

“If It’s Not Fun...”
Obligation and Identity;
To Be “Clean” Before God and Israel
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769
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In my continuing quest to derive life-lessons from pieces of plastic glimpsed on the back of moving vehicles, I saw the following bumper sticker the other day: “If it’s Not Fun, Why Do It?”

Now, the blue sky and white cloud background should have been enough of a clue, but I just didn’t get it at first. Didn’t recognize the tell-tale sign, until I looked it up on my old-friend Google, and discovered that, yes, as most of you probably already know, this is a company slogan, the business motto of non-other than... Ben and Jerry’s.

Beyond launching a debate about our favorite flavors, however, the words themselves, the idea is worth a moment of reflection.

For it is true, of course, that our own sense of satisfaction and fulfillment and fun is an important thing. With the fading of the faithful certainty of centuries past, with the rise in skepticism about promised rewards on another plane of existence, in an afterlife we are supposed to wait patiently to reach, pursuit of pleasure and the centrality of the self become the new milestones of our existence. “One life to lead.” “Live to the fullest.” “Can’t take it with you.”

There is nothing wrong with self-fulfillment. If modernity has taught us anything, if there is a lesson to be learned from freedom and

democracy, it is that *you* matter. Not just *y'all*. It is the insight into the importance of the individual.

Indeed, there is much work to be done, and much more we can offer, for each one of us, as individuals. My own pathway to spirituality is found in the tradition of *berachot*, of blessings, that ever-expanding, yet profoundly personal awareness of the extraordinary, hidden behind the folds of the mundane and everyday. The latest issue of *Reform Judaism* magazine focuses on the Mussar movement, the 19th century exploration of self-improvement and personal ethics, examination of the *middot*, virtues, inculcations of certain character traits in each of us, independent of one another. And now, on a topic related to the universal human experience rather than being particularly Jewish, a new book about traffic teaches -- much to my surprise, and denying me that instinctive eruption of righteous indignation that occurs whenever I witness such behavior -- that it is actually in *everyone's* best interest if you *do* merge out of a disappearing lane at the last possible moment!

And yet, and yet... Our tradition teaches, I believe, and somehow we know in some part of our heart... that we are social creatures, we human beings. With Martin Buber and his famous philosophy "I and Thou," fulfillment is found in relationship.

We watch the political debates raging around us at the moment. "Duty." "Nobility" "Country." Even the question of taxation and allocation, bailouts and bonds. At their core these are arguments about

the balance of self and service, how to hold in both hands the freedom of the individual and the call of the collective. “Me First” versus “Ask Not...” “If It’s Not Fun...” versus “Semper Fi.”

Despite the emphasis on individual rights and desires and fulfillment being a prominent – perhaps even characteristic – feature of modern life, this issue is not new. We read in the Torah, in the Book of Numbers, the story of the Israelites, poised to enter the Promised Land. And then... and then the heads of the tribes of Reuvein and Gad approach Moses with an unusual and unexpected request:

“U’mikneh rav haya livnei Reuvein, v’livnei Gad, atzum me’od... The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers.” Noting that the [just conquered] lands of Jazer and Gilead in Jordan were “suitable for cattle” the chiefs of the two tribes came to Moses and said, basically: “we’re done with wandering. We’ve found our place. This suits our needs, it is good enough for us. We’re stopping here.”

Moses, forty years into dealing with a cantankerous, persnickety and less than appreciative flock, explodes in anger. “What! Are your brothers to go to war, and you stay here?” After a long review of the history, complaints and missed opportunities of the past 40 years, he concludes by arguing that by following their own selfish impulses “you will bring calamity upon all this people!”

The tribes respond with a counter-offer. “We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks, and towns for our children. *V’anachnu*

neichaleitz chushim lifnei B'nai Yisrael...We will go forth as troops in the vanguard of the Israelites.... We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion. But we will not have a share with them in the territory beyond the Jordan, for we... have received our share... here."

And Moses can do no more. "If you do this," he says, if you keep your word and do your duty in this... "*vihiytem niki'im M'Adonai, u'm'Yisrael...you shall be clear... you will be clean before God and before Israel..."*

Clear. Clean. God and Israel.

What does it mean, to be clean before God and Israel?

And what does this phrase teach us, about service and duty, identity and obligation?

