

ROSH HASHANAH EVE
Sunday, September 16, 2012

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Many years ago, Diana and I visited friends in Northern California. These friends lived in a suburb of San Francisco.

One Sunday afternoon, we four Jews all decided to go to the local movie house to see a new Woody Allen film, which none of us had yet seen. I believe that the film was “Annie Hall,” but it really doesn’t matter which film it was.

There were very few other people in the theater, perhaps an dozen or so, whom we saw before the theater darkened.

As you all know, Woody Allen’s films have a special New York quality to them. Whatever the film was, we howled at some of his insider New York Jewish jokes. After the film was over, we all exited, and we saw the other people in the theater looking at us as if we were lunatics. “What was SO funny??” they seemed to be saying.

To fully enjoy a Woody Allen joke, you either need to be Jewish (though not necessarily from New York,) or someone who has lived in New York for a long time (though not necessarily Jewish.)

Woody Allen writes with a special New York quality that only we can understand.

Woody Allen always reminds me of another Jewish writer from an earlier era. His name was Leo Rosten, whose name you may

remember. Rosten was a man of many parts. He was born in Poland, and came here as a very young child. He was educated at the University of Chicago, which has the reputation for its intensity in every arena, academic and intellectual most importantly. But the U of C also gave us some of America's most delightful humorists. Besides Leo Rosten, we remember especially Mike Nichols and Elaine May.

Rosten's special achievement was to write very humorously about the immigrant experience in New York during the first quarter of the 20th century. You may remember his *The Education of Hyman Kaplan* as well as his stories in The New Yorker magazine about the challenging process of become an America.

The joy with which Leo Rosten wrote about the immigrant experience is s far cry from the anger and hostility toward immigrants that we see today.

I. OLD-NEW AGENDAS

Each of us sitting here tonight comes from immigrant stock. Most Americans, who have put down roots in this country, go back just a generation or two or three. That is what America is all about. Yet this year, the vitriol from anti-immigrant groups has increased in volume and frequency.

Throughout the history of the United States, there have been groups who were against one immigrant group or another. Immigrants seem to be an easy target for those seeking simple solutions to highly complex problems.

In the 1850's, there was a serious anti-immigrant movement, which began in the Mid-west. It did spread to other parts of the country. It was called the "Know Nothing" party. This term, uttered by members of this secret club, when asked by journalists and others, questions about their party, became the sobriquet by which they were known.

The Know Nothing Party was anti-Irish immigrant, and heavily anti-Catholic. They asserted that the Pope had secret and not-so-secret desires to take over the United States. But basically, it was all about the Irish being foreign to America.

There were others in this country, including the American Federation of Labor, who were fearful that these first generation Americans would take jobs away.

At home, lest you think that the German Jews of New York, and elsewhere in the country, were welcoming of new immigrants. Let me disabuse you of that idea.

Jews who came to this country in the 1840's from Germany, were already acculturated to America by the time the huge Eastern European immigration began in the 1880's. They were appalled at the "foreign-ness" of the immigrants, who spoke Yiddish and not German, whose dress and mores were clearly European and not American.

Interestingly enough, the response of the German Jews was not to become anti-immigrant. Their response was to set up all sorts of agencies to *integrate* Eastern European immigrants into the American scene.

They established many social welfare agencies, some of which still survive to this day. These agencies include HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the 92nd Street Y, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Most of the German Jews were Reform. Their German heritage prepared them to create a new American Judaism, based on German Reform Judaism, which began in the early years of the 1800's. So New York Reform Jews – largely from Temple Emanu-El, were the founders of the Conservative Movement, as a way station for the new immigrants to become Reform, and more American.

The response of German Jews in New York to the wave of immigrants was certainly different from those of the Know Nothing Party. And from other anti-immigrant groups in the last 150 years.

II. TAKING CARE OF THE SICK AND INFIRM

To carry this theme further, German Jews of New York knew they had a clear responsibility to their unwashed Eastern European brethren.

