

YOM KIPPUR DAY
Saturday, October 4, 2014

Last night, I spoke to you about Jewish fantasies. Those fantasies were first, the unity of the Jewish people. Then: that rabbis could prevent mixed marriages by not officiating. The third was that there is an “authentic Judaism.”

What I tried to do last night was to indicate that these fantasies in the Jewish community are harmful to us as American Jews.

Now, I want to turn that sermon on its head. I want to talk about realities.

Let me sum up what I will say in this way. I feel very optimistic about the Jewish community in America. I feel optimistic about the survival of Judaism in America, and the survival of American Jews.

There are many people among us who are wringing their hands. They say that there is no future for American Judaism; that our only salvation is to move to Israel. Others point out that our numbers are falling, and that the intermarriage rate is so high, that Judaism will be non-existent in a generation or two.

My response to these dire predictions is: Nonsense.

I. JEWISH UNITY

The Hawks among us have been wringing their hands. They cry for unity in the Jewish community. They cannot understand why every American Jew does not walk lockstep with each and every position taken by the Israel government. They tell us that “disaster is around the corner” every time there is disagreement with what Israelis say or do.

First, we need to remember that Israel is a full democracy. Israelis have internalized one of the chief values of democracy: dissent. In colonial America, the case of John Peter Zenger, a German immigrant to New York, set an important precedent. Disagreement with government authorities is not libel. It is a clear manifestation of free speech.

It is this experience in democracy that we American Jews bring to the table. But we also bring a long history of strong dissent in our Jewish past.

Two thousand years ago, in ancient Israel, the Jerusalem Temple was the province of the Sadducees, the upper class supporters of the priesthood in Judaism. Our forebears, the Pharisees were the dissidents. When the Roman Empire destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, the rule of the Sadducees ended. The Pharisees established a network of synagogue throughout the land of Israel. They ignored the primacy of the Temple and its sacrificial cult. They established a Judaism that focused the ethical values of Judaism and not on the sacrifices of Temple worship. This is the Judaism that prevails to this day. It is because of the dissidents that Judaism has survived.

The omnipresence of Chabad, the shtetl focused Orthodoxy, who seem to rule the day in Israel, might mislead us into

thinking that they are the historical Jews. The fact of the matter is that they were never the majority. It was the opposition to the Chasidim, the Mitnagdim – the Protestants in Judaism - who are the rightful forebears of modern Judaism today.

Dissent has always been a value in the Jewish world. It helped us survive through the centuries. Dissent clarifies thinking.

But also, what I am saying has other implications. Early Zionists tried to show that there is only one place for Jews to live: in Israel. That was understandable. These pioneers were looking to gain as much support as they could. The concept of *shelilat hagolah*, the denigration of the Diaspora, was part and parcel of building a Jewish state.

But now we understand that Jews have always lived in Israel and in other places throughout the world. That the contribution of the Diaspora was huge; it was life giving and positive. Those who chose to live outside of Israel were an important alternative and articulate voice.

While dissent may not always be pleasant to hear, it is the life blood of Judaism, as it is in America today.

II. RESULTS OF MIXED MARRIAGES

For many years, we heard that if rabbis officiate at mixed marriages, Judaism will be destroyed. Dire predictions about the demise of Judaism, caused by rabbis who give their blessing – whatever that means – to two faith marriages, abounded.

That too has become nonsense. Jews rarely converted to Christianity. The worst case scenario is that the family that was created by a mixed marriage would become part of the “nones.” Mixed married families generally become part of the vast American category of the un-churched. Non-religious humanists.

It is a best case scenario that I want to speak about this morning. A mixed marriage – between a Jew and a Buddhist – that produced my good friend and rabbi Angela Buchdahl.

For those of you who may not know, Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl is the new Senior Rabbi of Central Synagogue, one of the largest and most prestigious synagogues in America, and perhaps the world.

Angela is the daughter of an Ashkenazi American Jew and a Korean Buddhist mother. I do not know who officiated at Angela’s parents wedding, but whoever did, did not drive the family from Judaism.

Why is Angela so important? First, she is a woman. Women rabbis now abound. Women senior rabbis of major synagogues are still a rarity.

Second, Rabbi Buchdahl looks very Korean. Yes. She is beautiful, articulate and very smart. She went to Yale for her undergraduate education.

Angela Buchdahl, for me, is the new face of Judaism in America. It is a Judaism that is inclusive. It is a Judaism that is welcoming. It is a Judaism that is very American, in the sense that we are casting aside old stereotypes.

We welcome all who believe with us, who wish to understand and practice our age-old faith. We welcome them from wherever they come.

III. AUTHENTIC JUDAISM

Which brings me to my third point. Last night, I railed against those Orthodox Jews, in Israel and here in America, who portray themselves as the true Judaism. I pointed out last night that Orthodox Judaism of today really has nothing to do with the Judaism of the Second Temple, the Judaism of Maimonides in the 12th century, or the Judaism of Jews who lived every place in the world through the ages.

Orthodox Judaism of today has ossified a Judaism of the 18th century Eastern European shtetl.

If there is an Authentic Judaism today it is American Reform Judaism. Let me tell you what I mean.

Judaism has survived through the ages by its ability to change and adapt to many places and many values. The key to our survival is not our Orthodoxy, but our ability to adapt. The only strand of world Jewry, which has sanctified change, is the American Reform movement.

This is not to say that we have not made mistakes, and gone down fruitless paths. We have. We were wrong when we tried to imitate mid-West Protestant churches, and we tried Sunday morning services, as the main service of the week. And we were wrong when we let our interest in creative worship produce services with kids dangling their feet in the swimming pool while reciting the Shema.

We were wrong when Reform Judaism, in the 1930's and 1940's, eliminated any Zionist tendencies from our midst.

But it was our adaptability that took care of these aberrations. What has emerged from our history in America is a Judaism that is forever authentic and adapting.

This is the Judaism that we see around us in America, and it is the Judaism in Israel that is emerging this very day.

CONCLUSION

This morning, I wanted to contrast the fantasies in Jewish life, which I discussed last night, with the realities of our Jewish world today.

Jewish communal fantasies make me sad. They end up as dead ends. They are the result of misplaced virtues and unsupported hypotheses. They led us down primrose paths.

The realities of Judaism and Jewish life today are exhilarating and optimistic.

We must welcome dissent. Dissent is the life blood of democracy. Dissent makes us think, at the same time that it may make us feel uncomfortable.

We must welcome all those who wish to come to Judaism. We must not close the door by invoking worn out nostrums. Judaism must welcome new life from wherever it comes.

And the history of the Jewish people demonstrates the adaptability is at the heart of the Jewish experience. This is what is authentic about Judaism, not ossifying one moment in ancient history.

I am optimistic about the future of Judaism. And you should be too.