deeply analyzed and beautifully written. It deserves a substantive response. Consider this one rabbi's riposte – not a point-by-point rebuttal, but a general reflection on the spirit of our times.

I want to clarify what this sermon is not:

It is not a discussion on who should deliver a commencement speech. I am not afraid of controversy. To the contrary – according to our Sages, any disagreement that is for the sake of truth – is blessed. Jews argue with each other. It's what we do. We like it. We value it. We perpetuate it. It is *haplotypical* of Jews, it's in our DNA. No one has to convince me about free speech or openness to new ideas. I'm not sure that Michael Chabon would have been my first choice – but I'm all in on free speech and controversial speakers.

It is also not a discussion about interfaith marriage. According to recent surveys as many as 70% of all marriages of non-Orthodox Jews today is an interfaith one. It is a fact of liberal American Jewish life.

Mind you – I am not against one Jewish person marrying another – I did it myself. If you want to give it a shot, you have my blessing. I do not consider my marriage unassailable evidence of my Neanderthal mindset – but at the same time – I hope that those of you in an interfaith relationship feel good about the synagogue. We work hard to create an atmosphere of respect and acceptance.

I hope you feel comfortable here – integral and integrated and one of us. We deeply respect your decision to remain who you are. Judaism never proselytized. We do not seek to convert anyone. To the contrary – we respect and cherish you for who you are. We do not want you to be someone else – unless that is what you want. And if that is what you want, we have programs for you.

Moreover, I cannot express enough how moving it is to me when non-Jewish parents in our synagogue raise Jewish children. Often, it is the parent who is not Jewish – who takes the lead in Jewish education. Many of you meet with me for advice how you can parent most effectively, since you did not grow up around Jews and you are not Jewish, yourself. These are among the most uplifting conversations I have as your rabbi. And I am proud and touched – that even some of you who are not Jewish consider me “your rabbi.”

What this sermon is about – is Jewish solidarity. Progressive Jews never seem to speak about our obligations to Jews anymore. To care about fellow Jews, to feel connected to the Jewish people,

and to be attached to the Jewish state – are not proof of ghetto Judaism. The opposite: Not to be committed to these values is evidence of Jewish decline.

To characterize Judaism as a ghetto is a profound misreading of Judaism. It says more about the characterizer than Jewish character. To study Jewish texts deeply is to find beneath the maze of mind-numbing laws and regulations an unwavering belief in, and acceptance of, intellectual pluralism. Millennia before Western philosophers, Jewish Sages embraced reason and logic as the building blocks of progress. They were astonishingly flexible. They did not fear contradiction. To the contrary, they embraced disagreement as the best way to harness human difference. Persuasion – not coercion – would prevail.

To characterize Judaism as a ghetto is also a profound misunderstanding of liberalism. Under what theory of liberalism are we required to discard attachments and loyalties to Jews? What is this new Jewish progressivism that asserts that acceptance of others requires the negation of self? Where did it come from? Under what theory of liberalism is a marriage between two Jews illiberal? Is a marriage between two Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics or Universalists illiberal? Is a marriage between two aboriginal Australians, eager to preserve Aboriginal civilization illiberal? Is a marriage between two Canadian Inuits eager to preserve Inuit culture illiberal? Is a marriage between two secular Venetians a ghetto of two?

Don't liberals believe in diversity – in a pluralism of communities? Don't we believe in the dignity of human difference? Or – do we believe in diversity for everyone but Jews?

Individual, communal and national distinctiveness – separations between people – are among the most basic of human realities. It is why liberals believe in pluralism. Pluralism assumes that people are different and cherishes these differences. It assumes that freedom and unity can be maintained – and social progress can be advanced – through diversity and that diversity is not a blemish on human progress, but, to the contrary, is a social good.

One tall tower of uniformity is unhealthy. A babel of different languages, different approaches, different cultures, diversity – is what God wanted – and hence – God brought down the tower of uniformity and scattered the peoples of the earth. Ironically, this is what Michael Chabon, himself, said he prefers: “ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity, muddle, complexity, diversity, creative *balagan*.” Those are among the central axiomatic presumptions of Judaism. Not a ghetto – but a mishmash of cultures. That is how Judaism understands the world.

