

Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson  
Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester  
Rosh Hashanah 5768

### *Abraham, Ruth and Jewish Survival*

Ever since God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, we Jews have worried about our survival. True, Abraham expresses no outward concern as he leads his son up the mountain. The same man who argues on behalf of the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah remains shockingly silent in this morning's tale.

But the commentaries do not mistake Abraham's silence for certitude. According to Rashi, Abraham is filled with doubt as he and Isaac make their ascent. Had not God promised him that his seed would be as numerous as the stars! Seeing the mountain in the distance Abraham remarks to his servants, "We will see what will become of God's promise."<sup>1</sup>

From then till now, we have agonized. Our concerns for Jewish continuity have sparked debate and study, plan and proposal. The most recent wave of unease broke when the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 estimated erroneously that 52% of Jews were intermarrying. The rate was corrected to 43%. And then the study of 2000-2001 – which has also been challenged – warned that the American Jewish population had dropped 5% in ten years from 5.5 million to 5.2 million.

Jewish continuity is important to us – for many reasons.

We Jews believe, not sanctimoniously but earnestly, that we have a story to tell and with it a set of values to share with the rest of humanity. And we believe that if we live out that story and live by those values we can have a positive bearing on the future of God's creation.

Jewish continuity is important to us because we appreciate Judaism's power in our own lives. It teaches us faith, and in faith we find hope. It offers us community and in community we find strength. We want the next generation to have these too.

And Jewish continuity is important to us because no people wants to die. Ahad Ha-Am called it the *chefetz hakiyyum*, the communal "will to survive."<sup>2</sup>

#### *On what does Jewish continuity depend?*

On what does Jewish continuity depend? Our future depends on religious vigor and commitment to our people.

In a recent paper, the President of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson cited a familiar Biblical text: "The book of Ruth captures the twofold nature of Jewish existence and identity quite well when Ruth says to

---

<sup>1</sup> On *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:2.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, "On the Vanishing American Jew," *Jews and Judaism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ed. Rabbi Edward Feinstein, p. 144.

Naomi, at the moment she decides to convert to Judaism, ‘Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’...Jewish identity must be built upon both religious and national grounds.”<sup>3</sup>

If Jewish identity encompasses faith and peoplehood, then Jewish continuity depends on the vitality of that faith and the strength of our commitment to our people.

The vitality of our faith.

To inspire future generations, our religious life must remain dynamic – it must evolve, respond to a changing world.

We see vitality in our own Reform Movement: in the use of new liturgies with new melodies and more Hebrew, and in the recovery of once rejected rituals. We experiment out of a desire to explore what is timeless and connect to traditions on emotional as well as intellectual levels.

We see vitality in the remarkable growth of synagogue affiliation, both in numbers of households and as a percentage of the Jewish community, especially significant given American Jewry’s population decline. We see new energy in the upswing in participation in Jewish education at all levels: nursery school, day school, adult education programs, Israel trips, and especially Jewish studies classes at colleges and universities.

Our religious life remains energetic. But Jewish continuity also depends on the strength of our commitment to the Jewish people.

*Am Yisrael* is elemental in Judaism. Ours is not a faith practiced alone on some distant mountaintop, but one lived in community. That is why Jews join synagogues. That is why we care about the fate of Jews in other lands. That is why we care about Israel and defend her when she comes under attack. Last summer it was Hezbollah’s rockets and the media’s bias. This summer it was Hamas’s continued assault on S’derot, and noted academicians John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard damning Israel as America’s “strategic liability,”<sup>4</sup> and accusing the “Israel Lobby” of responsibility for America’s involvement in Iraq. We are one people. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba’zeh*. We depend on one another.

But tragically, commitment to the Jewish people has waned in relevance for most American Jews. We have achieved in every walk of life, and gained acceptance in every field of endeavor. The external forces that once united us no longer do. In America, how we identify is our choice. We can choose whatever group associations we want, or none at all.<sup>5</sup>

“It is [this] sense of individual autonomy,” says HUC’s President Ellenson, “not shared traditional commitments, that is decisive in defining [our] relation to the Jewish

---

<sup>3</sup> David Ellenson, “Jewish Identity and National Strength,” Herzliya Conference, 1/23/2007.

<sup>4</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Steven M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, in *The New York Times*, 8/16/2007, E1.

