

“Judaism is Punk Rock”

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A few weeks ago, I found myself in the Sunday morning Silver Stars waiting room for the first time. For the uninitiated, Silver Stars is a gymnastics gym in Silver Spring that seems to engage 1000s of children in gymnastics all at the exact same time.

What struck me while sitting there in that chaotic waiting area is the fact that all of the little gymnasts pretty much have the same 5 leotards...I recognized them because at the very last minute I panic-ordered anything that promised to arrive in time for the first class. All of us harried parents ordered the leotards with the gems sewn around the neck, a few went for the multicolored cats, and if you really want to make a statement, there are a few with full unicorns.

There is a powerful pull towards just doing what everyone else does. Often, it's convenient. Sometimes, it's popular and you want to fit in. Other times, it genuinely seems like the best idea. Inertia drives us toward a kind of passive sameness, reinforced by technology getting smarter and smarter, helping to predict if you're more of a unicorn gymnast or a cat gymnast before you even realize that there is a choice to be made.

But Judaism has always turned us against the tide- has caused us to be different. A little bit separate, set apart. That is the Jewish story...a group identity that emerged in our sacred text as special, as holy. It is also a group identity forged by experiences of exclusion, expulsion, otherness and persecution. It is an identity rooted in the stories that we tell about ourselves, and the stories that others have told about us...we have always been a little bit different.

There's a great story about a man named Joseph Jonas, one of the first American Jews to go west of the Allegheny Mountains. It was 1817 and he encountered an elderly Quaker woman. She had never before in her life met a Jewish person. And she was psyched. She approached Joseph Jonas and asked, “Art thou a Jew? Thou art one of God's chosen people.” She gave him the once over- she walked all the way around, studying him closely. Finally, she exclaimed with obvious disappointment, “Well, thou art no different [from] other people.”¹

¹ *The Chosen People in America*, Arnold Eisen.

What makes a Jew different? We just read the beginning of the Torah- the story of creation. It taught us that everything and everyone was created by God. All of humanity- created in the image of God.

But soon after that we read about Abraham and Sarah...we trace the story of a family, we find ourselves emerging as a people, enslaved in Egypt. Then liberated and covenanted to God. Genesis includes a promise to Abraham that is fulfilled in the wilderness. We are a part of something different, something special.

God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation...I will bless those who bless you...and curse those that curse you."² So, yes...we will be a great nation. But even from the beginning, God wasn't promising world domination- that everyone would be a part of this nation. Even in that initial promise, there was the recognition that there would be other people...that God would need to have our backs because, yes, other people would be blessing us but other people would also be cursing us. That we would exist among others, and that we would be different.

It's not just because God told us to be different. There is a midrash³ that explains why Abraham was chosen as the first of this new people...because Abraham saw his father's idols and figured out that his dad, and everybody else in their society, were all worshipping false gods. In a world of idol worshippers, Abraham knew that there was a different way to live. That the thing that everyone else was doing, wasn't the only way.

Our tradition teaches us not to be afraid to stand against the current, to imagine a different way of being. Sometimes, because we stand at the margins. And from that vantage point, we can take a broader view, we can imagine something better than the world as it is.

Sometimes, it's because by being Jewish we already are different. We need Kosher food or matzah on Passover. We need a different schedule, a break on Shabbat or a day off for a holiday that most people aren't observing. Sometimes our rituals force us to stand outside the mainstream. And that's hard, but it has required us to exercise the muscle of pushing back, of choosing something else, of forging a different path.

So, in the year 5786, I want to remind you that being Jewish...is punk rock. And that's the kind of Judaism that the world needs from us right now.

For those of you less familiar with the origin of Punk Rock, it was anti-establishment, and counter culture. Punk rock broke away from the commercialized mainstream pop sounds

² Genesis 12:2-3

³ *Genesis Rabba* 38:13

that dominated the radio, and made it cool to be loud, and independent, to do it yourself. Punk rockers were not afraid to be different, to look different, to act different, the shows were inclusive and all ages, sometimes they were loud and a little unpleasant.

Punk was about being authentic, even if it wasn't popular and it wasn't cool. But...being yourself, and doing what you love was about as cool as it got. Joey Ramone...also known as Jeffrey Ross Hyman...Jewish!...explained that "Hey, Ho...let's go" in *Blitzkrieg Bop* was, "the battle cry that sounded the revolution, a call to arms for punks to do their own thing."⁴ To do your own thing...not to passively embrace the culture around us, but to make a *choice* to be different.

