

Making the Connection

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To an extent I could hardly imagine twenty years ago, much of my life and many of my daily routines are conducted with the assistance of a personal computer. I pay my bills on line, use a computer program to keep and reconcile my check register, shop on line for clothing, buy books through Amazon, keep informed about current events by reading online magazines and blogs, and make travel arrangements through Priceline or Trip Advisor. It's so convenient, but at the same time, the machines can be so frustrating. The e-mails I attempt to send out from my office computer sometimes stay in the Outbox for what seems an endless interval. I know I'm in trouble when instead of seeing the word "Sending" at the bottom right of the screen, I see "Connecting", which obviously I'm not doing. At home I use a wireless link to my printer but occasionally there is a failure to print, and the dialogue box informs me that it's because I'm "not connected."

On Rosh Hashana, the New Year, we come to synagogue for a variety of reasons. We are, all of us without exception, flawed, and so we seek forgiveness and the opportunity to learn from our missteps and embark on a new beginning. Amid the jumbled details of daily life and experience, we seek some overarching sense of meaning. Aware of the uncertainties of life and anxious about the future, we come together to pray for health, prosperity and security in the year ahead and for the resilience and courage to meet whatever challenges will come our way. But, most of all, I think, we come to the synagogue **to connect** – to connect with the sacred and transcendent dimension of life and to connect as well with our community and our people.

The question "What is a Jew?", while not as contentious as the more familiar and contemporary query "Who is a Jew?", has been at the heart of the ideological debate over the course of the past two centuries regarding the nature of Jewish identity. Are we members of a religion, a race, a civilization, a nationality, or a people? My answer to this question has changed little, if at all, over the past fifty years.

We are assuredly not a race, as a visit to Israel and an encounter with all of the diverse sub-groups (with their varying physical characteristics) that comprise the Jewish

population of the state would readily demonstrate. Nor are we a nation or nationality; for we who reside in this country proudly affirm our American nationality and citizenship. On the other hand, we are not exclusively a religion; one does not have to believe in a particular creed or observe the commandments in whole or even in part to be a Jew. Some 19th century Jews, laypeople as well as their religious leaders, in their eagerness to assimilate into the culture and society of western Europe, might have downplayed Jewish peoplehood and sought to define themselves as Germans or Frenchmen of the Israelite persuasion. But the events of the 20th century (anti-Semitic agitation and persecution culminating in the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state) led the overwhelming majority of world Jewry to affirm the idea of Jewish peoplehood. Reform Judaism in particular, between the 1880's and the 1930's undertook a striking reversal of course in this regard. The near unanimous consensus we have today is the signal achievement of the Zionist revolution in Jewish life, which defined Jews as an *'am*, a people living dispersed throughout the world, residing within the boundaries of many different sovereign nations, and ranging in terms of religious belief and observance from ultra-Orthodox to totally secular, but bonded by a sense of common history and common destiny.

I will speak more tomorrow about the manner in which peoplehood in the Jewish experience is bound up with faith and about my conviction that the fullest expression of Jewishness is one which embraces the religious elements of our heritage. However, the interplay of peoplehood and faith goes both ways; or, as Frank Sinatra put it, "you can't have one without the other." Aaron Lansky, the founder of the National Yiddish Book Center, in advocating for a greater appreciation of and familiarity with the cultural and secular elements of Jewishness, has stressed the importance of both the *kodesh* (the holy) and the *chol* (the secular, everyday and mundane) in Jewish life. And Olivier Roy, a French-born scholar of religion traces the worrisome rise of religious fundamentalisms in our time, to the detachment of religion from everyday culture and the resulting quest for a pure and idealized faith.

We Jews **are** a people and, for many of us, **connecting** with our people is a significant motive in our attendance at shul on the holidays. A recent article in the Forward newspaper, however, expresses concern that the ties of peoplehood that have

bound us together might be fraying and that the connections, particularly for our young people, might be tenuous. The writer attributes the threat to our sense of peoplehood to political polarization, especially as it relates to Israel and its policies, although there are additional factors that I believe are at play.

