

YOM KIPPUR
Friday evening, October 3, 2014

I want to speak tonight about fantasies. We all have them. They are part of our waking hours and our dreams. Psychologists and psychiatrists have used fantasy for many years as a way of understanding and treating many illnesses.

As Jews, we also have our communal fantasies. One of the benign fantasies of American Jews is “Fiddler on the Roof.”: a nostalgia for what we think Jewish life was like then. Life in the shtetl was never anything like the Broadway play or the movie. In reality, it was both better and worse

Life in the East European shtetl was certainly better in the 16th and 17th centuries, when Jews were an integral part of the economies of Poland, Russia and the Ukraine, when Jewish merchants were crucial to the functioning of these Slavic lands.

And it became worse when the extant governments and duchies began to think that they really didn’t need Jews to grease the economies of their particular lands. They could do better without the Jews, they thought. That, of course, was an erroneous notion.

“Fiddler on the Roof” gave us lots of good songs, and it certainly popularized the excellent tales of the Jewish writer Shalom Aleichem.

But there are other American Jewish fantasies, which are not quite so benign. In fact, they are harmful and paralyzing. They stop us from understanding the world in which we live. These fantasies lead us to dysfunction.

But it is the realities, which I will address tomorrow morning, which give us hope for ourselves as individuals as well as the Jewish people.

Let me tell you what I mean.

I. ISRAELIS AND AMERICAN JEWS ARE ONE

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas brought about some of the worst dissonance between the American Jewish community and Israel.

We Americans are clearly divided between Doves and Hawks. The Hawks generally support every action of the Israel government. They are impatient with other American Jews who seek to understand why the Israel government decides to act in one way or the other. They feel that it is required that every American Jew support Israel, no matter what. Jewish unity is their clarion call. Dissent from the Israeli political line is an intolerable notion to them.

It doesn't matter to the Hawks that positions taken by the government of Israel frequently have many critics among the citizenry of Israel. As is true in any functioning democracy, the pronouncements of the government are not universally applauded by all its citizens.

Doves frequently bring their American Jewish ideals and experience to their understanding of decisions of the government of Israel. They speak from the safety of New York or Washington or Los Angeles. They speak from a tradition of great security in America, where Jews are accepted almost everywhere. They speak from a world in which Jews, after centuries of persecution have "made it."

The fact of the matter is that American Jews and Israeli Jews speak from two different universes. More than 350 years in a land surrounded by the safety of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans have insulated us from the real problems of Israel. Safe

neighbors to the north and the south compound the feeling of security and safety that we have from living in America.

In fact, Israeli and American Jews, the two largest centers of Jewish life in the world, speak to each other, but we hardly understand each other.

I have been visiting Israel on a regular basis since I was a rabbinical student. I have many Israeli friends. I even have American Jewish friends who have made aliyah, a decision, which I have difficulty in understanding. The more I travel to Israel, the more I am convinced that the “unity of the Jewish people” is a fantasy, which has no basis in fact or reality. Yes, many of us have common origins in Europe, but that is where the similarity ends.

We need to accept the notion that living in a place surrounded by armed enemies on three sides gives one a different view of the world. Several weeks ago, we had dinner with good friends who had recently returned from Israel. The last several days of their Israel trip coincided with the Hamas rocket attacks on Jerusalem, where they were, and the rest of Israel. They told us of the panic they felt on hearing the sirens, the thuds of rockets landing, and the hysteria of those around them.

This is not to say that we need to accept every Israeli idea. It means that we must accept the fact that the fantasy that we are really one does not exist. We need to accept this idea to understand why young American Jews don't feel the same about Israel as do older generations.

The reality is hopeful and bracing. The reality

II. MIXED MARRIAGES

The second fantasy that I wish to address is about rabbis. For more than 50 years, my rabbinic organization, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, has been roiled by the issue of officiation at mixed marriages.

The turmoil seems to have quieted down. Perhaps this is because there are more important issues on the table. Or perhaps the realization has occurred that we are fighting a losing battle, or perhaps from exhaustion.

One key argument of those who oppose rabbinic officiation at marriages between Jews and non-Jews is that rabbis are only entitled, by halacha, to officiate at marriages between two Jews. The argument continues with the assertion that rabbis are only clergy for Jews, and not for anyone else.

