

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE:

FINDING OUR JEWISH SELVES IN A TIME OF BIGOTRY

First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5775

A colleague of mine was having lunch with the Executive Director of the local Jewish Federation, and had agreed to meet the latter at his office. As you can well imagine, the rabbi was shocked to see the Jewish professional at his desk avidly reading a copy of the neo-Nazi newspaper, *The Aryan Bugle*. “How can you read such *dreck*?” he exclaimed. The Executive Director responded, “You see, my friend, when I read the Jewish papers, they talk about anti-Semitism, terrorist attacks, and Israel’s isolation in the United Nations . . . almost every story is depressing. But then I read this newspaper, find out how powerful we are, how we control Hollywood, Congress, and even the world economy, and immediately I feel better!”

We sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah to awaken us to the dangers of the world in which we live. This year, however, the *shofar* came several months earlier than usual; We heard the *tekiah* of air raid sirens in Tel Aviv, Be’er Sheva and Ashdod as well as the scores of other cities. We listened to the *shevarim* of Qassam rockets slicing through the air with their deadly high-pitched sound, and could not ignore the *teruah*-like urgency of emergency vehicles blaring their way down city streets. Indeed, if the *shofar* were a rocket, it would have been sounded more than 4,000 times in Israel over the course of the last few months.

Looking backward from Rosh Hashanah, 5774 was a difficult year for Jews throughout the world. It would be hard to call the summer-long campaign against Hamas a resounding success. As was the case with Hezbollah in 2006, mere survival has burnished Hamas’ credentials in the radical Islamic world. It would seem the more death and destruction you can call down upon your own people, the greater the hero you are.

The news from other corners of the world is no better. Over the summer rioters attacked the Don Abarbanel Synagogue in the 11th arrondissement of Paris with rocks and other projectiles,

while George Galloway, a British MP, declared Bradford, the district he represents in northern England, to be “Israeli-free” -- a chilling echo of Nazi boasts to make Germany *Judenrein*, Jew-free. Three weeks ago in Lyon, France two teenage girls, ages 15 and 17, were arrested for plotting to blow up a synagogue. In Berlin protesters chanted, “*Jude , Jude , feige Schwein , komm heraus und kampf allein* -- Jew, Jew cowardly swine, come out and fight on your own.” Indeed, just between Britain and France, there have been 900 documented instances of anti-Semitic assaults, protests, and acts of vandalism this year alone.

Thankfully the climate of America is very different than that of Europe. Still, here, too, bigotry has reared its ugly head. In April, Klan leader Frazier Glenn Cross, killed three people outside of a Jewish community center in Overland Park, Kansas, in the hope of ridding the world of a few more Jews (though, ironically, none of the victims were Jewish); last month four Orthodox teens were attacked in Brooklyn, and there have been dozens upon dozens of incidents of vandalism and graffiti on synagogues and Jewish schools -- not only in urban areas with significant Jewish populations, but in places like Frontenac, Missouri, Clarksville, Tennessee, and Eugene, Oregon. Scores upon scores of incidents on every continent -- except Antarctica, which remains free of anti-Semitic taint. At least for now. And we haven’t even talked about Iran and its nuclear ambitions!

Since the days of the Enlightenment when Jews first permitted themselves the hope that humankind could change for the better, and believed in the inevitability of progress and the eventual disappearance of prejudice, we have been disappointed time and again. The religious anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages morphed into the racial anti-Semitism of 19th century pseudo-science, which, in time, became the anti-Zionism of today’s Jew haters. As in the treatment of any virus, we can create vaccines and articulate strategies of containment; we can curb the plague from becoming a pandemic, but we’ll never eliminate the scourge entirely; it is too deeply embedded in the psyche of Western civilization. It can remain dormant for generations -- 12th century Spain and 16th century Poland are proof of that -- but eventually it rises from its period of dormancy to stalk the Jewish people anew.

But my message today isn't about anti-Semitism; it's not about why others hate us or how to combat such hatred. Rather, I want to focus on the question of why we are proud to be Jewish. In a world in which anti-Semitism is flourishing, why should you be glad to be a Jew? When was the last time someone asked you: Are you glad that you're Jewish? And if so, why? How does that pride manifest itself? When was the last time you asked yourself that question?