We didn't build walls to keep people out. They built walls to keep us in. We hate ghettos – for ourselves and for others. The ghetto is not our invention. It was their invention – those who didn't like Jews and who either willfully or ignorantly mischaracterized Judaism. They put us behind walls. We didn't go there voluntarily. They built gated communities to keep Jews out. It wasn't our idea. World peace – the wolf laying down with the lamb – was our idea. Isaiah said it. Justice and righteousness for all was our idea. Amos said it: “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Mercy and humility was our idea. Micah said it: “What does God want of you?” Only this: do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

Compassion was our idea. Zechariah said it: “Deal loyally and compassionately with one another. “Do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor, and do not plot evil against one another.”

Universal good for all people is the goal of the particular existence of the Jewish people. “I have selected you, Abraham, to do what is just and right, so that you shall be a blessing, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves through you.”

The goal of the particular existence of the Jewish people is to bring light to all the peoples of the earth. “I, God, appointed you to be a light to the nations,” Isaiah preached, “opening eyes deprived of light, bringing prisoners, and all those who sit in darkness out of their dungeons.”

The point of the particular existence of the Jewish people is to promote the commonality of all people. Our ambition is to endow all people with dignity. God created all human beings. Each of us has equal standing and equal worth before the Creator. “Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us?” Malachi proclaimed.

The arrogance Chabon ascribes to Judaism is completely opposite to the teachings of our tradition. Our persecutors and ideological opponents hoisted these characteristics upon us. Chosenness never implied superiority. To the contrary, we were the lowest of nations. We were slaves. There are some brief moments when the Bible describes the People of Israel positively – but by and large, the Bible is one long litany of the failures of our people. From the beginning, Judaism insisted that the Jewish nation was no better than any other nation. “You are no different to me than the Ethiopians,” Amos proclaimed. “I brought you up from the Land of Egypt, but I also [freed] the Philistines and the Arameans.”

And anyway – what is so wrong with a nation believing that it is special? To be motivated to do good because you feel that you have special gifts – even if you overestimate your talents – isn’t that a good thing? That a group sees itself as special or unique, by itself, should not be offensive to anyone, especially liberals. What is so illiberal about a people that believes it has something positive to contribute to the world? Many peoples regard themselves as special. Don’t we constantly proclaim American exceptionalism – that we are the last best hope on earth? Doesn’t the British nation consider itself unique, having something important to contribute to the world? Read the speeches of Churchill. One wonders why, of all the peoples of the earth, it is only the distinctive existence of the Jewish people that is so troubling to so many. Why do some of the very people who uphold the value of diversity as a social good find the distinctiveness of the Jewish people so challenging?

To be Jewish is not to separate from society; it is the opposite, to be part of society – to influence society.

Some Jews are arrogant.

Michael Chabon described the settlers of Hebron as “a clutch of 800 zealots lodged in illusory safety behind a wall made from the bodies of teenage soldiers.” I agree. Those settlers are among the most fanatical, intolerant, arrogant Jews living today.

Chabon spoke about seeing a video of ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in Jerusalem assaulting a group of young girls for the sin of daring to learn – and he thought to himself, – *That is not Judaism*. I agree. Those ultra-Orthodox Jews in their pious pomposity distort Jewish teachings. That is not Judaism.

Sadly, we have such Jews in our community. Too many. Some of them are even rabbis. We are right to call them out and to feel disgust at their behavior. We must oppose them.

But to equate the most radical, the most fundamentalist, the most unrepresentative Jews with Judaism is absurd. We are the first to criticize those who do that to Muslims – who point to Islam-inspired extremism as proof that Islam, itself is illegitimate. To point to the most intolerant Jews as proof that Judaism is hopelessly intolerant – and that liberals have no alternative but to cut it all away – like an arm, Chabon said, infected with a flesh-eating disease – is preposterous. It would be as if we were to cut away the American idea because some Americans are racists – or to cut away the liberal idea because some progressives are intolerant.

It has come to my attention that some other religious people are also extreme. Do you know that there are militant Buddhists? They are not all like the Dalai Lama. Do you know that there are some ill-natured Catholics? They are not all like the Pope.

You know what I have even heard? You won't believe this. I have heard that even some atheists are intolerant. Imagine that. You know what else I've heard? I've heard that some liberals are unpleasant. And – apparently – there are even some bigoted writers.

