

Kol Nidre 2022

What defines a Jewish person's relationship to their Judaism? I'd like to suggest, that the majority of modern Jews connect to their religion primarily based upon whatever they determine to be the greatest existential threat to the Jewish people: anti-Semitism or assimilation. As far back as the Hanukkah story, we see this very struggle. The Jews who wanted to be a part of the broader Greek world fighting against those who saw the Greek way of life as a threat to Jewish life.

Over the last few centuries, as the world changed and Jews were able to become citizens and full participants within the broader world, this struggle re-emerged. The one group, later known as the Reformers tried to find ways to assimilate within the broader society, praying in the vernacular and suggesting moving Shabbat to Sunday in order to bring an end to Anti-Semitism while others, now called the Orthodox, rejected their place in the broader society for fear of Judaism being lost within the larger culture.

As it turns out, both of these groups were right. Both Anti-Semitism and assimilation remain threats to Jewish life. Many Jews have lost any religious character to their lives while still facing anti-Semitism, whether in the form of anti-Zionism or in the "more traditional sense." As a result, no matter where one stands on this issue, one can find validation for their preferred existential threat being the problem. Look at Reform and Conservative Judaism shrinking, this is proof of the perils of assimilation! Or look at the uptick in Anti—Semitism across North America. This is proof that the Jews will never be safe wherever we go.

Upon greater reflection, however, I believe that modern Judaism is facing a greater threat than either Anti-Semitism or assimilation. In fact, our biggest threat isn't external at all. It's Jewish apathy. We are part of a religion that is defined more by what it is

against rather than what it is for. A Judaism that is more about fighting external forces than it is about active participation. Where outside forces define who we are more than we do ourselves. A Judaism that is meant to be *preserved* rather than one that is meant to *observed*.

I think many of us would be surprised how much of our Jewish lives have been defined by a reactionary Judaism rather than one that is proactive and engaged. The degree to which our Judaism is made up of rote practices rather than ones that require our full participation? How much of our Judaism is about being Jewish, rather than about doing Jewish?

When the rabbi delivers their quarterly speech to encourage more people to attend services, it is always because a minyan is needed, hardly ever because prayer itself is worth doing. How many of the largest communal gatherings have been both in response to anti-Semitic events, but also ones that only required the individuals to show up, not to actually *do* anything. More than 500 people came to shul the Shabbat after the Tree of Life shooting. How many were still there the following week?

I first started thinking about this problem a number of years ago when I was reading an article written by a non-Jewish young woman who was dating a Jewish guy. In order to better understand what Jewish life was all about, she started doing some research online about Jewish practice and Jewish holidays. Following her reconnaissance, she decided to share some of what she learned with her significant other. She said, I know you like to complain about the fasting that Jews do on Yom Kippur and the stale nature of matzah, but did you know that there is a Jewish holiday that is centered around dancing, singing, and celebration of the Torah. He said yes, that's called Simchat Torah. And then she asked him again, did you know that there's another holiday where people

dress in costumes, drink, and get to scream and boo during the service. He said, yes, that one's called Purim. So she asked him the obvious follow up question. So why have I never heard of these fun and engaging holidays? Why have I only heard about the boring services, tasteless cracker, and annoying fasting. And he answered, because those are the holidays I do.

The biggest threat to Jewish life, to Jewish continuity, to Jewish peoplehood, is Jewish apathy and disengagement. We have inherited a Judaism that asks too little of ourselves, where we are passengers on our Jewish journeys rather than the drivers. We have been taught that all that matters is that someone *is* Jewish and it does not matter what that Jew does. Or put another way, we have grown much more comfortable marking the "oys" of being Jewish than the joys of being Jewish.

The Rabbis knew that for Judaism to continue, for it to add value to people's lives it would need to be lived. That's why they replaced the passive process of placing the sins of the people upon the scapegoat to the more active process of Teshuvah. It is why they selected the Haftarah that we will read tomorrow. In it, Isaiah berates the Jewish people for thinking that just fasting and showing up for Yom Kippur are sufficient. Are you also doing the work he asks? Are you supporting the needy and lifting up the downtrodden? The passive actions of fasting and showing up for the Yom Kippur service aren't sufficient. Doing the work, participating in the important work of Judaism is what matters. We have been convinced by centuries of anti-Semites that persecuted and killed us simply for being Jewish, that simply being Jewish is enough. But a Judaism that is reactive rather than proactive, one that is defined by others rather than by and for ourselves, will not survive. We must be a people that makes Shabbos rather than simply having Shabbos. One that davens instead of simply having a daily minyan. A religion that is lived and loved. A

religion that calls on each and every one of us to be *kidshanu bemitzvotav*, sanctified, and enriched through the observance of the commandments.

Just over a week ago, I spoke about the importance of dreams. And this idea, this hope, this is my dream. I dream of a Judaism that never worries about making a minyan because the incredible power of daily prayer is eminently clear to all. I long for a time where our shul attendance is as high on Simchat Torah and Purim as they are on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, with scores of people in costumes and dozens more dancing and singing with our Torah scrolls. I dream of a Judaism that asserts its importance, that engages with Israel, not only when fighting against Anti-Zionists, but because Ahavat Yisrael, a love of Israel exists not as a reflex but as an expression of our hearts. Where classes are filled to overflowing because we all know how much more there is to learn. This is my dream for Judaism, for our community. A Judaism that is proactive rather than reactive. A religion that is about doing rather than being. A faith that is about the positive and joyful rather than remembering past attempts at our destruction. One that doesn't allow itself to be defined by others, but where we control our own amazing destiny.

This idea of speaking about solemnity and passivity being replaced by a time of joy and celebration on Yom Kippur is not my own. In fact, the Zohar, the Jewish mystical tradition, says that Yom Kippur is called Yom HaKippurim, the day that is like Purim because, in the future, people will rejoice on Yom Kippur as they do on Purim, transforming its required afflictions to delight. Turning fasting into feasting.

The goal of our faith is and has always been a Judaism that is joyful and celebratory, but for too many of us, we are still missing out on those parts of our tradition. If you cared enough about your Judaism to come tonight, try out Simchat Torah too. The singing, the dancing the dinner, it's really amazing and will be even more amazing with more of

you coming. Take part in a new class and learn ideas that can change your life. Realize the ways that a regular Shabbat practice can make your whole week better.

For too long, we have allowed the threats to Judaism to define who we are. We have been inspired by the need to fight against those who would attack us rather than for what has been given to us. But we cannot allow those things to define the Jewish future. It simply won't work. If we dream for this amazing version of Judaism to come to fruition, if we find opportunities to work together to make it happen, we can make sure that Judaism not only continues, but is a faith tradition worthy of perpetuating.

Every day, at the beginning of our services, we recite Psalm 30 which reminds us that no matter how sad, depressing, and troubling the night before may have been, that joy will come in the morning. Let's create together this joyful, active, positive, compelling, and inspiring version of Judaism. One that asks more of us but, at the same time, gives us even more in return. That's my dream and I hope you'll help build it together with me. And while we may never see the full version of this Judaism come to pass in our time, we can plant the seeds for our children and children's children to benefit from the fruits of our labour. And what an amazing gift to them (and to us) this will be.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah, May we all be inscribed for a sweet, happy, healthy, meaningful, and joyful new year.