

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 – 5777 – Rabbi Paul Drazen

An eighteenth century rabbi, the Maggid of Dubno, told the following story:

Many merchants were aboard a great ship sailing on the high seas, each had vast quantities of merchandise as cargo. One day there arose a violent storm. It became obvious that the ship was in danger of sinking. The captain gathered the passengers and told them to throw their heavy merchandise overboard, lest the boat go down. The merchants, anxious to save their lives, went to the hold, brought out their precious cargo and started to ditch it as quickly as they could. One of them, however, a man known to have a considerable load of valuable goods with him, made ready to ditch not his well-sealed crates, but his tallit and tephillin and the holy books he had brought with him.

His companions stopped him saying: Foolish man! Throw your crates of precious stones into the ocean; you can do without them, they are only valuables. But do not throw the tools of our religion overboard, for they are our life.

That story may not duplicate our experience, but there's no question that each of us are on a similar journey, at least on dry land. All of us have journeyed a considerable distance from the lives led by our great-grandparents, our grandparents, even by our parents. We have travelled physically, spiritually and culturally, some of us on or over an ocean of water, but all of us on the sea of assimilation. Proof? We are Jews living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That demonstrates we have all assimilated to some degree.

That's the case no matter if we live here or even in deepest darkest Brooklyn. It's not a surprise that we do not live the same Jewish lives as did our parents or grandparents. No one does, not us, not those who live in the shtetels of Brooklyn or Jerusalem. We do not live in the kind of communities they did. Our circle of friends is likely more diverse than theirs was. We dress like everyone else today. We pursue the same leisure time activities as do our neighbors. For those who are natives or long-time dwellers here, that there is no "Jewish neighborhood" in Syracuse means that we lack something our parents or grandparents had. There was one, I know. On my first trip here I heard: the butcher was here, the bakery was here, the JCC was here. We live in a different, changed world all of us an inheritor of a process of assimilation.

It is that reality which should, as we begin this period of personal introspection, ask "have we, like the merchant in the story, thrown our tallit and tefillin, that is most of our Jewish lives, overboard?"

We are in America, the land of opportunity. Thanks to the Constitution, we have freedom unknown to Jews before this time. In America, as Americans, we have had the chance to really make it. Making it, of course, has meant assimilating in some ways changing or giving up Jewish ways.

In many ways, assimilation has been good for our religion. Judaism has been most vibrant and creative, not when it pulled back into its shell, but when it interacted with other cultures. In the days of the Maccabees, Jewish culture absorbed certain practices of the Greek world, such as the seder, as an example. In medieval Spain, Judaism adopted part of the culture of the Islamic world. Judaism has survived because of Jews who **partially** acculturated and partially assimilated. It was the Jews who retained their Jewish practices and world view while being open to the world around them, **not** the far right, who preserved Judaism.

We live as Americans. We are comfortable with American patterns. We gather with our families on Thanksgiving. The fourth of July is as much a holiday for us as it is for any non-Jew. The secular calendar dominates our schedules. We have mastered the language and terms of secular or Christian culture as well as our non-Jewish neighbors. That's all good. But it leaves me with a question. For how many Jews did the freedom **of** religion become a freedom **from** religion.

Constitutional religious freedom and measured assimilation have been a blessing and a curse. Many Jew's life-styles are so assimilated; there is so little difference between a Jewish home and a non-Jewish home. Would a visitor to our homes see anything which states, unequivocally, this home is Jewish.

A colleague of mine was officiating at a funeral. He asked the Hebrew or Yiddish name of the deceased. The family indicated they didn't know - and hastened to add, "Rabbi, we don't know his Hebrew name. Being Jewish was not terribly important to him. But, if **you** think it's important Rabbi, give him a Hebrew name."

