

Jewish Peoplehood: Five Ramifications

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I am marking some milestones this year. This is my tenth High Holy Days at Stephen Wise. In addition, I have begun my 25th year in the rabbinate.

There are certain milestones that when reached, we tend to want to probe their meaning. It seems appropriate to me that a decade at our synagogue and a quarter century in the rabbinate offer an opportunity to share with you what I have learned along the way.

In deference to our decade together let me convey ten ideas; ten central values that guide my life and my rabbinate: Five communal values today; and five personal values on Yom Kippur.

One

Jews are a people. We are not simply a religion. We are a civilization. This is the core idea; the essence of who we are and the starting point for everything else.

Eescha le'goy gadol; "I will make of you a great people and I will bless you." (Genesis 12:2-3).

Ve'atem tihiyu li mamlechet kohanim ve'goy kadosh; "You shall be unto Me a holy people." (Exodus 19:6).

Ve'etencha livrit am; "I created you and appointed you a covenant people." (Isaiah 42:6)

There is a special bond – a *brit* – a covenant - between our people and God and amongst Jews, themselves. This covenant is both contemporaneous - we are bound in special ways to all Jews living today; and it is also a covenant of the ages that connects us to all Jews who ever lived and will one day live after us:

The principle framework of Judaism is not the individual Jew or the local synagogue. The center of Judaism is the Jewish people.

More than anything, this is the message I have been trying to convey since my first day in our synagogue. In one way or another, most everything I say and do comes back to this foundational idea.

We belong to something larger than ourselves. You are connected to something special: the Jewish people; the only Western civilization to have survived ancient days. I have seen it as my mission to remind you of this; to be a nudnik and to challenge you to develop a sense of belonging; a pride, a spiritual awakening; a commitment to continue what three thousand years have produced.

This is the essence of who I am and what I preach: Three thousand years of Jewish civilization; don't let it slip away in you or the ones you love.

Two

The second value is a consequence of the first: We are Jews no matter what we believe about God or whether we believe at all.

I know that there are many different beliefs represented in this sanctuary; and there are many who define themselves as agnostics or atheists. So what? Where is it written – in the Bible or in the Talmud, in the commentaries or in the codes – where is written that an atheist shouldn't go to shul?

Since I am a rabbi, after all, I have sought to bring millennia of Jewish wisdom to your attention; to teach you how the brilliance, the depth, the values of our people are relevant to your lives, and can inspire you to live a good and meaningful life.

And since I am a rabbi, after all, I have endeavored to teach that faith is not some pre-modern crutch that is no longer necessary in the age of science. Faith and science are not at war; they are allies in the search for meaning. Religion benefits from the input of science. Science enhances our understanding of the limitlessness of the universe. It leads to humility regarding the smallness of the earth and our place herein.

And since I am a rabbi, after all, I have challenged you to consider that faith is who we are; we are creatures meant for God. "Seek me and live," proclaims the prophet Amos.

Now these are my beliefs: You are free to disagree with me – and throughout our decade together many of you have exercised this freedom prodigiously; and have expressed to me your disbelief in, and rejection of, the God idea.

And for you, especially, I have tried to assure you that this, too, is a Jewish view, well within the mainstream. Any thinking person has doubts; all of us have doubts; rabbis have doubts too. So let's all continue to struggle and challenge each other – and in the midst of our doubts – let us recite the Shema together at the appointed time.

And remember - while religion is a critical component of Jewish civilization, it is not the only component. Our beliefs in God, or lack thereof, do not affect our Jewish status. We

are Jews if we have joined the Jewish people – either by birth or by choice. That’s it – whatever we believe. No one gave you a faith-based examination upon joining the synagogue.

Three

The third value is a consequence of the first two:

The purpose of the Jewish people is to be a light to the nations; to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The Jewish particular exists to achieve universal goals; our reason for being is *tikkun* - to improve and repair society at large.

We believe that the collectivity is the key determinant of social well being, not the individual. Nations drive history, and the forces of history – collective politics and policies – not an individual savior - will one day produce a better world, where peace and tranquility reign; when “all shall sit under vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.”

