

Lost and Found - Rosh Hashanah 5770 (2009)

Shanah Tovah.

Timed to coincide with the holidays, the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government recently released a new series of Israeli ads.

The intent was to promote MASA: Israel's well-received and generous initiative to encourage young Jews to study abroad in Israel by awarding scholarships.

Unfortunately, the ads were less than appropriate. They portrayed pictures of American Jews on posters headlined by the word "Lost".

The ad reminds viewers of intermarriage in America, and urges Israelis to act now! If they know someone in an interfaith relationship, call the toll free number on your screen – so that we can send information about MASA. A year in Israel, the ad implies, will "save" that Jew from being lost.

The ad is problematic on multiple levels. It is most offensive to the many interfaith families that we all know – so many of whom are the lifeblood of our Temple Solel family - who have made inspiring and meaningful Jewish choices.

But it's also offensive to all of us, because it implies that we're a lost cause...that American Jews, especially those under the age of 30, are simply fated to fizzle out.

A few days ago, the ads were pulled, and all the appropriate apologies were offered. But in the scandal's wake, I continue to wonder: what is the nature of my generation's Jewish identity – of our American Jewish identity? We are obviously not lost. We are gathered together on Rosh HaShanah, after all. But has our Jewishness changed in recent years?

On the surface, we know that younger Jews are doing less. We're less religious than our grandparents. We light Shabbat candles less frequently. And we pray together in synagogue less often.

A more remarkable shift is taking place on the landscape of our internal Jewish identities. Thanks to a virtual absence of anti-Semitism, there are no barriers standing in the way of our kids. Their Jewishness doesn't set them apart from their peers, and it's largely inconsequential when it comes to their acceptance in American society.

But our success has come at a price. In exchange for the assimilation we enjoy, our knowledge and passion for all things Jewish has declined.

The Torah describes Rosh HaShanah as Yom HaZikaron – a Day of Remembrance. This is the day we are called together...to remember and recover the essential components of our identities. Today we explore what we've lost, and recommit ourselves to finding it again.

For two thousand years, Jewish identity has been mapped through the prism of God, Torah, and Israel. What, if any, is our relationship to those three today? And what place could those three essential elements of Judaism play in our lives in the year to come?

Any serious return to Judaism begins with the question of God. Do I believe in Her or Him? Do I pray to It? Will the Holy One Beyond All Names respond to my prayers?

During our Rosh HaShanah Torah reading, we encounter Abraham, and witness how he responds to God's command by faithfully bringing his Isaac up the mountain as a potential sacrifice.

Would that we were like Abraham – blessed with the ability to perceive God’s presence so tangibly...

That faith and devotion is largely absent from the world that we American Jews inhabit today. Instead, we know despair, and feel only God’s absence from our world.

To draw on the Harry Potter lexicon, we live in a world full of dementors: of things that literally suck the hope out of our lives.

We wake up to read of the unstable dictatorships in Iran and North Korea: both thirsting for nuclear weapons.

We turn on the television to learn of more casualties among our brave men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And we read online about the swift spread of new and mysterious diseases from one corner of the planet to the other....

To be honest: if these news stories were the whole of my existence, then I probably would have given up on God a long time ago.

But for all the doom and gloom: I stand before you on this day to remind you that there is something more out there!

Have you ever experienced the miracle of goosebumps? Of finding yourself in a moment when your spine tingled, or your breath was taken away?

Have you ever been overwhelmed by the birth of a child, or the union of two loving partners?

Or maybe, like me – you cry like a baby during the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics, when you sense the possibility that the nations of the world can actually figure out a way to get along with one another.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that these moments are illustrations of the “sublime,” – or, of God’s Presence in the world.

If you think about it: our job is so easy. All we have to do is open our eyes to see all the sublime that surrounds us.

The problem is: we have forgotten how to see. Our eyes have become distracted: by war, violence, and fear. We must retrain our eyes to see the beauty of our world, which represents hope and the possibility of a better tomorrow. That hope gives birth to faith, and to the joy we might know of entering into the Holy Presence of God.

God is only the first piece in the complex puzzle of our Jewish identities....Torah is the next one.

Torah is the essential building block of our Judaism because it can unlock our past and guide our future.

Rabbi Neil Gillman describes Torah as sacred mythology. He writes that “A myth [is the way in which] a community [...] makes sense of its experience. [...] Myths become our intuitive way of confronting the world.”

Part of what it means to make sense of the world is to come to terms with who we are, and where we come from....Mythology helps us to do that.

On an individual level, each of us has a personal story that reaches back a few generations, to explain how we all came to be living here in San Diego. These are our private narratives: they explain who we are as individuals.

There is a larger narrative, or mythology, that we all share together. That story begins with the assertion that we are spiritually descended from hundreds of thousands of slaves who were forced to serve Pharaoh in Egypt, until God and Moses won their freedom.

We are descended from slaves.

This is the story that we have told for a hundred generations: the story about who we are, and where we came from – a story that values freedom. And a story that demands compassion from us when we relate to the poor and the stranger: for we were once poor and strangers in the Land of Egypt.