Now, you didn't come here on Rosh Hashanah to learn about the history of punk music. But, right now, when we are considering the significance of our Judaism, I want to urge you to embrace the punk rock-ness of your Jewish identity. These are the muscles that we need to be flexing right now. Those that enable us to stand outside the culture, the natural momentum...the silent consent that we offer when we don't object. This is not the time to put your head down and try and just be like everyone else.

And, you have a little bit of practice already... you're here... in a high school auditorium on a Tuesday morning. You're not in school, or at work, or at the gym. You chose...THIS. And it may have caused a bit of discomfort, of having to take an extra day off of work, or to explain to your teacher why you're going to miss the homework assignment.

Being Jewish, even in Bethesda, Maryland... is making a choice to live your life a little bit differently. To choose something different than what most other people are choosing. And, that is the source of a unique and important perspective.

In a broken world, where so many are suffering, where the resilience of our democracy is being challenged, you are making choices all the time...about when to say no, when to fight back, when to stand up for what you believe in. Those choices have very real consequences. We need to lean into that Jewish ability to make a different choice. To say no when so many others are saying yes. To remember that we can tolerate the discomfort of doing something counter-culture, because we have been doing it for thousands of years.

And, it gets even more complicated. Just as our Judaism is a reminder to us to think for ourselves, to push back, to make different choices, we need to bring that perspective to our Judaism as well.

⁴ "The Ramones," Dr. Donna Gaines. https://rockhall.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Ramones_2002.pdf

We need to bring that to the contemporary Jewish world, a global community in a time of turmoil and change. Nearly two years after October 7th, two years into the war in Gaza. In a time of religious extremism, and in an American Jewish community that contains all of the polarization and division of the larger culture. We need that same punk rock Judaism. A willingness to push back when we don't agree, the courage to question what we don't think is right, and the capacity to tolerate discomfort when that challenge is met with opposition.

I am struck by the common recurrence of the phrase “Bad Jew” in contemporary Jewish writing- it's the name of a play by Joshua Harmon, a book by Emily Tamkin, it appears in Noah Feldman's book “To Be a Jew Today” and Sara Hurwitz's new book, “As a Jew.” In this already small, set apart people, we're also constantly defining ourselves and each other in opposition to one another. Defining ourselves as “Bad Jews.” Because we don't practice the same way as other Jews or because we believe something different than other Jews. But the ones who push back, who make a different choice, who want to live in a different way...what could possibly be more Jewish than that?

It can be hard to be the person who makes a different choice. That has led some Jews to Borough Park and B'nai Brak. To choose a Judaism so extreme, so counter culture, that you have to essentially withdraw from the world. And while that's an extremely difficult choice, once you get there, it gets much easier. There aren't a lot of decisions left to make. And, I do want to acknowledge that some still don't have a choice. That for some Jews, their Jewish practice is proscribed or limited by the difficult circumstances in which they live.

But, for us...we've chosen to live in the culture that surrounds us, and we've chosen to hang on to our place in the Jewish community as well. That can be challenging, and it can be powerful. In the year 5786, we need to bring our punk rock Judaism with us into the world, to major American universities to powerful law firms, to our neighborhood public and independent schools to positions of power in our local and national government. To the press and to the airwaves...we are making choices about how we live all the time. About our Judaism, and about how we show up in the larger world. About when we go along with everyone else, and when we push back, and make a different choice.

Author Dara Horn wrote, “Judaism has always been uncool, going back to its origins as the planet's only monotheism...Uncoolness is pretty much Judaism's brand.”⁵ But I respectfully disagree. Being different isn't uncool. It's punk rock. Being different is cool, and important, and powerful, and desperately needed.

⁵ *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn. Referenced in *As a Jew*, Sara Hurwitz.

Our Judaism reminds us that we are practiced in making different choices, that we stand on the shoulders of generations before us who lived a little differently. May we be strengthened by their legacies, and may we continue to have the courage to make a different choice.

Happy New Year.⁶

⁶ Appreciation to Rabbi Jen Gubitz and Rabbi Robert Goldstein for reading and giving feedback. And Josh Friedman for reading, giving feedback and teaching me about punk rock.