I haven't discarded literature – because some of Michael Chabon's fellow authors are extreme. I haven't discredited classic novels because Dostoyevsky was an anti-Semite. I have not concluded that the very essence of literature is irredeemably racist because some novelists were racists. Why that would be very ignorant of me – very superficial – no?

Would you suggest that the very idea of classical music is fatally flawed – that the arm of music should be cut off from the body of Western culture – because one of its greatest composers – Richard Wagner – hated Jews? Would you point to Wagner as proof that there is something intolerant about music? I can't even bring myself to cut Pink Floyd from my iPhone, despite the troubling views of Roger Waters.

Some Jews are intolerant. Some Jewish leaders, political and religious, are extreme. Some Jews purposely separate themselves from others, hiding behind thick walls of Jewish law. Intolerance,

objectification, arrogance, prejudice, aggression, narrow-mindedness – these are human qualities. All of us have them. All of us objectify people. You do too.

Judaism is a magnificent, inspiring, visionary, progressive, enlightened, humane, humanitarian philosophy that admits we all have these traits – and urges us to overcome them – and teaches that we can – indeed – prevail. The human creature can rise above that which drags us down.

Judaism trains the individual to master himself. We can improve. Individual and collective progress is possible. We are not condemned to ever-lasting futility. You can repair yourself. Do not wait for a savior. It will be too late. Judaism teaches that the Messiah will arrive the day after he is no longer needed. The discipline of better behavior will produce in you better behavior. This is Judaism – the soaring optimistic, life-affirming philosophy of self-empowerment, self-realization and concern for others. It is a liberal progressive idea.

Judaism's central narrative is freedom. Release the slave. This is the purpose of the Passover Seder – not to prove that every word of the Bible is literally true – but to sensitize us to the horror of oppression. Redeem the oppressed. That is a liberal idea. Proclaim liberty throughout the land. That is a liberal idea. Care for the weak. That is a liberal idea. Shelter the homeless. That is a liberal idea. Feed the poor. That is a liberal idea. Clothe the naked. That is a liberal idea. Pursue justice. The king is not above the law. That is a liberal idea.

And in any case – speaking as a haplotype – some things in life should be separated. The basis of modern gene therapy is to separate healthy genes from unhealthy ones, thereby curing the patient. We should separate clean from unclean – in both physical and moral health. We should separate good behavior from bad. We should separate the criminal from the just. We should separate heaven and earth. We are not God.

The defeat of God in our times has not led to better behavior or fewer crimes. When a person no longer believes in God, he often thinks that he is a god. It is not that he believes nothing. Sometimes, he comes to believe everything (Chesterton) – first and foremost, his own superiority. Everything is allowed.

Immorality is caused, in part, by our unwillingness or inability to make distinctions, to separate one thing from another – to distinguish between truth and lies, between order and chaos. The spirit of our times is “it's all relative.” Each has her own version of scientific and moral truth.

So, yes, from time to time, I do teach my child and your child that “We are not those people over there.” We are not oppressors. We are not the Taliban. We are not Boko Haram. We are not White supremacists. We are not extremists, Jewish or other.

Dear congregants, we have been together now for 14 years. We have laughed together, cried together, studied together, questioned together, prayed together, traveled together. For better or for worse, the focus of all my professional energies has been you: To enrich your

understanding of Judaism, and to deepen your attachments to our people. That is my job. It is why you hired me. It is also my vocation. It is why I became a rabbi in the first place.

In that spirit – with profound respect and deep affection: The growing inclination amongst liberal Jews to deemphasize Jewish distinctiveness is the gravest threat to the future of liberal Judaism – and to your own Jewish identity. For what are the prospects of the continuity of the people if the people is not committed to its own continuity – and does not even agree philosophically that it is a legitimate objective and a social good? Is it possible to sustain the Jewish people without being committed to the Jewish people? Can Judaism survive without Jews?

It is the will to Jewish distinctiveness that ensures Jewish distinctiveness. It is the will to continue that has led to continuity. There is a ferocity to Jewish survival instincts, an indomitable sense of Jewish destiny. When these are lost, the future is lost.

In the modern world, those who are not committed to Jewish survival will not survive as Jews.