

**Facing the Facebook Challenge:
Who Are You and What Do You Believe?
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770 Late Service
September 18, 2009**

An article appeared on the front page of the Washington Post in late August. There, amidst ongoing coverage of escalation in Afghanistan, outrageous hysteria at Town Hall meetings across the land, and the twists and turns of training camp, there, in print, was an internal existential struggle of the technological age laid bare for all to see. It seems that all over the country, perhaps, indeed, all over the world, young people and old are having trouble answering what must have seemed like such a simple question to those who asked it in the first place. People are sent into self-confrontation and spiritual angst in the face... of Facebook. For there, in filling out your profile for the first time, a new user of this social networking site is asked to fill in a question about... Religious Views.

A problematic enough question, even if there was a pull down menu and a limited range of choices. Now, though, the monkey wrench in the works: Facebook allows you to free-lance. You can choose from pre-existing traditions. Or you can describe yourself. In your own words.

Gevalt! Imagine the floodgate of questioning and creativity that this unleashed!

One young man, quoted in the Post piece, had the following reaction. "It's Facebook. The whole point is to keep it light and playful... But a question like that kind of makes you think."

One option, of course, is to leave the question blank. Over 100 million of the 250 million Facebook users worldwide have done that. Who knows how to interpret this? Blank is blank. No comment. It could mean anything from "none" to "none of your business!"

But of those who have filled it out, the outside-the-box thinking is rather impressive. Some put down, as their religion "whatever works for you!" Others pledge their allegiance and affirm their belief in "beer." Others list things like "Jedi."

For quite a few folks, the fact that people from different social circles and multiple chronological eras of their lives would all see this posting made them nervous. What would church friends she sees every Sunday think of something too offbeat, one woman wondered? On the other hand, though, what would friends from her college days think... of any religious belief listed at all?

Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. The Days of Awe, the holiest of days. This is a season replete with imagery of that which is filled out, and written down.

In traditional imagery, it is God who writes, fate and fortune spun out in a Book of Life which tells the tale of every human being. Imagine, though, that it is not God the writer. Imagine it is you, sitting in front of the profile page. Religious beliefs, please? How would you fill out the form? Who are you, and what do you believe?

It seems to me that being willing to wear a tradition, to take on a label imposed by accidental association and muddied by active ambivalence... is particularly challenging for many Jews.

Did you ever notice the percentage of “public” Jewish figures who identify themselves as “of Jewish heritage” or having “Jewish roots” or who admit only that “my parents were Jewish?” While it may be the case that in many rabbi, priest and minister jokes the rabbi gets the punchline – and if it’s not the rabbi it’ll be the priest – still it seems to me that a step away from the clergy, when dealing with “real” people, in any series of characters or any discussion of how religious community might help with a sense of commitment and meaning, the iconic figures which emerge are the practicing Protestant, the doubting but connected Catholic – and the “average non-believing Jew.”

Is it... is it that it is still not acceptable, that it would still not work to be Jewish and proud, to fit too comfortably in to one’s own skin? We are, after all, barely a single generation removed from the name-changers and face-hiders, those who tried to “pass” and hope no one would notice.

Maybe that's not it, though, not in a world in which Michael Jackson had his own personal rabbinic advisor, and in which Madonna and Britney Spears run to us instead of away. Or, more likely: is it just not clear to too many of us, in this world of individual choices and self-definition, what reading oneself in to a communal identity and centuries-old inheritance is all about?

Jewish identity is certainly... complicated. Not just by the twists and turns of a tragic history, a price almost too much to bear, with a treasure often too hidden to appreciate. No, it is complicated in and of itself. I spoke last year, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, about folk and faith. How odd, indeed, for we are religious tradition that encourages questions, to the point of embracing skeptics, and welcoming the very numerous agnostics and atheists in our midst.

It is possible that no single aspect of Jewish life so mystifies our believing Christian neighbors or loved ones as this: we are, after all, not merely *any* religion. Judaism is the religion that gave to the world the idea of the one God. How... how can we... how is it possible to so downplay divinity, to say it is okay...to not believe? Or, rather, to believe... in ways which manifest themselves so vastly and very differently for each one of us.

The struggle, though, is built into our identity from the outset. Abraham argued, challenged, even took God to task when he thought God was not living up to God's own standards. "Will not the Judge of all

the earth judge justly?” And Jacob had an encounter in the night, which left him limping, and forever changed. A new name he had, as he greeted that distant dawn: Yisrael, Israel. The one who struggles... the one who wrestles with God. Sacred skeptics: that is who we have been. And why, perhaps, it is so hard for so many Jews... to just buck up, and answer straight. To fill out... a line on a form.

How odd of God, to choose the Jews, one not-so-friendly poet wrote. Why the Jews? Maybe our self-perception of why we were singled out... will be of some help in getting at the heart... of what we are all about.

But, of course, we are Jews, or we are part of Jewish families, and, as you know the saying, “two Jews, three opinions.” Indeed, in reflecting, ourselves, on this puzzling, possibly out-of-date concept of the Chosen People – a concept which I believe to be merely just another way of giving voice to the idea of destiny and vision, mission and identity -- in reflecting on the why-we-are who-we-are, we ourselves have given different answers, to the very same question.