When I ask this question I sometimes get a startled stare, like I am from another planet or two-headed. "Rabbi, what a question . . . of course I'm proud to be Jewish!" But *why*, why are you, really?

The question is far from an academic one. Increasingly, college-age students, and even some high schoolers, are telling me about being personally challenged with anti-Israel rhetoric, often phrased in highly-charged ways. Let's be clear: I'm not taking about questions such as, "If Israel is committed to a two-state solution, why does the Netanyahu government support continued Jewish settlement of the West Bank?" That would be a nuanced and absolutely legitimate question to ask -- in fact, it's one that I ask myself. Rather, the rhetoric our kids are hearing include utterances like, "Why are Jews so greedy that they had to steal the Palestinians' land?" Or, "Why do Jews think they're better than everyone else and can just thumb their nose at the world?" Or, "If you Jews suffered so much at the hands of Hitler, why do you act like Nazis toward the Palestinians?"

Matters become even more complicated when one considers that Jewish individuals echo these sentiments. One month ago today, 300 Jewish survivors of the *Shoah* purchased a full-page ad in the New York Times (at a cost of \$139,000!) stating, "As Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors and victims of the Nazi genocide we unequivocally condemn the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and the ongoing occupation and colonization of historic Palestine. We are alarmed by the extreme, racist dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli society . . . and call for the full economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel." After Shabbat, go online to the International Anti-Zionist Jewish Network or the Jewish Voice for Peace websites. These are not organizations that question the wisdom of specific Israeli policies, but condemn Israel's very right to exist as a Jewish state.

We need to educate our children how to respond, to provide them with facts and figures, with historical background and knowledge to refute the misinformation they encounter. *But that isn't enough.* We must start by teaching them why it's a privilege to be Jewish, and why they should be glad that they are. So why are you glad . . . and how does that play itself out in your day-to-day life?

Sometimes Jews answer the question in classic Jewish fashion . . . with another question. Why am I proud to be Jewish? Well, why shouldn't I be proud? But the circular response is hardly inspiring; in fact, it would be hard to find a more *pareve* answer. The dictionary defines pride as a "feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements." Unless one considers being born Jewish a great achievement in and of itself, it seems a rather vacuous response.

Others explain their Jewish pride in terms of the deeply embedded respect for learning within the Jewish community. There are numerous sources in our tradition that praise and emphasize the virtue of learning Torah for its own sake. Translated into the realm of the secular, that ethos has yielded a rich harvest of Nobel Prize winners in medicine, chemistry, physics, literature, economics and peace. It is undeniably impressive that, while we constitute no more than 2/10 of one percent of the world's population, 22% of all Nobel prizes have gone to recipients who were Jewish by birth.

Yet how many of us could name even ten Jewish Nobel Prize winners and explain why they received their prizes? Some of the recipients were the products of strong Jewish upbringings, but an equal number were raised with little Jewish content or connection. Did they win *because* they were Jewish, or did they just happen to be Jewish? Moreover, how meaningful is vicarious pride, to find satisfaction in an achievement for which we haven't expended a single calorie of sweat to attain?

Another group articulates Jewish pride in terms of our resilience as a people. They echo the sentiments expressed by author Mark Twain more than a century ago: "The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are

goneThe Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains.” Or as the old joke has it -- The message of every Jewish holiday is: they tried to kill us; we won; let’s eat.”

In our rootless world there is something truly remarkable about our longevity. Yet I wonder whether or not this is really enough to fully sustain Jewish pride. Are we ready to define Jewish achievement primarily as a function of our enemies’ failure to eradicate us? Can’t we find a reason to be proud of Jewishness on its own terms, for its own sake?

During the years of the British Mandate, a story is told about David Ben-Gurion, who refused to support the partition of Palestine without consulting his close friend and ally, Yitzhak Tabenkin, one of the founders of the Kibbutz movement. Instead of answering immediately, Tabenkin insisted he could offer Ben-Gurion no guidance before he had consulted with two individuals. When he returned the following day, Ben-Gurion queried him about the identity of his two advisors. He replied: “I had to ask the two most important individuals I could think of: my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with grandson who is yet to born.”