My friends, it occurs to me at this, our eighth High Holy Day season together, that I have shared many words with you, but I have not yet shared with you what I consider to be my most important insight about Jewish identity. I teach this in classes, I convey it in conversations, but I have not yet spoken about it in a way it would reach everyone.

Who is a Jew? And what is Judaism? For a people who have been around for 4000 years, these are remarkably hard questions to answer.

Is a Jew someone who believes in Judaism? But there are radically different definitions of Judaism. And there are totally non-practicing Jews. Is it someone who believes in one God? But other religions also believe in one God. And more to the point, you know, and I know, and, indeed, some of you here may be... Jews who do not believe in God at all. What about the classic definition: a Jew is someone who was born to a Jewish mother, or who converts to Judaism. But our American Reform movement, at least, has expanded the circle, to include those born to Jewish fathers who are actively raised as Jews. And as to conversion in? That depends on who you work with, and who you ask.

What of conversion out? Is someone who sincerely comes to follow another faith, to believe in another religion, who goes through the rituals to adopt that practice... To borrow from a once-upon-a-time- Saturday Night Life spoof of a game show: Jew, or not Jew? The classical definition would be that these are still Jews. But... well... how do I put this politely? Um. They're Jews, but... let's just say they're not held up as Jewish role models.

But if we welcome those who join us, should we not recognize the spiritual integrity of those who consciously and conscientiously choose to leave? I would think so.

And... what do we do about the JuBus. The very numerous Jewish Buddhists in our midst?

If it is hard to define who is a Jew, describing Judaism is even harder. A religion? But what about the non-religious. A way of life? Same response. A ethical path? But there are Jews in jail. (And not all of them had bad lawyers.) A culture? Which one? Matzah ball soup? Or sh'warma and shak'shouka? A passion to fix the world? Ok, but how? Remember that there are Jewish members of all political parties! (And I'm not even going to get started on Senator Leiberman!) Someone who had a brit milah, who entered Judaism through the covenant of circumcision? Pardon me, but wouldn't that leave a few people out? A race? Have you not met the Ethiopian Jews? Or Jews from Arab lands, Indian Jews, the Jews of the Caucuses? And that is without mentioning the hundreds, and now many thousands of those who have come into Jewish life through adoption: South America, Korea, Vietnam, China, Kazakhstan or even from here in the United States, a joyous addition, blessings to us, every one. There are many ways, to build a Jewish family.

So who are we? And what are we? And why does it matter?

Here is my answer. From an outside perspective – and it's interesting to use this, because I am going to touch on Christianity again tomorrow – from an outside perspective, it seems that Christianity is easier to define. Christianity is a faith. A Christian is someone who believes in God, in a certain way. And I depict "faith" as a vertical arrow, pointing upwards.

Judaism is, of course, also a faith. After all, we invented – I mean, we gave to the world... the idea of the one God. As the authors and intuitors, then, of this foundational idea, the ancient Israelites sensed and shaped the monotheistic ideal. Clearly, Judaism is a religious faith.

But we are also something else. There is another arrow, which intersects with the vertical one. It is a horizontal arrow. It represents Jewish peoplehood. Yes, we are a “faith.” But we are also a “folk.”

Now, there are many other groups that seem to share some of these same characteristics. Hinduism is a closer analogy to Judaism than any other, perhaps, but there are Irish Catholics and Greek Orthodox and African American Baptists, groups in which the neighborhood and food and language and culture and church are all wrapped up together.

But here is the difference. As I understand it – if you are Greek Orthodox, and you go into your priest and announce that you do not believe in God, that priest could – he might not, but he could – declare that “you are not a Christian.”

As a rabbi, I cannot do that. Well, alright, I probably could say to some of you that “you are not a Christian,” although, technically, I suppose that such a conclusion is outside of my exact area of expertise. But a Jew who tells a rabbi he or she does not believe in God will not receive the same kind of response.

Even this model is a bit of an oversimplification. It is not that beliefs do not matter; certainly there are some beliefs that, if expressed, serve as a functional departure from the Jewish people, even shy of formally requesting to be traded to another team. But we are a combination of faith and folk in a way which is true of few other entities in the world.