We speak, therefore, of the centrality of Jewish peoplehood, but our purpose is not self-aggrandizement. Our aim is not elitism, superiority or special privilege: to the contrary – the Bible tells us over and over again that we were the lowest of nations – we were slaves – that’s why we have something to say about suffering and that’s why we are committed to the freedom of our people and all people.

Four

The fourth value is a consequence of the first three:

I am a Zionist. I believe in the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in Zion, the ancient homeland of Israel.

It is not only that Israel is a place of refuge for millions of persecuted Jews who now live with dignity and are thriving: If it was only that – *dayenu* – that would have been enough for me. If all that Israel did was to provide a home for what is now the majority of the world’s Jews – *dayenu* – that, too, would have been enough.

But Israel is much more: Israel is the most eloquent expression of Jewish peoplehood in our days. It is one of the great wonders of the world: the recreation and restoration of the national home and the national spirit of the Jewish people. Israel testifies to the Jewish people’s indomitable will to survive.

Rabbi Wise, who founded this synagogue, believed the same thing. I am not sure that on all matters Rabbi Wise would be pleased with the way our synagogue has developed; I am not sure, for example, that he would have taken to our Kabbalat Shabbat services, drums and all:

But on the main point – putting Jewish peoplehood at the center of our concerns – and consequently - asserting our unbreakable commitment to the State of Israel – on this – I am certain that he would have approved. He was the leader of American Zionism for an entire generation. He established a rabbinical seminary next door at what is now the York Prep School that he called the JIR – the Jewish Institute of Religion – dedicated to the fundamental idea of the centrality of Jewish peoplehood:

I imagine his booming voice coming down through the decades saying: “You have stayed loyal all these years to our founding principles and most cherished beliefs; you have preserved, cultivated and enhanced the most distinctive and unique values of the Free Synagogue: Zionism!

It wasn’t easy for Rabbi Wise. He was among the few Reform rabbis who were Zionists. Almost all Reform rabbis of his era were anti-Zionists; opposed to the creation of the State of Israel.

And they fought him every day. They did not believe in a distinctive Jewish existence. They did not believe in the Jewish collectivity. They wanted to be like the gentiles – a community of the faithful, not a nation; not a people bound by covenantal bonds. They were convinced that the messianic era of peace was upon us; that German high philosophy had finally freed history from the chains of hatred and unreason; and that anti-Semitism would soon disappear.

Reason – pure reason – was the new god and Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Schopenhauer – were its prophets. “We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community,” they insisted, and therefore do not expect a return to Palestine: “America is our Zion.”

Stephen Wise considered this earlier form of Reform truly radical; extreme, and he, and a handful of other great Reform rabbis wanted nothing to do with it. Not only did they not expect the lion to lie down with the lamb in their lifetimes, they were filled with foreboding about the future of Jews worldwide.

Forty years later, the genocide of European Jewry, perpetrated by Germany, itself, proved that, as Rabbi Wise and his early colleague – Theodore Herzl - always insisted - these expectations of “universal brotherhood were not even a beautiful dream.”

As Herzl intuited and dreaded, the perpetrators of the *Shoah* didn’t care what individual Jews believed: they sought the elimination of the Jewish people.

Five

The fifth value is a consequence of the first four:

As this congregation’s rabbi and as a successor to Stephen Wise – I have endeavored to

develop in you, if not Zionist convictions, at least a special feeling of connectedness to the Jewish state. If all we have is an America-centered world view, disregarding the totality of the Jewish people - with Israel at its very heart – we will then lead diminished Jewish lives that will not sustain us over time, and will compromise the legacy of the Free Synagogue.

Israel is where we discover that Judaism is not only Shabbat and festival rituals; it is not only life cycles, and Torah study – but Judaism is all in: a history; a destiny. Judaism is the collective experiences of the Jewish people exercising collective Jewish influence and responsibility. We cannot fully understand the contemporary Jewish experience, or live complete Jewish lives, without Israel being part of our Jewish identity.

For this reason I have been so pleased that in the last decade hundreds of you have traveled with the synagogue to Israel. We expect at least 120 congregants to join one of the two Israel missions later this year; if you want to come, it is not too late. In addition, we will be organizing a special Birthright mission to Israel in the winter, so those of you between the ages of 22-26 who want to go to Israel at no cost – give Rabbi Fersko a call: it is your birthright.