Israel is the consummation of Jewish peoplehood, its existence grounded in the recognition that a people merits the rights of sovereignty and self-determination, its achievements a source of pride. We American Jews are not tax-paying and voting citizens of Israel; our children are not the ones who bear the burden of defending the country. Hence, our opinions carry limited weight, but they do stem from a sense of genuine attachment and concern. And whoever heard of a Jew without an opinion, especially about issues that matter to us so deeply?

Israel faces numerous problems and challenges, both internal and external, and has had more than its share of worrisome and upsetting developments to contend with. Peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority have been stalled for many months. Recent weeks have witnessed the downgrading by Turkey (formerly a key ally in the region) of its diplomatic relations with Israel, a mob attack on Israel's embassy in Cairo (from which embassy personnel had to be evacuated), and a unilateral Palestinian initiative for recognition of statehood at the United Nations. The latter move may or may not change realities on the ground but does carry the threat of increased diplomatic isolation for Israel and an escalation of protests in the occupied territories that may turn violent. The Arab Spring has displaced authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and threatens the Assad dictatorship in Syria, but the nature of the new regimes that will emerge is uncertain. What role will Islamists play, and what are the implications for the continuation of Egypt's peace with Israel? Let us not forget the ever-present threat of terrorism, the armed and hostile forces in neighboring Gaza and Lebanon, and of paramount concern, the Iranian nuclear program.

On the home front, this has been the summer of tent cities and a mass movement of social protest with demonstrations against vast income disparities, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of cartels and monopolies, rising prices, and the lack of affordable housing. There are tensions between secular and religious, and controversial legislation in the Knesset that some fear curtails the right of free speech.

Israelis and Jews here in America are, as one would expect, divided as to how these challenges should be handled.

My intent is not to weigh in with my own opinions but to register my agreement with the author of the Forward article. Dissent, self-criticism and disagreement are not treasonous; a multiplicity of views is a source of strength. What we must beware is the polarization that leads us to stigmatize those of differing viewpoint and read them out of the group or that leads us, when our own opinions don't prevail, to withdraw emotionally and spiritually, resigning, as it were, our affiliation with our people. Jeffrey Goldberg's blog earlier this year had a lengthy series of posts about the editor of the Village Voice, a young woman who had received a solid Jewish and Zionist education but had become, partially through the influence of her husband, a harsh critic of Israel. Far more disconcerting to Goldberg and to some of those who posted on his blog than the substance and tone of the criticisms was the young woman's withdrawal from engagement and her adopting the status of outsider, no longer a member of the people.

It is not only in Israel or in Jewish circles that ideologues and those firmly convinced of their own rightness are ready to "excommunicate" those who disagree with them or that politicians willingly pander to such sentiments. You've doubtless heard politicians in our country salute the members of their electoral base as "real Americans", implying that there's something less genuine or authentic about the Americanism of their political opponents. With over 300 million people, America can hopefully transcend the current climate of political polarization, distressing as it now is, and continue to survive and flourish. But Jews, scattered worldwide and numbering only 14 million, can ill afford it.

Another factor (and to my mind, a far more potent one) in the undermining of Jewish peoplehood is the outlook which regards all affirmations of a particularistic identity as tribalism. In the 19th century, the *maskilim*, the Jewish advocates of Enlightenment and modernization, advised their fellow Jews to act as Jews at home but as generic human beings when out in public, as if there were an inherent conflict between one's Jewishness and one's humanity. Later, during the heyday of immigration to America's shores one hundred years ago, there were some who regarded America as a melting pot in which all distinctions between ethnic groups would disappear, blended into

a common Americanism. Fortunately, there was an opposing view that had its advocates and adherents – the notion of America as a salad bowl, in which the ingredients are still recognizable for what they are.

