

YOM KIPPUR DAY
Saturday, October 8, 2011

There are a couple of sure signs that one has passed into age group affectionately known as “A.K.” For those of you who are not familiar with the term, it is frequently used to describe those of us who have entered into a full measure of our maturity.

As I watched myself move towards this new stage of life, I became aware of two changes in my life

First is the proclivity to focus on one’s body parts and the ailments related thereto. I have carefully noted that younger people never discuss body parts. Or if they do, it is a minor footnote to the conversation. With us mature folks, our bodies are a major theme.

The other trend is to be very aware of what are the Jewish names in any disaster, any reports about corruption, or any scandal. I am certain that my children don’t do this, nor do people who are not Jewish.

There are many causes for this latter behavior. One is that we were brought up to focus on the Jewish people, who we are, what we do, and how we have made it in America.

Another cause might be that we are more keenly aware of the presence of the Jewish people in the world, and the contributions we have made.

I prefer to think of this interest in more noble terms than an all-consuming interest in Jewish gossip.

But I do think it is a generational sign that we are fully engaged in the presence of Jews in the world, and an interest in our successes, and alas, failures.

I like to think that our generation has a heightened awareness of Jewish Peoplehood. Perhaps it is just because we lived through so many trial and tribulations, happy times and sad times in our lives.

But I do think Peoplehood is a major factor in who we Jews are, certainly here in America.

Let me state clearly that we Jews are not the only ones who feel a strong sense of Peoplehood. Muslims do as well. They call it Umah, and perhaps the best translation of this term would be Muslim Peoplehood.

Like Jewish peoplehood, it transcends boundaries and national ties. Our Jewish observation “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh” that all Israel is responsible for one another could be easily translated to fit the Muslim experience in the world.

That peoplehood is manifest in many ways. The first might well be a set of shared values.

SHARED VALUES

One of the characteristics of peoplehood is shared values. Shared values has nothing to do with theology or ritual or levels of observance. Shared values are frequently understandings which are not even topics of discussion.

Let me give you an example from my family. But let me say here that I chose this example not because it is unique. I chose it because each one of you has experienced similar circumstances in the life of your family.

My grandfather Manuel Schoolman came to this country after an extraordinary trek westward. He married my grandmother in Russia, and they had one child. They first moved to London, where they sired another child.

Then I grandfather moved to South Africa, Capetown to be exact, to set himself up in business. He then sent for my grandmother and the two children. My father was born in Capetown in 1902. They had another child, and finally got to New York. They rest of the six children were born here.

Somehow, somewhere, the shared value of the importance of education reared its head. While only two of the six children went to college, every single one of the grandchildren from the six marriages did.

We became professors of physics, certified public accountants, investment bankers, and even rabbis. There was no decree. There was stated rule. This is just what we did.

You certainly participate in the shared values of your family. Indeed, if one looks at the Jewish experience in America over the last 100 years, one of the characteristics is an emphasis on education.

I don't know about your family, but there never was a discussion about whether I would go to college or not. It was assumed.

And it was assumed in the families of all my other Jewish friends. There was not discussion about "whether." Yes, there were discussions about where and how, and how much.

Some other shared values are commitment to family. Sometimes it is difficult to maintain family ties over the vastness of the United States, we all do our best.

Needless to say, shared values do not mean that we are the only people in the world who express these points of view. But it is the peculiar combination, which activates us.

SHARED HISTORY

There was a time, many years ago, when I ran religious schools. From my student days at Hebrew Union College, and onwards, I became known for my ability to create new curriculums, to develop innovative ways of teaching Hebrew, and to discover ways of teaching Jewish history to unwilling middle-schoolers.

But looking around now, there are only two topics in Jewish history: The Holocaust and the State of Israel.

Don't misunderstand me. I am certainly not against teaching about the Holocaust or the State of Israel. But the history of the Jewish people goes back much longer than 75 years.

It was a hundred years ago that Salo Baron, then a professor of Jewish history at Columbia University, complained that the only history that Jews seem to be interested in is a litany of lachrymose chapters. His observation would be partially true today.

