

The Jewish Family

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You don't have to be a Jew to pray; other people pray. You don't have to be a Jew to repent; others repent. You don't have to be a Jew to fast; others fast. You don't have to be a Jew to study Torah; others consider the Five Books of Moses just as sacred as we do.

You don't have to be a Jew to speak Hebrew; others speak Hebrew. You don't have to be a Jew to wear a yarmulke; others wear skull caps – I even saw the Pope wear one.

You don't have to be a Jew to love Israel. You might be amazed at how many non-Jews support Israel - sometimes, alas, with more conviction and more passion than Jews.

You don't have to be a Jew to hold a Passover Seder. Many others now incorporate an elaborate Seder meal during the very hours that we do, and recite the ancient words of the *Haggadah*.

But – you do have to be a Jew to be Jewish. There is not a person in the world who is a non-Jewish Jew. As there is no such thing as a partial pregnancy, there is no such thing as a partial Jew. You are either Jewish or not Jewish. And if you are not Jewish – not that there's anything wrong with that...

But if you want to be Jewish, how does that happen? Most of us become Jewish by being born into the Jewish family; and the rest of us decided at some point that we wanted to join this family.

Jews are a family. Judaism is the faith and civilization of the Jewish family. We are a people. It is this principle more than any other that distinguishes us and makes us who we are.

If you were to go to a Christian minister and you were to ask what constitutes a Christian, you would be told that a Christian is a person who accepts the gospel of the Church. If you were to go to a rabbi and you were to ask what constitutes a Jew, you would be told that a Jew is someone who was born a Jew or has joined the Jewish family.

What determines a Christian is faith. What determines a Jew is family.

Of course, Jews have faith too. We believe many things. But it is not our beliefs that determine our Jewish status; it is our Jewish status that determines our beliefs.

And what we mean by family - is not a family of the spirit binding like-minded philosophers and believers. What we mean is that we are a real family, of flesh and blood.

The Torah portion for tomorrow morning begins as follows:

“You stand before the Eternal your God to enter into the covenant that God is concluding with you today. I make this covenant not with you alone but with those who are standing with us this day and with those who are not with us this day.”

The Jewish family – like your own family – is connected to those who are with us this day and those who are not with us this day. In your own family there are those who have passed on, those who are alive now, and those yet to be born. All are considered by you to be part of your family.

You have an unwritten compact between the generations of your family. You have an agreement – a covenant – between those who are dead; those who are living; and those who are to be born.

We pay deference and honor to those in our family who came before us. We remember them. We cherish them. We name our children for them. In many cases, we seek to embody their values. We have a past and we are the product of this past. We know our family history. We tell family stories about how we got here – over and over again.

We also attend to those who are now living. If we have children, we raise them. If we have relatives, we see them. If we have responsibilities, we embrace them.

And in your own family you have a future. We do not consider our family to end with us. We want our family to endure. We sacrifice for the future. We save money and deprive ourselves today to benefit those whom we will never know tomorrow.

The Jewish family is the same. If you are part of this family; if you were born into the Jewish family or you joined our family later in life – you are bound to all other Jews – those who have gone before us, those who are now living and those who will come after us. You have obligations – you are in covenant – between the Jews of the past, the Jews of the present and the Jews of the future.

This is what the Torah portion is trying to say: We are in partnership between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born.

The Jewish Past

Let us dwell first on our partnership with those who are dead.

To be rooted is among the most important human need. We have not come from nowhere. We are Jewish today because there were Jews yesterday. We are not the first born; only the latest born. Everyone comes from somewhere; there is no creation without tradition; there is no creation from nothing. Only God creates from nothing.

Our primary problem today is not in discovering our modernity. American Jews are pretty good at that. We are on the cutting edge of modernity. We are accomplished, learned, affluent and fully absorbed into Western culture and civilization.

Our problem today is that we have lost a sense of the tradition. We are ignorant, oblivious or disdainful of the past. I am always surprised by how many people tell me that they do not own a Bible. They may have hundreds of books at home; but not the Bible.

We are too eager to put the past behind us. There is no future when the past is dead. We build on what we have inherited. We do not build on air. Being modern is not about sacrificing the past in favor of the new, but of preserving the past and making it new.