In addition to the many social service programs created, the health care of these new immigrants was a primary concern. Mount Sinai Hospital and Beth Israel Hospital were the responses to these health crises. Every other large city established Jewish hospitals. In Los Angeles, Cedars and Sinai Hospitals, in San Francisco, Mount Sinai. In Boston, Beth Israel and so on.

These Jewish hospitals – and they *were* Jewish – were created for several reasons. Not every other hospital in New York was willing to welcome Jewish doctors to their staffs. So, these Jewish hospitals were a response to this second need. Another need was a place where new immigrants could find kosher food.

In this same period of time, a true revolution took place in fundraising. Jewish leaders recognized that the obligation to help their co-religionists was so great, that they could not afford to allow competing fund drives. So, they established Jewish Welfare Funds in every city. This was a coordinated campaign to raise money. The United Way copied itself after the Jewish Welfare Funds.

There was no sense that certain Jews were not entitled to medical care. There were no criteria for exclusion.

These German Jews clearly recognized their human responsibility to take care of others. They understood that each Jew was responsible for every other Jew.

These German Jews, Jews who came in the 1840's and in the 1850's, came from poverty. They did not flee Germany because conditions were so wonderful. They came with packs on their backs. Many were itinerant peddlers, who wandered from town to town hawking their wares.

Some of the peddlers remained in towns and cities, and they put down roots. Their shops became the retail giants of yesterday and today. They were the Bloomingdales, the Strauses of Macy's, the Bergdorf Goodmans, the Magnins of California, the Neiman-Marcus family of Texas. They were the backbone of a caring and responsible society.

They set the standards for us Jews today. The same welcome was extended to German Jews who arrived in the 1930's and 1940's, and Soviet Jews who came a generation later.

Yes, the times were different. But they set the levels of responsibility high for all of us.

III. WOMEN IN OUR SOCIETY

The German Jews of the 19th century and the Eastern European Jews of the early days of the 20th century came with a certain mind set with respect to women. The German expression *Kinder, Kuchen und Kirke* was used to describe the role of women in society. But that was 19th century Europe. In that era, women had certain functions in the world. They were clearly defined. Jews and Christians alike take a rather limited and condescending view of women in society.

But it was not always that way. In Jewish communities, in every age, women were *not* treated as chattel. The role of Jewish women in the community was respected and honored. There was a long tradition at the Sabbath table. The father of the household rose, turned to his wife to praise her. He read a section from the Book of Proverbs – “A woman of Valor.” This took place week after week, and the children heard it every week.

Yes, women were excused from the practice of certain ritual obligations. I said excused, not excluded. Any mitzvah that was tied to time was optional for women. They had more important things to do: to take care of the children.

I confessed that I am astonished regularly at the way in which women in our society are treated. There is regular and on-going debasement of women and their human dignity. The worst part of this is that this treatment is justified by quoting snippets of biblical verses, taken out of context, to justify bad human behavior.

One of the more blatant examples is the treatment of American nuns by the Vatican. The cardinals of the Vatican say it's about

doctrine. I say it's about putting down those "uppity" American nuns, who seek to lead the Roman Catholic Church into the next century. Catholic doctrine has always had a political dimension to it, especially in Rome.

Women's dignity is deeply tied into the core values of Judaism.

CONCLUSION

We see in America today a very strange and curious phenomenon. It is a clash between Jewish values and the values of America. That clash was not always so. The extremes of positions in American set our teeth on edge. Quick answers that respond to our basest human need, taking care of ME. And taking care of me seems to exclude the needs of other human being in its equation.

I am not speaking of Democrats versus Republicans. Or of conservatives versus liberals.

I am talking about the notion that some people are not entitled to the gifts of America, because of the manner of their arrival in this country. (I would not want to examine the immigration documents of all of our ancestors.) The idea that some people are not entitled to health care because of their immigrant status is an appalling notion. And so is the idea that women are not entitled to make their own health decisions.

We Jews are all about responsibility: our responsibility to others, to their humanity, to their dignity as people. This must be the starting place for every decision we make. The first criterion should and cannot be “who will be excluded.”

Our humanity is what makes us Jews. This is the beginning and the end. And all the rest is commentary.