As we reflect on the Jewish pieces of ourselves that we have lost, it is time to return to Torah because Torah is our mythology: it explains who we are, and where we came from.

Of course, Torah isn't just a collection of stories about our past. Torah is also a collection of mitzvot: rules and values that guide us in building a vibrant Jewish future.

Take the Torah's first commandment: be fruitful and multiply! Our tradition celebrates the institution of the family. Spending time with our families, and passing our customs down to the next generation: this is at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. And it comes from Torah.

What about the passage in Deuteronomy 20 that prohibits the cutting down of a tree during wartime? The Torah radically compares the tree to an innocent human bystander! We learn from this that living Jewishly and living green are one and the same. And it comes from the Torah.

Our text also includes the stipulation, in Leviticus 23, that farmers should leave the corners of their field untouched, so that the poor of the community can come to enjoy in the bounty of the harvest. From this: the age-old Jewish responsibility to share what we have with those less fortunate. And it comes from the Torah.

A few days from now, on Simchat Torah, we will re-wind the Torah to its beginning. We return to the beginning because we know that there is much that we've lost. How blessed we are that we have the chance to return again: to reacquaint ourselves with the stories, values, and laws that make us a unique and holy people.

We have spoken of reclaiming a connection, or relationship, with God and Torah. But we haven't spoken about the need to connect with each other.

We have forgotten, to a degree, what it feels like to be part of the People Israel.

As Americans, we were blessed to come together this past January 20th. Regardless of party, we marveled that our country had elected its first African American president. For a moment, we transcended our partisan identities and became a part of something bigger than ourselves.

When was the last time that we Jews did that? When Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated in 1995? During the Six Day War in 1967?

Thank goodness that those moments of cataclysmic loss are few and far between. But in their absence, we have to work doubly hard to retain a sense of connection with one another.

For the length of our history, we have expressed our peoplehood by showing concern for our fellow Jews.

We can see this locally in the way that temple members help one another during times of loss. We see it communally, when Jewish Family Service of San Diego insures that we have access to an array of social services in times of need. And we see it internationally, thanks to organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the Joint Distribution Committee – both of which work to support the wellbeing of Jews around the world.

It is lovely and wonderful to contribute to, and feel a part of, our national and secular societies. But our tradition teaches us that we cannot fully reclaim our Jewish identities until we embrace the dictum that kol yisrael areivim zeh la zeh – that we Jews are ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of one another.

Perhaps that sense of responsibility drove the Jewish Agency to its recent and woefully misguided advertising campaign about American Jews.

However turned off we are by that kind of treatment, we cannot escape the fact that being a part of the Jewish people also means having a relationship with, and a stake in the survival of, the State of Israel.

There was a time when love and support of Israel was often an American Jew's primary way of expressing Jewishness. Many of us can remember the pride that we felt, after Israel's victories in 1967 and 1973. That support for Israel was easily channeled into a sense of Jewishness.

But my generation was born after 1973. We have never witnessed first hand how Israel was systematically attacked by the military forces of her Arab neighbors.

Instead, the pictures that we see on the news are more morally ambiguous. There are pictures of bus bombings. And such terrorism is outrageously heinous and disgusting.

But there are also ample reports that Israel, for example, unevenly enforces its building codes. As an unfortunate result, Israel disproportionately targets Palestinian homes – even bulldozing some of them to the ground.^[1]

And so, we have a problem...because a lot of my Jewish friends and peers turn away when someone tries to engage them about Israel. They're confused: should they support Israel just because they're Jewish? Or should they sympathize with the Palestinians, based on our religious and secular concern for those that suffer?

Isn't it possible to do both? Why can't it be possible for us, to stand up and declare: that we Jews have an inalienable right to Israel as our homeland. A place in the world where we can be free and live with the assurance that anti-Semitism will never be tolerated. A State of Israel that has the right to maintain a robust army to defend itself – like any other nation in the world.

And why isn't possible for us to also stand up and declare: that most Palestinians aren't evil... that they are looking for the same thing that Israelis are: a place where they can raise their children in peace and safety, with a government of their own. Like any other nation in the world.

I think we can, and I think we must, if we are going to have any hope of inviting the next generation of Jews to remember and reclaim their connection to the Land of Israel.

From our Hasidic tradition, we have the parable of a king who lost a precious stone from his royal ring. And although the king had many trusted servants and advisers who were prepared to set out in search of the stone, the king insisted that his child search for the stone instead. For it was terribly important to the king that his child be the one to discover the stone, and receive the credit for finding it. And some suggest that indeed the king lost the stone on purpose – and that the king knows its location, and has even whispered it to the child, in order that the king might come to know the delight on the child's face when the stone is found.

Like the child in the story, let us think of this New Year – this Day of Remembrance, as the beginning of a yearlong quest. A quest in search of something precious that our parents went through fire and water to pass down to us. A quest in search of something beloved that we have lost: an identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of where we came from. Let us defy the naysayers in the Israeli government who have already written us off, and let us show them that we are more than capable of finding ourselves.

Shanah Tovah.