

HOW DOES A PEOPLE SURVIVE?

A High Holiday Sermon, Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard
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In recent weeks two books have been published on the state of the Jewish community in America. Egon Mayer, a sociologist, has published a book entitled, "Love And Tradition". His thesis is that, "Jews have never been more uncertain about who they are and what they represent". Charles Silberman, a journalist, has written a book titled, "A Certain People: American Jews And Their Lives Today". Mr. Silberman is almost euphoric about the future of the Jewish community in America. His thesis is that with the decline of Orthodoxy, anyone can be a Jew on his own terms, and this freedom is what gives out community its new found vitality.

I think that Mr. Silberman's positive estimate of the American Jewish community is inflated. I agree with him that the extreme Orthodox Jews should not be the sole definers of who is a Jew in good standing, but I think that American Jews must recognize that there is such a thing as diluting Jewish observance and commitment to the point of meaninglessness. If the bulk of the Jewish community has no common standard for their actions, both in an ethical and ritualistic sense, then we have no Jewish community. All we have is a number of isolated individuals each winging it on his own.

Many years ago, I attended a Rabbinical conference in Daytona Beach. An erudite Professor from a respected rabbinical seminary gave a lecture in which he tried to establish what he thought was a valid hypothesis. "Judaism", he said, "is anything living Jews want it to be." This Professor wanted to say that modern Jews have the right to define Judaism any way they wished. Since I believe that Judaism has a moral tradition and a world perspective which has been consistent ever since the time of Moses, I said to the Professor, "If we carry your thesis to its logical conclusion, you are saying that if we modern Jews want to say that Jesus is divine, then we are free to do so, and this will still be Judaism?" The Professor was upset. "You are hitting below the belt", he said. Obviously he thought there were limits to his hypothesis, but he wasn't prepared to describe those limits. What he was interested in was the right to differ, in a radical way, from the tradition. I learned later that this Professor from a very Orthodox background, and that he had a great psychological need to assert his independence, but the battle today, dear friends, is not against autocratic dictators of the tradition. That battle was won when Jews first migrated to democratic America. The battle today is against complete apathy to the tradition. The battle today is against radical freedom.

All of this brings us to my question this morning, "How Does A People Survive"? I certainly don't believe it possible for a people to survive when everyone goes his own way. A people is not a people unless it has shared memories, shared customs, and shared goals.

It's been a while since the musical, "Fiddler On The Roof" was in its heyday. The play was a delight to those of us who knew, to some degree, the world of Tevye, the hero in the story. When I was a young boy, I visited traditional synagogues and saw men davening or praying, as Tevye prayed in the play. While my family was not a copy of Tevye's family, my grandfather was from Tevye's world, and the joy of the singing and the stylistic dancing was familiar to me. "Fiddler On The Roof" was to me a way of experiencing my grandfather's world, of which I already knew something. I was still fresh from the glow of seeing "Fiddler" when the then President of Beth Am told me he had been to New York and he had seen two plays, "Fiddler" and "A Man From La Mancha". He was thrilled by the latter, he said. He didn't quite understand the idiom of Fiddler. Our President was telling me that he did not have a grandfather like mine. He was saying that he had not visited in his youth the kind of Orthodox synagogues I had visited. He was telling me that he had no memories of the Eastern Europe shtetel, and therefore his emotions were not aroused when he saw "Fiddler". If a group does not have shared memories to sustain them, if they are to survive together, they must intensify their shared present experiences. But, this does not seem to be the

direction of American Jewish life.

When I was a Rabbi on Long Island, an aged Orthodox Rabbi told me a "joke". The Rabbi enjoyed telling the joke so much that I could see that it was more than a joke to him. It was a dig at me and at all modernistic Jews. The story is this. "A certain Jewish family was not very observant. They never lit the Sabbath candles. The observant grandfather of the mother was coming over to the house on this particular Friday night, so the mother lit the Sabbath candles. When the children came into the room, they were surprised to see the candles, so they started singing, "Happy Birthday to you". Then, they blew out the candles." The cohesiveness of a people is weakened when it does not have a core of common practices. The question is how do you keep alive some of the practices that were precious to the previous generation?

While I was on Long Island, I had a number of conversations with the Orthodox Rabbi who led the congregation across the street from mine. Rabbi Glazer told me that the danger of deviating from one single Orthodox custom was that the person would be led to deviate from other customs. "If there is no absolute authority", said Rabbi Glazer, "there will be only chaos." I did not believe Rabbi Glazer to be right. I thought it was possible for modern Jews to develop a core of customs which was meaningful to our time and to observe that core, but so far, it would seem that Rabbi Glazer was right. A growing number of modernized American Jews do not recognize even that small core of rituals recommended by Reform Judaism.

