

KOL NIDRE
Tuesday, September 25, 2012

RABBI LEONARD A. SCHOOLMAN

You have heard it said that this is the most solemn night of the Jewish year. You probably heard me say it right here.

But in spite of the solemnity of the service, I would like to poke a little fun at myself, and perhaps even you.

For years – most of my life – I have read the newspaper and listened to the news with a special point of view. I look for Jewish names in casualty lists, or survivor lists, or honors bestowed on people. The endeavor is really silly. I am not even sure what a Jewish name is any more. Nor, I am not sure that there ever was such a thing.

Do you remember that early television program “The Goldbergs”? It was the story of a New York Jewish family, starring Gertrude Berg. But not all Goldbergs are Jewish. Johann Sebastian Bach’s Goldberg Variations were not written for Mrs. Goldberg. They were written for Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who played them for Count Kaiserling, who had insomnia.

But this penchant of mine does have some basis in a confusion of what Judaism is anyway. Before the Enlightenment, Jews were all living in self-contained societies. They were not citizens of the countries in which they lived. They had their own self-contained culture, and they even had a language of their own.

It was very easy to identify exactly who was Jewish and who was not. But along came the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Jews were freed from the ghettos, and we began to emerge as people who were looking for their identities.

In her wonderful new book , *How Judaism Became a Religion*, Leora Batnitzky, who teaches at Princeton, tells us that with Enlightenment, Jews sought their own place in society. She asks the questions: Are we a Religion? Are we a Culture? Are we a Nation?

Until then, Jews were an amalgam of all three, intertwined so intimately that separating the parts was almost impossible.

And when our ancestors came to America, the easiest way to go was to identify themselves as a religion. That category seemed to fit into the American society most easily.

But are we really only a religion?

So, my question tonight is who are we? Indeed, what are you?

I. ARE WE A CULTURE?

If we were to go the French cultural attaché in New York, and we asked the question: What is French Culture? I think we would know the answer.

He would certainly say the French language. Also French literature. French music. French art.

Is Yiddish our language? My suspicion is that the Yiddish language has fewer speakers each year. My mother did speak Yiddish at home. My father did not. I have a friend who is a doctor who teaches at Mt. Sinai Medical School. His partners are all Jewish; he is the only Christian. And yet his use of Yiddish is legendary. Neither my wife nor my children know any Yiddish to speak of. Perhaps my kids will retain my regular announcement when they were growing up: Your room looks like a *chazir shtall*. For the uninitiated, Your room looks like a pig pen.

Would you be willing to make the case that the novels of Saul Bellow or Phillip Roth make up Jewish culture? I do know that in the ghettos of Eastern Europe, we had great Yiddish literature. But I would be hard pressed to take full ownership of these writers as Jewish alone. They are American writers by any standard.

Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein were certainly Jewish, but is their music Jewish – or American?

So, to make the case that American Judaism is a Culture – or even a civilization – would be a hard one to make.

We certainly have been very influenced by American values and American culture. I think that the Americanization of Judaism is something that separates us from Israelis, or Jews who live in other parts of the world. I think that frequently Jews living outside of the United States don't quite "get us." Or, frankly, we don't get them either.

To look at England for a moment, would you assert that Lucien Freud was a Jewish painter or a British painter? Or that composer Thomas Ades is a Jewish composer or a British composer.

No, I think that we would fail to justify the assertion that Judaism in America is a separate culture.

II. ARE WE A NATION?

We Americans are very much aware of our backgrounds, of the countries from which our ancestors came. Italian Americans are deeply proud of their culture, their music and their food. We Americans are enamored with Italian cooking, and I do not mean pizza alone. I don't need to list the number of Italian cooking shows there are on television these days.

Irish Americans are happy to show off their Irish heritage at every turn.

So what is our national heritage? Were there to be a Latvian Day parade or a Lithuanian Day parade on Fifth Avenue next spring, would you attend? Or would you march? Do any Jews participate in the Kościuszko Polish parade? I think not.