The words, “melting pot”, (coined incidentally by a Jewish writer), may no longer be heard, but I daresay the attitude still exists among some contemporary Jews. “Why can’t I just be a human being?”, or “why can’t I just be an American?” “I’m not denying my background or ancestry, but I feel no obligation to involve myself in the community and its institutions, to contribute to its causes, or to immerse myself in its culture and history.”

Judaism, of course, sees no contradiction between universalism and particularism. The same series of prayers in the third section of the High Holiday *amidah* that implores God to grant *kavod l’amecha*, glory to Your people also looks forward to the day when all humankind will become *agudah echat*, one band united to serve God with perfect heart. God is *elohei Yisra’el*, the God of Israel, but also *melech al kol ha’aretz*, sovereign over all the earth.

In a book I read recently about the revival of Hebrew as a modern spoken language in the first decades of the 20th century, the author notes that Jews traditionally have been polyglots, skilled at juggling familiarity with and fluency in multiple languages. Examples from our long history of residence in every region of the globe abound. Can we not, I ask, juggle multiple identities as well, as members of our families and our local communities, as Americans and as Jews, as humans and as citizens of the world? Or am I being overly optimistic, perhaps naïve?

Being simultaneously an American and a Jew and a citizen of humanity, whatever the stresses and tensions involved and whatever the increased obligations, is possible. More to the point, I believe that affirming and acting on our ties to the Jewish people are well worth whatever they entail.

The analogy has often been made between Jewish peoplehood and *mishpacha*, family. We cherish our ties to our families of origin (mother, father and siblings), to the families which we and our spouses establish, and to the extended kinship circle of aunts, uncles and cousin, near and distant. A highlight of the summer of 2010 for me was a family reunion in the Washington, DC area with my sister, five of my cousins and their

children, and my 87 year old aunt, who passed away two months later. Fellow Jews (whether born into the group or voluntarily casting their lot in with the Jewish people) are our *mishpacha*; we feel pride in what they've achieved and what they've contributed to the world. This is certainly the feeling I had earlier this summer when I toured the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles and viewed the exhibits portraying the history and culture of our people over more than three millennia, depicting our contributions to humankind but also our ability to maintain our own distinctive heritage. And yes, like any family, we have our scoundrels, and we occasionally feel shame, but that was anticipated by our religious tradition, which characterizes behavior that reflects negatively on our people as *chilul hashem*, a desecration of God's name.

Jewish peoplehood is a source of warmth and closeness, an identity that mediates between the loneliness and isolation which the individual often feels and the overwhelming scope and dimensions of a concept such as "all humankind."

But how do you impart a feeling of belonging to someone who doesn't have it? Families linked by ties of blood and marriage certainly have their instances of estrangement or simply an absence of feelings of closeness; all the more so can we expect this to be the case with the more extended and loosely linked family that is *am Yisra'el*, the Jewish people.

Strengthening the ties of peoplehood and encouraging our young people and our alienated or estranged fellow Jews to **connect** is the daunting task shared by parents, educators and religious leaders, by the home, the synagogue and the Jewish Federation. The task will demand thoughtfulness, sensitivity and creativity. Providing Jews (and I'm speaking especially of our young people) with positive Jewish experiences is the first step. I keep returning in the High Holiday messages I have been writing at this season to the Jewish high school students who were guests in our building this past summer as participants in the program of the American Jewish Society for Service. Their program combined community service, participation in Jewish worship, and exposure to positive role models for Jewish learning and commitment (their counselors), with camaraderie and fun and provided just the type of experience that, I believe, will strengthen their sense of Jewish identity in later life. A second step would be focusing, as the writer of a recent article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* advocated, not only on crises and on threats to

our collective well-being (and the threats are there and are certainly real) but also on the content of Jewish life

The High Holidays are the season of *Teshuva* , usually translated a “repentance” but more accurately rendered as “return.” Let me suggest additionally the notion of “restoration”. Let us use to our advantage the opportunity these Days of Awe provide to restore attenuated and severed ties to *am Yisra’el.*, in sum, to re-connect.