Years ago, when I was tutoring a young man for his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, I reprimanded him for his total lack of study. To which he replied, "What do you mean? I'm a Reform Jew. I don't gotta do nuttin!" In this same vein, well-meaning but perhaps over-protective parents will call Beth Am and admonish us for requiring their teenager to attend religious services once a month. The mood is growing throughout this land of freedom. "I'm not an Orthodox Jew", our people are saying. "I don't gotta do nuttin". May I suggest that no people has ever survived without accepting some kind of discipline - without rallying around some core of practices and beliefs.

The founder of Reform Judaism in America was Isaac Mayer Wise, but Rabbi Wise would turn over in his grave if he were to hear a Professor teaching that Judaism is anything modern Jews want it to be. By the standards of 1985, Isaac Mayer Wise was a traditional Jew. Early Reform Jews in America observed the Sabbath, attended the synagogue regularly, maintained a substantial core of rituals, and above all studied the Bible and other Jewish sources regularly. They called themselves Prophetic Jews, and they emphasized the moral teachings of the Prophets, but their homes were rich in Jewish observance, and the synagogue was the center of their community life. The early American Reformers did not believe with the Orthodox that failure to observe a ritual was a sin against God. They did believe that to be a Jew you had to set a moral example and observe those rituals identified with the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

Isaac Mayer Wise sounded the keynote of freedom within Judaism, but he was not an anarchist. He never envisioned in his wildest nightmares that his desire to make some key changes in Jewish attitudes would lead to almost total non-observance for many. Freedom within Judaism, implies the responsibility to use that freedom to strengthen Judaism. I like to think that we are strengthening Judaism within the walls of Beth Am, but I am not so sure about what some of our members are doing outside these walls.

Let us look, for example, at our Temple Seder. I have operated on the theory that as a Reform Jew I have the right to change the Haggadah, the Seder book, so that it will become more meaningful in modern times. When I was a boy, I listened for hours to my father intoning the lengthy traditional haggadah. The Seder was a great idea, but it became tedious. Here in Beth Am, I took the traditional haggadah and trimmed it. I saved the better passages and added some passages about the holocaust and Jews suffering in the Soviet Union today. Further, I involved members of the congregation in reading some of

the passages, and we added a note of excitement by having "Elijah" present fully costumed at every Seder. What we tried to do was to be creative about a very wonderful Jewish custom. We tried to heighten its meaning, and by all indications, we have been successful. Now our Seder is my idea of what Reform Judaism is all about. We observe selected traditional rituals, but we modernize and strengthen their impact. This attitude ideally must be carried out not only in our Reform synagogues but in our Reform homes. You too have the right to be creative and the duty to strengthen the impact of our customs.

Reform Judaism never suggested that we do away with the Sabbath which is a Commandment handed down by Moses as part of the Ten Commandments. We did suggest that we change the character of the Sabbath. For centuries, no Jew rode on the Sabbath because riding involved work. The horse or donkey had to be hitched up and driven. When I was a boy, turning on the electric light was considered a violation of the Sabbath. Writing with a pencil was a violation. Obviously, this is carrying the notion of not working to an extreme, and the founders of Reform Judaism suggested that we need not observe these extreme requirements. Isaac M. Wise and his followers, however, never suggested that Saturday be our main shopping day, nor did they suggest that we give up the beautiful rituals that introduce the Sabbath, or that we give up the dynamic ideal of the Sabbath as a day when we try to practice "the world to come", "Ha-oh-lahm Ha-Bah". Certainly, the Sabbath still has compelling value as the day on which we rehearse ideal conduct, when we relate to one another in such a way that we actualize the messianic world of peace and justice.

In Beth Am, we permit our young people to play basketball on Saturday afternoons, but we don't surrender our Friday evening or Saturday morning services. Our procedure, in this regard, should be a pattern for your Sabbath observance. Recreation is permitted but not at the expense of the worship experience. The Sabbath is the day formally set aside for Torah study. It is only secondarily a day for recreation, and it is definitely not a day for shopping. You can do your shopping on Saturday night, when the Sabbath is over, or on Sunday. The very fact that so many of us treat Saturday like any other day shows how diluted our Jewishness has become.

If you are concerned about the survival of the Jewish community in America, you will review your personal position of activity on the Sabbath and reorient it as an affirmation of Jewish teaching.

How does a people survive? With shared experiences, shared practices, and shared goals.

I hope that all of you at the very least, have a mezuzah on your door post. The mezuzah contains the prayer which tells us amongst other things of our responsibility to teach our children the customs and laws of Judaism. When I was in Jerusalem a few years ago, I went to the old city and saw a very touching sight. It was lunch time. A young Arab boy had come home from school to eat with his family. I saw the father take out the family Koran, the Islamic Bible, place his son at a seat beside him, and start reading the Koran with him. This is the mid-eastern ideal. The father is responsible for passing on the religion to the son. Judaism also places this responsibility on the father. The prayer in the mezuzah reads, "V'shinantam L'vahnehchah, and you shalt teach them diligently to your children."