Now we also have the Israel Day Parade, marching down Fifth Avenue. Hundreds of thousands of people march or watch the parade. The streets are filled with children who attend Jewish Day Schools from every borough, and from New Jersey and Westchester.

By that criterion, are we part of the Jewish nation? And what does that mean?

Is our citizenship Israeli? Do we vote there or serve in the military? Most American Jews have never even visited Israel, or have the desire to go.

Is our attachment to Israel greater than Evangelical Christians, whose identification with Israel is at the very heart of their Christianity. "This is where our Lord Jesus was born and this is the land that our Messiah trod.

In fact, American Christians are greater supporters of strong right wing Israeli political views than American Jews are.

Most American Jews do not have the slightest inclination to move to Israel, or to cast their lot with Israelis.

What is our connection to Israel? Ephemeral at best. Do we pay special attention to Israeli news? Perhaps, but I would not bet on that at all.

The answer is that we think of Israelis as distant family members about whom we kind of care somewhat. Israelis are heroic. They appeal to our David and Goliath thinking, which is widely accepted here in the United States? Or is it gun slinging tradition?

For me, nationhood, as the idea emerged from the Enlightenment is pretty far from a characteristic of what Judaism is here in the United States.

III. ARE WE A RELIGION?

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jews began to re-define themselves. The new generation of Jewish religious thinkers were treading in unknown territory. No Jewish philosopher, at any time in the past, had to define Judaism in terms of the rationality of the Enlightenment.

There were no patterns. The Talmud or any other authoritative Jewish book had any guidance to offer. The ghetto walls were broken down, and Eastern European Jews began to flood into the West.

To be truthful, German Jews – newly emancipated – really were not interested in welcoming the *Ost Juden* – the Jews from the East. But they had to confront the new reality.

It was clear. Jews were not a separate nation. Nor were Jews a separate civilization. The only model available to these modern Jewish thinkers was the Lutheran Church and its relationship to the German state. Aha! For them, Judaism was a religion. A Protestant religion.

Thinkers like Moses Mendelsohn began to create a new construct in which all ethnic and previously national traits were to be stricken. We are a religion!!

And this was the approach that was taken by the early German settlers in the United States in the mid 1800's. So when the great creators of American Reform Judaism began to develop a theology for American Judaism, it was that Judaism is a religion! Our culture and our nationality are American. Another Protestant grouping.

But there were some difficulties along the way. Within 35 years, the still nascent American Jewish religious scene was inundated by millions of *Ost Juden* – Eastern European Jews. These new Americans had only the experiences of the ghetto. They never lived in Berlin, or Vienna, or in any other western European city.

They were delighted to be in America, but they brought with them a few encumbrances: They only knew about Yiddish, about the literature of the Eastern European ghetto. They had no sense of nationality, because they never had to right to vote in the countries from which they came. Jews in Eastern Europe were largely self-governing, with communities totally detached from the host country.

But we became a religion in the American style. With a few ethnic attachments.

So, I guess we are a religion – BUT...

There are many Jews, especially those of us living in large American cities, who are not affiliated with any religious institution. Are these people still Jews?

And what about those of us who express our Jewishness in the foods we eat, or don't eat? Are these people still Jews?

And what about those of us to give money to Israel and other charities, but do nothing else? Are these people Jews in the American sense?

And those of us who play Jewish basketball or Jewish yoga or Jewish swimming at JCC's. Are these Jews?

CONCLUSION

So what are you? Are you a member of a national grouping? Or a culture? Or a religion? Or all or none of the above.

In my many years working in churches, trying to explain Judaism to non-Jews, I have come to the conclusion that non-Jews will never understand us, even though they try.

I have a good friend who is a Catholic priest. A Jesuit. With the Ph.D. from Harvard. No slouch in any way. And a great Liberal, in every sense. Last fall, he gave a well-attended public lecture at Fordham, where he is on the faculty. His topic was atheism in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

He never quite understood the concept that it is possible to be Jewish and an atheist at the same time.

Can you explain that to my friend? Do you understand it yourself?