While that argument may be true according to halacha, 350 years in America have changed that position. Rabbis are considered, by both non-Jews and Jews, as Jewish clergy, much in the tradition of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers. Never mind that rabbis are only considered to be teachers of Judaism. Our American experience has changed our roles, whether we like it or not.

The other phantasmagoric argument is that if rabbis do not officiate at interfaith marriages, we will somehow prevent those marriages from taking place. The absurdity of that notion is apparent to all. At first, it was the local judge who was asked to officiate at these marriages.

Now, we have a new phenomenon. Just read the Styles section of the New York Times any Sunday, and you will see what I mean. Friends are authorized by some on-line ministry to serve as marriage officiants. I haven't made a study of the proportions, but those marriages conducted by on-line ministers far outweigh those by rabbis.

To confess: I once, early in my career, was unwilling to officiate at mixed marriages. Like other rabbis, I had my secretary (we had secretaries then) pronounce with appropriate condescension, that Rabbi Schoolman does not officiate at mixed marriages.

Then I got smart. I realized that refusing to speak to the couple was not preventing any mixed marriages, and that I was losing the opportunity to present the case for Jewish families and children to the couple.

Extended pre-marriage discussions are now part of my agreement to officiate at a wedding.

The reality is that new Jews bring us new energy and new ideas for our every renewing Judaism.

III. THERE IS AUTHENTIC JUDAISM

The third and most disastrous fantasy of the Jewish community is that there is an authentic form of Judaism. This view has been advanced by the new president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin. His position is that the Orthodox Judaism of the State of Israel is the real Judaism, and that everything else is idolatrous and false. I am led to understand that he has very recently modified his position. Outside scrutiny of the idea has led to ridicule.

Of course, he doesn't have a leg to stand on. First of all, 85% of the Jews of the world are not Orthodox, in any sense of the term. They may be Conservative Jews, or Reform Jews, or even secular Jews, who do nothing about their inherited religion.

This approach is probably another manifestation of *she'lilat hagolah*, the early Zionist notion of denigration of Diaspora Judaism.

To assert that there is one legitimate form of Judaism is merely to confirm that Orthodox Judaism, in its 21st century variety, has political sway in Israel. It is the Orthodox establishment there that has the political power to control marriages, and other communal functions.

But more than anything, it is very hard to sustain an argument that there is indeed an authentic Judaism. Is authentic Judaism the Judaism of the Polish shtetl, which is the origin of most Israeli Judaism? It is hard to sustain an argument, which says that the garb of Polish nobility is the true Jewish mode of dress.

The greatest Jewish philosopher of all time, Moses Maimonides, would have had no idea why these bearded Jews

are running around in black frock coats with fringes blowing in the wind behind them.

Nor would Jews of biblical times or Second Temple times, or of our experience in the Middle Ages know what these people are talking about.

Judaism has survived in every era precisely because it has changed, and developed, and grown. In our own life times, we have seen Reform Judaism, now the dominant form of American Judaism, change and grow.

Not only is the assertion that there is one authentic Judaism foolish and non-historical, it is self serving for splinter Jewish groups.

The only argument that can be made for authentic Judaism is that a certain group feels that its mores are for them a comfortable way to express their Judaism. It is not an objective statement about either Jews or Judaism.

The reality of the Jewish world is that creative and innovated Reform Judaism gives us great hope and promise for tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

Psychologists regard our fantasies as a clue to the content of the depths of our psyche. Fantasies help us cope with life at its most difficult moments.

But the fantasies, which abide in the Jewish world today do not help us deal with the realities of Jewish life in the twentieth century.

Israel's survival, while considered as a given by many people, cannot be guaranteed by facile and glib nostrums from American Jews. Monday morning quarterbacking might be a sport in America, but for people whose lives are in peril, it is exceedingly dangerous.

Dreaming that Jewish boys will marry only Jewish girls because a rabbi will or will not marry them is egoism at its height.

And our inability to face a changing world with a changing Judaism will not insure our Jewish future, but guarantee our Jewish demise.

Fantasies are wonderful and helpful. But Jewish fantasies must be identified as such.

The obverse of fantasies is reality. And it is this reality, which is positive, welcoming and bracing, that I will address tomorrow morning.