<sup>5</sup> “Voluntarism,” writes Jewish Theological Seminary Chancellor Arnold Eisen, “is the first governing rule of Jewish life in the United States today. Jews in this country, more than ever before and more than anywhere else in the world today, have the opportunity to make choices concerning Jewishness and Judaism virtually free from constraints. The American Jewish self...is proudly and resolutely sovereign.” (Arnold Eisen, “Rebuilding Communities of Torah,” August 2006, <http://www.jimjosephfoundation.org/PDF/Arnold%20M.%20Eisen.pdf>).

community...Jewish identity in the modern situation has transformed Jewish identity from one of membership in and commitment to a people to one of partial and eclectic individual choices regarding a religious tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

In a report published last fall titled, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The “Inconvenient Truth” for American Jews*, HUC Professor of Jewish Social Policy Steven M. Cohen measured a statistical decline in what he called “group cohesiveness...the collective aspect of Jewish identity and community,”<sup>7</sup> connection to other Jews locally, nationally and around the world, and to Israel. His research found that Jews in their thirties and forties feel less connected to and less responsible for the well-being of world Jewry than their parents. Less than half of Jews under thirty-five surveyed felt “a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people.” And for all age ranges attachment to Israel has decreased. Jewish Federations have witnessed a significant drop in their share of our philanthropy. In 1990, one third of American Jews contributed; by 2000 only one quarter gave.<sup>8</sup> Across the board the liberal branches of American Jewry are struggling to make Jewish peoplehood meaningful again.

*The synagogue: ensuring religious vigor and commitment to the Jewish people*

How can we best ensure religious vigor and commitment to the Jewish people? First by offering adults and children alike experiences that respond to their personal faith needs. Then by modeling for them lives that look beyond those needs, to the welfare of the Jewish community and our people.

The synagogue, better than any other institution in Jewish life, can do that.

The synagogue answers our individual yearnings. To the rejoicing it says: come sanctify your happiness. To the sorrowing it says: we are here to help. To the lonely the synagogue offers friendship. To the wandering spirit the synagogue says: come home.

We join many communal organizations, but the synagogue is unique. “We live in a world that works so hard to separate,” writes Rabbi Harold Kushner. “Old from young, rich from poor, successful from less successful...The synagogue is the one place...where those distinctions are not permitted to enter...where everybody is welcome.”<sup>9</sup> In our lives, so consumed by the mundane, the synagogue cries out: “There is a God in the world. And life is holy.”

The synagogue supports our personal spiritual needs, but it challenges us to look beyond them, to identify with a larger Jewish community -- the first connecting point being the congregation itself. Our commitment to the Jewish people begins here. And as

---

<sup>6</sup> David Ellenson, “Jewish Identity and National Strength,” Herzliya Conference, 1/23/2007: “Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen, in their book, *The Jew Within*, have captured this direction in American Jewish life and identity.”

<sup>7</sup> Steven M. Cohen, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The “Inconvenient Truth” for American Jews*, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, November 2006, pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Steven M. Cohen, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The “Inconvenient Truth” for American Jews*, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, November 2006, pp. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, “On the Role of the Synagogue and Rabbi in Tomorrow’s Judaism,” *Jews and Judaism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ed. Rabbi Edward Feinstein, pp. 89-90.

you heard last night from our President Bill Pollak, in the coming months we are going to ask you to show yours, as at long last and with great joy, we begin the expansion of our temple facility.

After thorough and thoughtful planning, we have hired an architect, and we know the funds we can expect to raise. And through the generosity of our lay leadership we have already begun to raise them. Later this year, each of us will be given the opportunity to join in, demonstrating our own commitment to this Jewish community, giving to the best of our abilities: so that we can provide for our members an education center devoted to our Jewish future, where parents can learn with their children, and where religious school students won't be distracted by nursery school toys; so that we can dedicate this sanctuary for use as a sanctuary, and not as a busy thoroughfare; and so that we can create a social hall where we would choose to celebrate the sacred moments in our lives. Our first connection to the Jewish community is this synagogue, and our commitment to it must be strong.

But for *Am Yisrael*, Jewish peoplehood, truly to be meaningful to us, we must expand our definition of Jewish community, and enlarge our commitment accordingly. Here are three ways.

1) We can help those Jews locally who need help.

Did you know that fifteen percent of American Jewry lives near or below the poverty line? In the New York Metropolitan area, that's nearly 350,000 people.<sup>10</sup> Many are elderly, homebound and alone. They could be our parents or our grandparents. Maybe they are.

One way to broaden our definition of Jewish peoplehood for ourselves and our children is to meet them. If, as part of this year's High Holy Day Social Justice Appeal, you choose to participate in our Food Package Delivery program, the *Tikkun Olam* Council will invite you to share the gift of your presence with these fellow Jews living in the Bronx, brightening their lives with a friendly visit at Pesach time. It is a mitzvah especially appropriate for families with young children, because nothing lights up a lonely room like a child's face.

Make no mistake: our responsibility extends to all the world's hungry, whatever their faith, from wherever they come. That is why every Rosh Hashanah we ask you to shop for non-perishables and bring them back on Yom Kippur so we can assist our local food pantries. And that is why we hand out *Mazon* donation envelopes, so that we can fight hunger the world over. When we as a united Jewish community reach out together to ease the world's suffering, when we lead the way as we have in Darfur, we strengthen our connection to *Am Yisrael*, and begin to fulfill God's instruction to Abraham: *v'nivr'chu v'cha kol mishp'chot ha'adamah*, "through you shall all the other families of the earth be blessed."<sup>11</sup>

2) We can expand our definition of Jewish community by supporting *Tzahal Shalom*.