Three years ago our synagogue visited Russia and Ukraine. We brought the gift of Torah to Jews now emerging from seven decades of Jewish hibernation, forced upon them in the name of universal brotherhood. That is where our opponents always start: "You Jews stick together too much. We can't absorb you and we can't get rid of you. Why don't you disappear already? You are remnants of a tribal past, unsuited to our times."

While we were in Kiev our synagogue group visited Babi Yar and recited the memorial prayer – the *Kaddish* - for the 33,000 Jewish souls extinguished there by the Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators. We stood over the steep ravine where tens of thousands of bodies tumbled down into a monstrous ditch during three blood-soaked days of murderous madness.

Our youngest travelers, American pre-teens and teenagers, recited the words of the poet before the mourners' prayer: "I am every child murdered here; no fiber of my body will forget this."

Living inside of us are all the Jews who were ever born. We are every Jewish child murdered. We are every Jewish parent's perseverance. We are every Jewish community's persistence. We are every Jewish sufferer burned at the stake for reading Torah and for worshipping God. No fiber of our body can ever forget this.

In July, our synagogue will return to Eastern Europe. We will visit Warsaw, Krakow, Auschwitz, Budapest, Prague, Theresenstadt, and Berlin. There are Jews there now; and

we will pledge ourselves to them and to Jewish survival. We will see with our own eyes the indomitable Jewish will to live; how like a phoenix, we rise from the ashes.

But we go, also, because these are Jewish graveyards. And for us to live, we must know where our family died. And we must know why they died.

We will re-learn that they died, not only as a consequence of Man's inhumanity to Man. They were murdered because of Man's inhumanity to us: our people; our family: The Jews. We were the target of their insane murderous rage. It was Jewish particularism; it was the Jewish family that they wanted extinct.

Many other people suffered, and many others were killed. There was a universality of suffering. Jews do not have a monopoly on suffering.

But first, we seek to understand particular Jewish suffering. Our entire people was marked for murder simply for being. That is what made the Holocaust unique in the annals of human civilization, and that is what makes Jewish suffering unique. That is what we seek to understand: because without understanding our Jewish past we cannot properly attend to our Jewish present and future.

So I invite you to join us on the flight back to Jewish history. We will make history come alive. You will better understand what constitutes Judaism. But not only that: you will better understand why Judaism. You will be a better Jew because you will begin to ask: what is my purpose? Not only what is my purpose as a human being; but what is my Jewish purpose? What do I owe my family; those who now lie in the dust?

Present

But to know the past is not enough. To know about Judaism is not the same as living the life of a Jew. We must also inherit the tradition. It must mean something in our lives.

We are not doing a good enough job in the present. In the freest society in the history of our people – the kind of existence that our ancestors couldn't imagine – we are not even reproducing ourselves.

So often in our history Judaism was forbidden; and today, Jews forbid it to themselves. So often in our history Torah was forbidden; and today Jews forbid it to themselves. So often in our history Jewish books were forbidden; and today Jews forbid it to themselves. So often in our history synagogues were forbidden, and today Jews forbid it to themselves.

If you want to live a Jewish life – you must be prepared to work for it. If you want your Jewish inheritance, you must obtain it by great labor. It does not come anymore on a silver platter.

Deep down you know this. You are among the most accomplished of all Americans, and you know what it takes to become accomplished in anything.

As Malcolm Gladwell has taught us in his book, *Outliers*:

If you want to be a good musician, you must spend ten thousand hours practicing. If you want to be a good athlete you must spend ten thousand hours training. If you want to be a good author, you must spend ten thousand hours writing.

If you want to be a good Jew you must spend a lifetime practicing Judaism. It never ends. Anything worthwhile and long-lasting takes time. Relationships take time. Learning takes time. Understanding takes time. Judaism takes time.

Instead, so many of us look for the easiest way, the cheapest way, the shortest way, the way of least resistance.

We even see it now at bar mitzvahs. What used to be the one period when young people and their families actually took the time to reflect, study and understand, is now, for some, just another occasion for speed dating with Judaism.

According to the media, there is a new trend now to have online bnai mitzvahs. Parents who might have turned to their local synagogue for Hebrew lessons and spiritual guidance are now turning to Google. Maybe you know such people.