One answer to the question of “why the Jews” is actually embarrassing, and I share it with some hesitation. The better-known, and less comfortable traditional answer, is found in the following story, a famous Midrash:

Before the Torah was offered to the Israelites, God gave a chance to all the other nations. God came to the children of Esau and asked them: 'Will you accept the Torah?' They replied: 'It depends. First tell us what is written in it!' And God answered: 'You shall not murder.' And the children of Esau responded (bizarrely quoting Torah back at God, a logical paradox which seems to not bother the writers of this story at all): 'But God: does it not say in your Torah that this is the inheritance which our father left to us, since Isaac said (in blessing Esau): 'By your sword shall you live!' (Gen. 27:40). How, then, can we receive the Torah?' Then God came to the children of Ammon and of Moab, and said to them: 'Will you receive the Torah?' They said: 'What is written in it.' God answered: 'You shall not commit adultery.' They answered: 'But God, we all sprang from one adulterer, since it says 'And the daughters of Lot became with child by their father.' [Gen. 19:36], (which is a nasty pun and insulting etymology based on the similarity between the word Moav – Moabite – and mei'av – from the father). How then can we receive your law?' Then God came to the children of Ishmael and said: 'Will you receive the Torah?' They asked: 'What is in it?' and God replied: 'You shall not steal.' They replied: 'But our father Ishmael was given this blessing, the prediction that he would 'be a wild beast among men, that his hand will be against all men' (Gen. 16:12); how then, can we receive the law?' Then God went to the Israelites, and asked if they would receive the Torah. Immediately they responded: 'All that God has commanded, na'aseh v'nishmah, we will do and we will hearken.' (Exodus 24:7)

[Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, on Ex. 20:2]

I have a problem with this Midrash. I would imagine that many of you do, too. It is... not exactly a story I am proud of. Imagine with me

for a moment, though, not only the obvious prejudices and debilitating stereotypes, but also the actual experience of the person who wrote these words. For this writer, what was the outside world like? It was filled with brutality, licentiousness, and greed. Not a positive experience at all. Who was the “other?” Essentially and internally foreign, even if, externally, physically just down the street, or around the corner.

Why did God give us the Torah? And why be Jewish? Because, in the light of this Midrash, alone among the nations, we responded to God with an open mind, and a willing heart. We chose this path... out of conviction, and faith.

In any event, however, a story in which Jews asked no questions is hardly credible. Unless you want to say... that this is why we’ve been asking so many questions, ever since!

And, more seriously, the whole story is a set up to begin with. It is meant to turn aside a hypothetical anticipated accusation of unfairness: why should Jews be rewarded for their close relationship with God? Wouldn’t anyone have chosen this path, and this communion? Well, maybe not... At least according to this story.

But what rewards have we reaped over the course of time? Indeed, is our light really so bright, our merit so distinctive over that of anyone else? Are we, truly, better than the other peoples? Listen to another Midrash, which answers the very same question, in a very different way:

'And the Israelites took their places under the mountain.' (Exodus 19:17). [In this Midrash, the word "under," meant as we use it in English as 'at the foot of,' will in this Midrash be interpreted literally.] Rabbi Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: 'This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be God, ripped Mount Sinai out of the ground, overturned it like an inverted cask, suspended it over the heads of the Israelites, saying: 'If you accept the Torah, all is well; but if not... this place will be your burial site!' To this, Israel responded: 'All that God has commanded, na'aseh v'nishmah, we will do and we will hearken.'

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 88a

Imagine, then, the *sitz in leben*, the life-experience of *this* writer. A cantankerous, argumentative, frustrating people we must be! Two Jews, three opinions! The only effective goad to action: a wrap on the knuckles, or a clop on the head.

Why the Jews? Why be Jewish? A matter of who we are, inherent, immutable. A fact of life, not an active choice. Are we any different than anyone else? Any better? God forbid we even think such a thing! We are who we are, because that is who we are. No better, no worse – just different. A path in by-choice for those who wish, of course, but basically we are Jews... because God and our great-great-grandparents made us that way.

A people and a perspective emerge into history. Whatever the details, and however it happened, our tradition teaches that God chose us. I believe, instead, though, that it went more like this:

We filled out a form.

We sat down to write the story of our life.

And we chose God.

Two answers, tradition gives, to the very same question. Spiritual communion and loving acceptance of our own identity... or the mountain hanging over our heads. There have been both aplenty in our history, triumph and tragedy, coercion and conviction, insight and ostracism, sacred connections and bare survival. It is, all of it, a precious legacy, a story of centuries, 4000 years of devotion and sacrifice and commitment and discovery. *L'dor va'dor*, from generation to generation... a chain of tradition... with the next link yet to be forged, the next chapter, the next entry yet to be written. That link, that entry... is up to us.

And all of what has gone before... it is a backdrop, against the moment before us now. We struggle with our identity, and we wrestle with God. There is no pre-set template to cut and paste into our heart. I could share with you what being Jewish means to me, what my religious beliefs are. I can, I have, and at some point I will again. But ultimately it is not a question anyone else can answer for you. It is up to you.

The cursor keeps blinking, and the screen remains blank.

It is the dawn of a new year. Something, some inner call or family pull, some reason has drawn you here. It is time to face the Facebook challenge.

What will you write?

What do you have to say for, and about yourself?

L'shanah Tovah.