And I am so pleased that as a result of our Israel Outreach Initiative drawing Israelis residing in New York City to our congregation – for their sake – and for our sake – that we are able to welcome today over a hundred Israelis – individuals and families – who are experiencing High Holy Days services for the first time in the United States: *Beruchim Ha'ba'im!* Welcome!

I feel an urgency to connect you to Israel. With personal memories of the Holocaust and Israel's creation fading, we are, again, powerfully attracted to one of the tendencies of contemporary liberalism: the de-emphasis of group ties in favor of a perceived more enlightened universal fellowship.

I worry about Jewish and non-Jewish elites who deride the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, describing them as “ethnic,” or “tribal,” and therefore, by definition, less enlightened than the bonds of universal love. The very idea of Jewish peoplehood is anachronistic, they say, in our era of enlightenment, reason, equality and fraternity.

And therefore, they assert in our day what the opponents of Rabbi Wise asserted in his day - before the Holocaust shattered the illusion that a post-peoplehood Judaism was immanent: They say that the very notion of a Jewish state is contrary to the spirit of the age; it is a product of 19th century nationalism imposed on a 21st century post-national reality.

They don't say that about other nations. There are over 190 nation-states in the world – with dozens of territorial and border disputes amongst them - but it is only Israel that receives their special animus.

Look at what is going on in the world; look at what is going on throughout the Levant: Hundreds of thousands of people mercilessly butchered and maimed, and millions displaced in front of our eyes by authoritarian regimes and movements. Israel is an island of democratic tranquility in a raging sea of anti-Western, anti-modern extremism.

Whatever you think about the wisdom of an American strike in Syria – and there are plenty of reasons to be concerned - do you not find it incongruous that those very people and institutions that are so noisy about every perceived Israeli violation - whether real or imagined - are so quiet when it comes to chemical warfare unleashed by the Syrian regime on its own people?

Whatever you think should be the proper American and world response: where is the outrage from those who say that their anti-Israel views are propelled by humanitarian concerns? Such deafening silence to the ear-splitting fire that has killed over a hundred thousand men, women and children? Some of these wounded Syrians are being treated in Israeli hospitals.

And whatever you think about the wisdom of an American strike in Syria – and there are plenty of reasons to be concerned – chemical weapons are different. I have struggled mightily with myself during the past two weeks to discern the moral difference between a death caused by a sniper's bullet and a death caused by poison gas. In both cases the person is dead.

But remember: chemical weapons are weapons of mass destruction. Fourteen hundred may have been killed in the recent attack, but it could easily have been fourteen thousand. And in our day – unlike the trench warfare of World War I – chemical weapons are used on ethnic groups. These WMD's are also WEC's - weapons of ethnic cleansing. Their purpose is to wipe out entire neighborhoods – either by mass murder or through the terror that such attacks create.

This is Israel's neighborhood. The margin of error is tiny in comparison to Western powers. And still, as we speak, Israel is negotiating yet again to give peace yet another chance.

We need peace. There is no other way. Time is short. Peace can only materialize through a political process of compromise. Compromise is not a dirty word; compromise is life itself.

Of course Israel is not perfect, and should not be immune to criticism. There is plenty wrong in Israel and there is plenty to do, including our own Reform movement's fight to be fully recognized by Israeli law. To be a critic is often honorable, commendable and patriotic.

But Israel should be receiving the support of liberals, not their scorn. Israel is a liberal democracy that upholds progressive humanitarian values – not perfectly, but earnestly – and admirably, given its security challenges that most countries cannot even imagine.

In Israel there is pluralism, secularism, tolerance, equality, the rule of law. Broadly speaking, Israeli society is not scandalized; not prudish, peevish or perturbed by men and women; or men and men; or women and women holding hands and kissing on the streets. Israel is where people dance and drink and wear bathing suits to the beach and have fun. It is what liberals say they want.

From what low place does the high-minded anti-Israel animus come from? A brilliant scientist who refuses to attend conferences in Israel; a leading author who refuses to even allow her books to be translated into Hebrew; a popular musician who boycotts the Jewish state; the only country as far as the eye can see in the Middle East that allows – and encourages – their free thinking books, music and academic research. They would be arrested for heresy or indecency in neighboring countries.