---

<sup>10</sup> Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 12:3.

The largest Jewish community in the world lives in Israel. But for many of us, Israeli Jews are like the side of the family we never got to know. We've got to change that.

For the first time last year Northern Westchester welcomed six active duty Israeli soldiers to our area synagogues. The Israel Defense Forces are called *Tzahal*, and the program, called *Tzahal Shalom*, depends largely on contributions from those synagogue's members. If you choose this Social Justice Appeal option and donate to *Tzahal Shalom*, you will support a priceless opportunity for our religious and nursery school children -- for all of us -- to meet young, brave, articulate Israeli men and women and identify with them as part of one Jewish family. They will be here the week of October 7, and we will notify you of events planned.

### 3) We can visit Israel.

The best way to integrate Israel into our definition of peoplehood is to go! I spoke of this last Rosh Hashanah, and many of you responded enthusiastically that this would be the year. So join our congregational trip February 14-24. We will hold a meeting for everyone interested following services on Friday, September 28 with the director of ARZA Travel, our agent. Celebrate Israel's sixtieth birthday by visiting her! No other experience has the power to revitalize faith and connect us to our people like a trip to Israel.

Jewish survival depends on us widening our definition of Jewish peoplehood, and strengthening our connection to it.

### *What the book of Ruth teaches us*

I return to the book of *Ruth* where we began. Ruth was a Moabite woman who married an Israelite man and lived and worshiped with his family. After his death, she chose to become Jewish.

The book of Ruth also holds the key to our survival. It instructs us to embrace newcomers as we must.

Rosh Hashanah Evening a year ago, we recognized non-Jewish spouses and parents in this congregation who have supported their husbands' and wives' Jewish lives, and committed to creating Jewish homes and raising Jewish children. These particular men and women ensure Jewish continuity. And we as a congregation continue to thank them and we will repeat that blessing so that our welcome rings out: this congregation embraces, values and supports all who wish to create Jewish lives for themselves and their loved ones.

Because many intermarriages do result in assimilation, some sociologists warn that intermarriage "constitute[s] the greatest single threat to Jewish continuity today."<sup>12</sup> I reject that conclusion emphatically. The greatest single threat to Jewish continuity today is the failure to provide Jewish children with opportunities for Jewish engagement which demonstrate how important it is for their own children to be Jewish. That is where the

---

<sup>12</sup> Steven M. Cohen, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The "Inconvenient Truth" for American Jews*, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, November 2006, p. 11.

synagogue comes in. When you look at intermarried couples who have actually chosen to connect with a Reform congregation, 98% of their children are being raised as Jews.<sup>13</sup>

So when a Jew and a non-Jew approach me seeking to marry in a Jewish ceremony and commit firmly to creating a Jewish home, to joining a synagogue, and to raising their children exclusively as Jews – when the non-Jew is not practicing another faith and is willing to learn about Judaism -- that is a ceremony I will continue to perform.

And when a non-Jew expresses interest in joining our people through study and conversion as two individuals did last night, we will welcome them with open arms. We are a people that embraces newcomers. According to the *Mechilta*, the Torah was given in the wilderness -- a place open and accessible to all – so that everyone wishing to accept it could come and do so.<sup>14</sup>

In this day, when individuals including Jews can either choose Judaism or reject it, Jewish survival depends on the extent of our welcome.

*“You think it’s easy being an optimist?”*

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of two Israelis debating the future. One asks the other, “So are you an optimist or a pessimist?”

“An optimist,” replies the second with a frown.

“So why are you frowning?” laughs the first.

“You think it’s easy being an optimist?”<sup>15</sup>

In 1964, *Look* magazine ran a cover story titled “The Vanishing American Jew,” which predicted that because no ethnic groups had ever survived more than three generations in America, the Jewish community too would assimilate and vanish. We have fared far better than *Look* magazine!

We have survived!

Yet from Moriah’s peak Abraham’s question about our future still echoes down through the ages for every generation to answer: “What will become of God’s promise?” he asks.

How our children respond will depend on our choices and our commitments. As Leo Baeck, the beloved German rebbe, once prophesied: “Every generation by choosing its way...chooses...the way of its children.”<sup>16</sup>

So may our way be one of vibrant faith – faith in God, faith in each other, faith in Torah. May our way be one of spirited commitment -- to our people, to our congregation, to Israel. And may our way be one of warm welcome – to all who would join us, all who would embrace our faith, share in our commitment.

---

<sup>13</sup> National Jewish Population Survey of 2000-2001.

<sup>14</sup> *Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, Exodus 19:2.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, “On the Vanishing American Jew,” *Jews and Judaism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ed. Rabbi Edward Feinstein, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Baeck, *This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*.

In this New Year, five thousand seven hundred sixty-eight, may the longings of our own hearts be fulfilled, and may we reach beyond them to the welfare of our people, and the yearnings of God's creation.

Amen.