Online you can avoid synagogue fees, membership dues, building funds – you can completely bypass synagogues – and pay on a fees-for-service basis. It's a bargain: \$950 for twelve hours of Hebrew. That should be enough to get the child through.

At one site, they will arrange for you a web-only bar mitzvah complete with an e-*minyán* or a Skype *minyán*. Typically, the e-rabbis meet the children only once the night before the ceremony for a run-through.

Nirvana! Talk about painless bar mitzvahs: One meeting with the rabbi - the night before. No need to meet every week for so many weeks, as we do here. The kids spare themselves the later trauma and expense of years of therapy.

And the benefits don't end. E-rabbis are willing to have bnai mitzvahs anywhere. The New York Times reported that one family gathered at the reservoir in Central Park; but just to make sure that there was a *minyán*, the e-rabbi recruited members of the Central Park Model Yacht Club to participate in the ceremony.

The Central Park Model Yacht Club: It gives a whole new meaning to the term "watered-down Judaism."

We cannot Googleize Judaism. We cannot go to a Jewish website and find the answer to our Jewish angst. Our objective is not a website, but insight.

For those of you who are younger parents; and for those of you who are not yet parents - take it from those of us who have gone before you. We learn the lessons of life early. It is the first wrong steps that count. It is when we are taught to treat Judaism casually in childhood that we are lost as adults.

Jewish survival is in your hands, not mine. It is for you to decide whether you want Jews in your family. It is for you to determine how much you are willing to invest to have Jews in your family.

That's not my decision. That's your decision.

It is for me to tell you the truth – as I see it. If you want Jews in your family you must educate your family about what it means to be a Jew. If you want Jews in your family you must engage a process that starts early and is life-long: life-long affiliation with synagogues, life-long learning, life-long community and life-long family observance. We are shaped and fashioned by the things we invest in and prioritize.

If you want Jews in your family, exercising in a Jewish gym won't do it. E-bar mitzvahs won't do it. The path of least resistance won't do it. Jewish schools, Jewish camps, Jewish homes – and synagogues – they do it.

So what if kids can get bnai mitzvahs on-the-run, on-the-cheap or on-line? What does it produce: Some kind of potent inoculation; some magic dust from the heavens sprinkled upon the precocious head pronouncing “all is well with this child?”

Teach them the *Shema*; that is a better investment. Inscribe it on the doorposts of their heart. Sing the *Shema* to them on the first day that you bring them home from the hospital. Recite it with them every night in bed. It will last a lifetime.

Children never forget their parents putting them to bed singing the *Shema*. It is our way of implanting in them a *Neshama*. We seek not only to raise our children with a soul. We seek also to raise them with a Jewish soul.

Future

But even commitment to the past and commitment to the present are not enough. We are in covenant – we have a partnership – with the Jews of the future: those who are not yet born. We do not know them. We will not know them. They will appear on this earth long after we are gone.

But we want them to be. And we want them to be Jewish.

What are our commitments to them? What can we do to strengthen the Jewish community of today so that it can produce the Jews of tomorrow – as the Jewish community of yesterday produced us today?

There is really only one way to do this. Support the key institutions of Jewish life that will ensure the vitality and viability of the Jewish community.

There are synagogues today because Jews invested in synagogues yesterday. There are Jewish schools today because Jews invested in Jewish schools yesterday. There is Torah today because Jews invested in Torah yesterday.

There will be Jews tomorrow only if we invest in Jews today.

We do not support Jewish institutions enough. The problem with us is not that we are insufficiently charitable. We are among the most charitable of all Americans. The problem with us is that we are insufficiently Jewishly charitable.

The problem with us is not that we do not give enough money to worthy causes. The problem with us is that we do not give enough money to worthy Jewish causes.

There are no ideas; no values; no beliefs that can long endure without institutions that embody them. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum.

We often hear people who tell us: “I am a spiritual person, but not religious,” by which, I think they mean, the idea of God – or the idea of a higher mystery – intrigues and might even compel me – but it is religious leaders and religious institutions that have corrupted it.” It’s like the humanitarian who professes his love of humanity; it’s just people that he can’t stand.