I worry that liberal American Jews are increasingly swayed by the hostility of some liberal thinkers. There are rabbis who never speak of Israel. There are rabbis who always speak of Israel, but only mention her flaws, in accordance with what they perceive to be the demands of the dogma of the day.

And therefore, as a liberal rabbi, I have taken every opportunity during our years together to remind you that Zionism is a liberal cause.

Zionism was created by liberals. Theodore Herzl was a secular Jew, deeply learned in Western philosophy – who just wanted to be left alone – and only after determining that Europe would never leave the Jewish people alone – no matter how much Kant they studied – he came up with the history-shattering idea of rebuilding the Jewish state after two millennia of exile.

President Obama said it best earlier this year on his visit to Israel.

He said: “More than three thousand years ago the Jewish people lived here...The founding of the Jewish State was a rebirth, a redemption unlike any in history...While Jews achieved extraordinary success in many parts of the world the dream of true freedom finally found its full expression in the Zionist idea – to be a free people in your own homeland.”

I recently came across the amazing testimony of Nachum Hoch, a witness at the Eichmann trial, and one of the only people in the world who was already locked inside the gas chamber, and survived to tell the story. There are no words; it takes your breath away.

With Eichmann looking on, Hoch described how, as a teenager in Auschwitz, he and approximately a thousand other boys were marched into the gas chamber. He testified that as darkness enveloped them, the children sang to give themselves courage, but when it became pitch black they began to cry. They knew what was about to happen. They had breathed the smoke, heard the rumors and seen the bodies.

Without warning, the doors suddenly opened. All of the children were marched out of the gas chamber to undergo a selection.

Fifty boys who looked stronger than the others were chosen by the SS. Hoch, by some incomprehensible circumstance, was among them. All of the other children were immediately herded back into the gas chamber and within minutes were dead. The fifty were taken to the railroad tracks.

And there they discovered why they were spared: a wagonload of potatoes had arrived and there were not enough laborers to unload them, so the SS went into the gas chamber itself to find fifty boys to do the work.

Of the fifty, only Hoch and two other children survived. In 1948 he arrived in Israel. He married. He had a daughter and three grandchildren: the most meaningful response to Hitler's burning insanity and Eichmann's icy efficiency.

Our lives can seem so capricious, so random and at times so incomprehensible. Nachum Hoch was already dead. Of the millions who were gassed, he was plucked from the very mouth of the beast and borne, as if on wings of eagles, to the Promised Land.

We must fight to find meaning to our lives. We are here for a reason – there must be a reason. It cannot be all randomness. There must be a purpose to my life. And there must be a purpose to the Jewish people's life; an explanation of why we are here and why we survived.

Eventually, Nahum Hoch found his way to Haifa, the shining city on the Carmel Hill, that we have visited numerous times on our Israel missions. Mount Carmel restored him. Up there in the glorious sunshine and gentle breezes – overlooking the blue tranquility of the Mediterranean Sea - Nachum Hoch was brought back to life.

From biblical times Mount Carmel was the place where the dead could be revived. We read in the Second Book of Kings that Elisha the prophet restored a dead boy to life on that very spot. We read that Elijah the prophet restored the Jewish people to life on that very spot, after they strayed towards the worship of false gods.

In the Bible, as in our very days, Mount Carmel is where one boy was revived and one people was revived. The mountain symbolizes redemption, restoration and recovery. It is

where hope is found again, after all hope is lost.

As written in the Book of Isaiah:

Yesusum midbar...vetifrach ka-havatselet...kevod ha'Levanon nitan la, hadar ha-Carmel

The wilderness shall rejoice and blossom like a rose...

It shall receive...the splendor of Mount Carmel...

They shall behold the glory of God...

Say to the anxious of heart,

Be strong, fear not...

The eyes of the blind shall be opened

The ears of the deaf unplugged.

The lame shall leap like a deer...

And a highway shall appear there,

It shall be called the Sacred Way...

The redeemed shall walk on it;

The ransomed of God shall return

And they shall come with happiness to Zion,

Crowned with joy everlasting

They shall attain gladness

While sorrow and sadness fade away.

(Isaiah 35)