I cannot tell you why you should be proud to be a Jew. But I can tell you that you won’t be able to answer the question, unless you speak with your grandparents and their grandparents, and all the generations that came before. Their collective example shows us that Jewish pride requires more than vicariously identifying with someone else’s Jewish achievement. Rather, it requires us to find ways to live, think, do, breath, and be Jewish. Not all of our grandparents were sages or scholars, some of them were fiery revolutionaries or socialists fighting for secular versions of *tikkun olam*; others struggled to balance their love of Jewish life with the demands of modernity, and found pride in learning how to be fiddlers perched on a roof over a house with many rooms. It is sobering to recall that, according to *midrash*, when the Egyptians came to throw the Israelite boys into the Nile, their parents continued to circumcise them before their oppressors drowned them. Our forebears knew that “*Es ist schwer a Yid zu sein* -- it is hard to be Jewish.” For them, however, it was not a complaint, but a source of strength in and of itself. The pride lay in the challenge accepted and met.

And we must also speak with our grandchildren and their unborn children as well. They need to hear why we are glad to have a Jewish identity, and the ways in which our Jewish self-perception both resembles and differs from that of the generations gone by. And we must be willing to ask them by asking ourselves -- have we done enough to instill in you the belief that being Jewish is a privilege? Will it have the staying power to withstand the shifting sands of assimilation, will it serve as a bedrock if, and more likely when, you are challenged by those who despise you?

Today, at the start of a New Year, I would like to invite you to a conversation with yourself, with your family, with your children. Think of it as an opportunity to work on an elevator speech of self-understanding -- in this case, however, you're not selling a product and you are proselytizing no one but yourself. "I am glad that I am Jewish because it helps me, nurtures me, challenges me, teaches me, makes me . . ." Choose your own verbs and then fill in the blanks. Start the conversation over your holiday lunch or at the Shabbat dinner table. I would love to hear your answers because I am constantly seeking to refine my own, and may learn from you.

As for today, I am proud to be Jewish because Judaism reminds me that while the world was created for each of us, we are nothing but dust and ashes, and that these messages are but the flip sides of the same coin. I am proud to be Jewish because my heritage challenges me to be more than I am and never to rest on my laurels, because it insists that I must keep growing, or start dying; I am proud to be Jewish because while Judaism asserts that I have a special responsibility to care for my Jewish brothers and sisters, it requires me to remember that all human beings are created *b'dmut tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, and I must, therefore, show kindness and compassion to all of our fellow creatures. I am glad to be a Jew because in a world filled with one-dimensional dogma and narrow-mindedness, Judaism delights in respectful debate and argument, and allows me the freedom to think for myself. I am proud to be a Jew because I view Shabbat as a gift, not a burden, and *Kashrut* as an invitation to transform ordinary acts like eating into sacred experiences. I am glad to be Jewish because Torah is a love-song whose music lends a richness to my existence.

The barrage of criticism focused on Israel is unrelenting. The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe is troubling. The gratitude I feel for being Jewish, however, does not depend on the course of world events or the extent to which I can debate Jew-haters into silence. If anti-Semitism miraculously vanished tomorrow, I would not be prouder of my identity than I am today; or if, God forbid, tomorrow a precipitous rise in the hatred of our people occurred, I would feel no less blessed for the opportunity to lead a Jewish life.

Twelve years ago, journalist Daniel Pearl was murdered in Pakistan. Before his terrorist captors beheaded him, a camera captured his words: “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.” At that moment those simple words were transformed into far more than a mere statement of fact. They were the proclamation of a proud identity, a flag of proud defiance, a reminder of our imperishable spirit as a people; and above all, they were a summons, a challenge, and an invitation to each of us to create our own commentary to Daniel Pearl’s final words. Here, then, is the Torah of Jewish identity while standing on one foot: “Your ancestors, by birth or through conversion, were Jewish. Our patriarchs were Jewish, our matriarchs were Jewish. You are Jewish.” The rest is commentary. Now go forth and learn its meaning all the days of your life.