I meet people all the time who tell me that they do not support “organized religion.” It always frustrates me: because the Met never has to justify itself in that way. No one ever says: “I believe in music, it’s just “organized music” I don’t support.”

Do people say that about charity? I have never met a single solitary person who has told me that they believe in charity – it’s just “organized charity” that they do not believe in;

They believe in compassion, it’s just “organized compassion” they do not believe in;
They believe in liberty, it’s just “organized liberty” they do not believe in;
They believe in equality, it’s just “organized equality” they do not believe in;
They believe in morality, it’s just “organized morality” they do not believe in;
They believe in education, it’s just “organized education” – schools, teachers - they do not believe in.”

Is there an idea of law without law schools? Is there an idea of justice without courts of justice? Is there an opera without an opera house? Is there the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel without the Sistine Chapel?

There is no Torah without the house of Torah. There is no Jewish community without the Jewish community house – the synagogue. There is no Jewish education without teachers. Like the maestros at the Met - these teachers need to be trained; they need to acquire expertise. This happens in organizations that are organized. Ideas that are not organized are meaningless.

We must be much more broad-hearted when it comes to synagogues. We must believe, not only in ourselves, and not only in the moment. We must believe in the future. And we must build the future. The future of the Jewish family in America will be determined here – in the synagogue, the House of Torah.

We are a family. Our family is covenanted with those who are with us this day and those who are not with us this day. We are in partnership with those who are alive, those who are no longer alive, and those who are yet to be. Every thought and every action we take here expresses this idea.

There is an extraordinary wartime diary of a young man named Moshe Flinker. I was thinking of him this summer because my wife and I spent two days in The Hague.

Moshe was born in The Hague in 1926, and lived there for sixteen of his eighteen years. After the conquest of Holland, he and his family fled to Brussels, where they lived in hiding.

While millions of Jews were rounded up all over Europe, including their Belgian neighbors, Moshe, his parents and six siblings were relatively safe. His father was wealthy and managed to bribe German officials.

But in April, 1944, *Erev Pessach*, an informer led Gestapo agents to the Flinker apartment. The entire family was sent to Auschwitz.

In all likelihood, Moshe was selected for the gas chamber as he stepped off the train. He probably died in the first hours of the first day. His parents, too, were murdered. When we are in Auschwitz in July, I will recite *kaddish* for Moshe and study his diary anew.

He wanted to move to Palestine and become a diplomat for the future Jewish state. He studied eight languages, including Arabic. Had he lived, who knows, perhaps this brilliant teenager might have ended up becoming Prime Minister of Israel.

Moshe's siblings - five sisters and a brother – survived the Holocaust. After the War they returned to the Brussels apartment, and in the basement of the building found the three notebooks in which Moshe kept his diary.

In one of the most moving testimonials ever written about the Jewish people, this sixteen year-old teenager writes:

“Oh, my people, my people, I love you so. My anguish and pain are so great I don’t know what to do...All day long thoughts of my people never leave my mind, not even for a minute. They are with me everywhere...

I try hard to deprive myself of the numerous pleasures that are to be found all around. I walk in the street and...pass a pastry shop, and I see in the window delicious-looking cream cakes and I am just about to enter the shop – and then – the situation of my brothers flashes across my mind and my desires are destroyed, and I am overcome with shame for having forgotten their plight...

Every time I meet a child of my people I ask myself: “Moshe, what are you doing for him?” I feel responsible for every single pain...Where are they? Where is my people, the chosen people of God?”

And these are the last words in the diary of Moshe Flinker:

“...For two thousand years we have brought children into this world who are doomed to suffer. Lord our God is this still not enough? If not for us then for Your own name’s sake, pity us, God, and redeem us. Hasten to our aid, for soon we will perish and not the slightest remnant of Thy people will remain. Pity us, have mercy, Lord, on Thy people, do not tarry, do not wait, for soon it will be too late.”

History has granted us yet another chance. Despite everything, we are still here. Out of the shadow of the night our world rolled into light and it is daybreak everywhere for the Jewish people.

You belong to this people. You are bound by covenant to those who are with us this day and those who are not with us this day.

Preserve the remnant of our people. Keep our flame alive. Keep our family alive. Keep our future alive.

So that we may be sealed, now, and forever, in the Book of Life.