Yes, I know many are thinking: That's an extreme example. But for a long time here at Adath Yeshurun Hebrew names were not high on the priority list. While most of us here know our Hebrew first names, do we know our Hebrew last names, that is **both** our parent's Hebrew names, father AND mother? When Yom Tov is over – write it down, email it to me, so we can record it in the synagogue system.

Today is the second day of Rosh Hashanah. You're here, which shows you know its significance. I assume you might know that the second day of Rosh Hashanah is observed **even in Israel**, where celebrating only one day of a holiday is the norm. Being here today is a statement you make that being Jewish is important, more important than what you would have been doing on a regular Tuesday.

So this is a good time to ask ourselves: do we speak with a Jewish voice? When we go through daily life, to what extent is our vocabulary Jewish? When we have discussions, are our opinions and values molded by Jewish knowledge?

We've grown up with it, so Jews often speak with a secular or Christian voice, rather than a Jewish one. How do we refer to the Bible? Do we use the English term "Bible," or do we say, "the Hebrew Bible," or the Hebrew term Tanakh or do we say "Old Testament?" "Old Testament" is Christian terminology and reflects the Christian concept that our Bible is outdated or obsolete, in contrast to their "new" improved Bible. I mentioned that a few weeks ago to a kind, caring Christian who was taken aback when I noted that Jews find the name "Old Testament" to be a distinctly Christian concept. To speak with a Jewish voice, we should shun the term Old Testament and use the Jewish word Tanakh – or Hebrew Bible. There are many other examples we could mention, but no matter how few or how many we note, they all suggest if we speak with an authentic Jewish voice or not.

Did something go wrong with the promise of assimilation? Not really. We just need to recognize that since we're part of the American culture, we should also recognize that we need to become authentic Conservative Jews, that is going back to the origins of the names of the movement, to CONSERVE Jewish life. Because in Conservative Judaism, when the outside world and Jewish world collide, we should be ready to at least give the Jewish option a fair shake.

The old Jewish neighborhood had a coherence and a pattern. You saw the community in Shule on Shabbat morning and sitting on the park benches on Shabbat afternoon. You knew it was Shabbos in the neighborhood whether your own family observed it or not. These overarching Jewish patterns and rhythms tend not to be part of our lives anymore. Can we say "this is the year I am going to bring some of that back home?"

For too many, assimilation has robbed us of the rituals which enable us to celebrate everyday events. We have lost the words which give us the capacity to give thanks for the simple joys of life and which enable us to deal constructively and meaningfully with life's joys and tragedies. We need to take active steps to assure Jewish patterns of everyday life do not slip away. If the only holiday we make a big deal about is Hanukkah, there's a message in that.

We've done well here, but we need to be vigilant to be sure that we know and continue to provide the American world with the flavor of authentic Jewish views. Consider what as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

America needs us to bring our Jewish voices to bear on secular culture and thereby enrich and strengthen it. When our voices are the same as those of our non-Jewish neighbors, we abandon our historical destiny. We diminish ourselves, we diminish our neighbors and we impoverish our country.

A Hassidic story suggests the task before us. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, once went to a certain spot in the woods, lit a candle and said a prayer, thereby preventing a disaster from happening. In the next generation, a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov was faced with disaster. He went to the special location in the woods, lit the candle, but he did not know the prayer. Nevertheless, the calamity was averted.

A disciple of the next generation was faced with disaster. He found the spot in the woods, but he did not know how to light the candle or how to say the words of the prayer. Still, the disaster was forestalled. A final disciple of a more recent generation was faced with tragedy. He did not know how to light the candle; he did not know how to say the prayer or even the location in the woods. He knew only how to tell the story. Even then disaster was avoided.

That tale ends here. But what happens now? We are the ones who need to be sure that the pattern of life by which we live differ from lives of the non-Jews around us. We are the ones who can show determination to focus on our Jewish way of life, our story - so even if we have forgotten the candle, the prayer and the place in the woods, we will still speak with a Jewish voice, live by Jewish values and preserve ourselves and our people by telling our story.