As for any individual among us... for each of us our Jewish identity falls somewhere on a spectrum of faith and folk. There are Jews who come to services every Friday night, believe in God, speak no Hebrew and hate bagels and lox. And there are those who have served in the Israeli army, act in the Yiddish theater, are deeply committed to the Jewish people, who do not believe in God and eat ham in cheese in public on Yom Kippur. Jews, both. I would not -- but I also cannot -- say to either one: you are not a Jew. What I can say -- what I do say, what I am committed to teaching and the prospect to which I have dedicated my professional life -- is that a healthy expression of Jewish identity is a combination of the two.

Jews and Judaism. We live at a meeting point, an intersection of two axes, a mixture of two worlds. Religion and culture. Spirituality and peoplehood. Faith and folk. God... and Israel.

To be clean, before God and Israel.

We speak so much about freedom, and choice. But by what are we bound? What are our obligations? This night, this season you are summoned to an accounting. Not from the IRS, but the JRS. Not a *cheshbon haguf*, a material accounting, a financial one, but *cheshbon hanefesh*, a spiritual reckoning. An accounting of the soul. Not, now, the question of what do you get out of it. But what do you owe?

What do you owe the Jewish community? This community in which we live? The larger Jewish community? And, we American Jews, we who have chosen to build our cities and pasture our flocks outside the land... what... what do we owe to Israel?

And what do you owe the world, and its maker? What do you owe God?

Images, and suggestions, for the questions each of us must answer for ourselves.

That to the Jewish community, we owe a commitment to leading authentically Jewish lives. And in this world of choices and flavors, how are we to know what is authentically Jewish? We might be tempted, perhaps, to look backwards, and to ask our Jewish grandparents. But the answer is only partly to be found in the past. And not all of us had Jewish grandparents. What is authentic? To answer that we must, I

believe, leap forward in time. It is a question to ask... of our Jewish grandchildren. There is no other standard that will work, no other yardstick by which we can measure. For there have always been schisms and arguments in Jewish life. There has never been a time in our history where there was not one group pointing at another and questioning their practice, or even challenging their status. How can we be certain about what is authentic? We just have to do our best. And hope that what we do will pass the test of time, live up to the standard of continuity – generations of community.

That to a land across the sea, a homeland which many of us have chosen not to call home... To Israel we owe, I believe, care and concern, the love and patriotism which includes asking hard questions, challenging Israeli actions when called for, support when Israel is in need. And... *“V’anachnu neichaleitz chushim lifnei B’nai Yisrael; we will go forth, to help the children of Israel settle in...”* To Israel I still believe that we owe our involvement, our intimate knowledge... and an ongoing physical connection. I believe – I know this is troubling and challenging to some of you but I believe that it is impossible to lead a full Jewish life without a deep commitment to the land and state of Israel. To be there, to go, at least once in our lives, preferably to spend real time there, to learn the language, the culture, the nuances of the new and newly majority Jewish community of our time. History is being renewed before our eyes, a new chapter to our age-old story is taking shape on the

distant-shore of a Mediterranean sea. I call for a spiritual pilgrimage for each one of us, the Jewish equivalent of the Muslim haj. It is time... it is time to realize that it is not just what we get out of the experience. But we owe something of ourselves... to that land to which our ancestors have yearned and turned... for 2000 years.

At this time I announce that our next congregational trip to Israel will take place in the summer of 2010, dates to be determined. I look forward to being there, with many of you.

And finally, what do we owe... to that sometimes silent but deeply demanding partner in our lives, the One who breathed life into us and the world... It is said that when God made the world, God left one small piece of it undone. It is for us to fix and finish, for us to mend and heal and help. *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. For God has no hands but ours. We owe to God the best that is in us, to leave this world a better, holier, healthier place... than the one we came into.

This night we stand on a threshold of time, at a crossroad in our lives. An old year has passed away; a new one now begins. Who are we, as we enter into this new year, and who will we become? Faith and folk, rights and responsibilities, the pursuit of pleasure and the call from beyond. "If it's not fun, why do it?"

“Why do it?” Because in this world in which we live, there are things that need doing. We defend our interests, but in the end it is our obligations which define our lives.

Generations of community, a chain in which we are the latest link, the foundation of the future. The dreams of our old, the visions of our youth.

To be clean, before God and Israel.

So many flavors.

Choose wisely, and choose well.

L'shanah Tovah.