But there is plenty of good stuff in Jewish history. There are many chapters of happy times, of great successes of Jews in the world, and of experiences, which made our Jewish experience in this universe happy and prosperous.

I think in particular of the period one thousand years ago, when Jews lived primarily in cities and states surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean then was effectively a Jewish lake. Not only did we live in Spain, the south of France, Italy and North Africa, but we were shippers and traders, with Jewish ships plying the waters.

There are many books that describe life during these times. Jews were scholars and teachers. Jews were sought after physicians and healers. It was a period of great sophistication.

Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides, the Rambam, was one of the great teachers of the period. He was a well-known physician, who was sought after by royalty and nobility throughout the Mediterranean basin. But he was also a Jewish philosopher. While not the only one, by any means, he dealt with many of the same philosophical and religious issues that face us today.

He was a follower of Aristotle, whose work he read in Arabic. And he was a rationalist. What the Rambam wrote is appropriate for our rational and scientific age. If he lived today, he would have understood the modern world very well.

The omnipresence of the highly affective style of Judaism today would have made him crazy! In my view, we need a strong dose of Maimonides in the Jewish world today.

Do we hear much about Maimonides today? Do we hear about the glorious history of that period? No very much at all.

My point is that there is much in the Jewish experience that goes beyond the history of the last 75 years. It is our heritage, part of our shared experience as Jews.

That shared experience is part of the Peoplehood, marking the Jewish connections among Jews everywhere on this earth.

TIES TO THE LAND

Another manifestation of our Peoplehood is our attachment to the Land of Israel.

I am not limiting myself in saying this to the State of Israel. Our attachment antedates 1948, when Israel was established as an independent, self-governing democracy in the Middle East.

For centuries, Jews have prayed for our return to Zion. In the darkest chapters of our history, the hope of the return was frequently what kept people alive.

The connections between the Land of Israel and Jews all over the world were maintained by thousands of sh'lichim, Jewish shnorers who prowled the byways of Jewish communities throughout the world asking for donations to maintain them and their families in the Holy Land.

The entire Zionist enterprise was given emotional grounding through the prayerbook. Through ancient prayers and supplications, the idea of the return to the land of our ancestors was a hope that would not die.

And now that we have a State of Israel, in many ways those ancient hopes have been fulfilled. And there are many Jews who have sought to cast their lot with those who live in Israel.

It is important to recognize that Zionism was NOT an Orthodox Jewish endeavor. The mainstream Orthodox from the end of the 19th century until relatively recently, eschewed the idea of Zionism. They believed that only the messiah could bring about the restoration of Israel as a Jewish state. It was secular Jews, Jews from Eastern Europe, who believed in Peoplehood, who were those who moved to Israel before World War II, and those afterwards who

were stateless as a result of the Holocaust.

Orthodox Jews are Johnnies-come-lately to Zionism.

For us Jews, in one degree or another, there is a deep attachment to Israel. Some of us may choose to live in Israel, or in the rest of the Jewish world. This does not separate us from the Land, the State and the Peoplehood we all acclaim.

Reform rabbis have their own list-serve. It is called RavKav (rabbis' line.) There are frequent discussions there around the general theme of who has the right to voice opinions about what goes on the Israel. American Jews, in particular, fear little from speaking out on any topic.

And, of course, Israelis are very free to voice their opinions. No set of opinions from Jews in America can match the array in Israel.

Then, there are some, when confounded by reason or other arguments, try to bolster their case by saying: Well, you don't live here. That appeal to geography is usually the sign of a losing argument.

I believe that American Jews have every right to speak out on issues that confront Israel. We are indeed part of the Jewish people.

CONCLUSION

It is the idea of Peoplehood which binds us Jews together. It is our shared values, our common history and our ties to the land, which keep us alive and as one world-wide community.

Being part of the Jewish people has nothing to do with keeping kosher or attending services. It has nothing to do with reading Jewish books or being a member of the ADL or the American Jewish Committee.

It has nothing to do with any external demonstration of the fashions of piety.

Peoplehood is about the way we think about the world, and our place in it.

This is what makes us Jewish, and this is what our generation of American Jews, and generations to come, should want to preserve. Indeed, it is what we will preserve.

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