Our Bible is much more of a literary feat than the Koran, much more applicable to modern times in its dynamism, but to be able to teach this most widely read of all books, one must know a little about it. It is not a requirement of Reform Judaism that we be ignorant of the Bible. On the contrary, it is a requirement that we know it not only as our ancestors knew it, but also in terms of modern scholarship, archaeological discoveries and the like. Rabbi Gunther Plaut, who has spoken from this pulpit, has edited a new commentary on the Torah. It is very interesting and quite readable. Buy a copy from our Judaica Shop and become an expert on the Torah. Then, teach it to your children. Just 20 minutes a week will do for a starter; teach it on the Sabbath of course. Mothers may do it, but fathers, it is your primary responsibility according to the tradition. How does a people survive - by

sharing experiences. Studying Torah with a parent is an experience a child never forgets. Think of that Arab merchant in Jerusalem mediating his tradition to his child. Can you do less? Your child will always hold dear the time he spends with you in shared experiences. He will remember the fact that you brought him to Temple on Shabbat to play basketball at 1 P. M. Will he also remember that you brought him to listen to the Shabbat Torah lesson at 11:15 A. M.? Your daughter will remember that you took her to the Dolphin game or that you took her shopping in Dadeland. Will she also remember your setting an example with the Sabbath lights? Through what shared Jewish experiences are you motivating your children to share their Jewish experiences with their children?

I have told you of my burning memory of my mother lighting the Sabbath candles and praying. The Sabbath candles will always be important to me, because they were important to my mother. Rest assured that in this free American environment your children will observe less than you do, but if you observe almost nothing, what is there left for them to observe? Can it be true that the Orthodox Rabbi Glazer is right, that once you stop observing even one custom, all the tradition falls by the wayside? Must we be Orthodox Jews or nothing? If you are interested in reinstituting the introductory Shabbat rituals in your house, please get a copy of my pamphlet entitled, "Taking On A New Soul - A Recipe For Lovers". This pamphlet takes you step by step through the opening Sabbath rituals and shows you how the occasion was intended to be and can still become a love moment for the entire family. Especially in our own time, these rituals are needed and meaningful. With this pamphlet you don't have to know any Hebrew or memorize anything. It's all spelled out and transliterated. This Sabbath pamphlet is another example of how a modern Jew can intensify the impact of an ancient hallowed ritual.

The fragmentation of the American Jewish community into a number of atomized individuals each interpreting Judaism as he sees fit and maintaining a splendid isolation from Jewish observance is part of the emphasis on individual freedom as against group purpose. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to play this game with respect to our Jewishness, for if we do, the Jewish people will not survive. Writing in "Newsweek" recently, an educator took the position that Americans no longer shared a knowledge about a common American heritage. This college Professor gives a test to his students at the beginning of the year to discover what they already know. He has discovered after many such tests that the majority of college students today are almost completely ignorant about people like Mark Twain or Dwight Eisenhower. Most of them don't know about Ralph Nader or J. Edgar Hoover. Of course, names from early American history and the formative years of our American democracy are still less familiar to them. The Professor concluded that this ignorance boded ill for the survival of a common American purpose. Said this educator, "Communication depends upon the ability to share allusions (or references), to share a common understanding and a common heritage". We are already raising Jews who cannot appreciate the nuances of "Fiddler On The Roof", a story reflecting the 1,500 years of our European experience. Progressively modern Jews are resisting attending religious services, resisting reading the prayerbook and studying the Bible. Unless each of us does some personal accounting and brings it to bear on his or her family life, we will soon have our children blowing out the Sabbath candles and singing, "Happy Birthday to you". Should this scene or something like it occur in more of our homes, what we will have is not a birthday celebration, but a funeral.

Let me conclude with a story that might be a Jewish parable for our time. The King of a small country found himself suddenly attacked by an unexpected enemy. In desperation he took his most trusted General and sent him as a messenger to his friend, the ruler of a neighboring kingdom. To make sure the message was not intercepted, the King had the general commit the message to memory. "Make sure", said the King, "that you rehearse the message once every hour" or you might forget it. "Don't worry", said the general, "I'll rehearse it every half-hour."

The general set out on his journey over mountains and rivers, and faithful to his charge,

he repeated the precious message constantly. After several days, however, the terrain became less difficult and more beautiful. The General began to admire the landscape, to enjoy the beautiful forest and valleys. More and more often, the General would rest and sleep, and less and less often he repeated the message. When he passed through the villages, the General spent more time at the pubs and fairs and began to think more of his personal enjoyment than of the peril of his people. A journey which should have taken 3 or 4 days, took ten days, and, finally, the General was ushered into the Court of the ally of his King. When invited to speak, the General could only stammer and fumble. "Alas, your majesty," he said to the sovereign, "I have travelled many days over mountains and rivers, and I have survived many perils, but "I have forgotten the message".