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Judaism Worth Preserving

In the face of increasing disenchantment with Israel along with the rise in antisemitism in the United States and throughout the world, there is real concern that many Jews will cut their ties with the Jewish community. For a small subset of Jews, this might include conversion to another faith, though depending on their name and manner they might continue to be identified as Jews anyway. For many, it will mean just falling away, doing a little less year by year. I think this second option represents the greater threat and includes an assessment that there is nothing worth preserving from our Jewish culture.

For some it is the political element. They want to disassociate themselves with Judaism altogether. They see it being represented by extremists, who use religion to justify calls for ethnic purity in Israel and endless warfare, or who display a willingness to ally themselves with those who use fighting Antisemitism as a cudgel against other values such as free speech and academic freedom. This is not just a Jewish problem. In some ways it's not so different than what my liberal Christian clergy friends are facing with the rise of white Christian nationalism. They call it unchristian or anti-Christ just as we challenge the cherry picking within Jewish teachings to support extreme views, but Christians have the combined advantage of much larger numbers and, at least for white churches, the absence of violent attacks on their places of worship and individual members of their communities.

Regarding antisemitism and support for Israel, things have changed dramatically, most noticeably over the past three years, but beginning well before that. No longer can we say what was said often in the post 1967 euphoria, "don't worry about the future of the synagogue in America, supporting Israel will be enough to produce Jewish identity", nor can we identify our period of history as an American Golden Age for Jews.

But what worries me the most is that for many of us it is hard to put into words why we believe that Judaism is worth preserving. Warm nostalgic family feelings have held past generations together, but we need a more thoughtful answer to the question, why preserve Judaism when being Jewish once again feels like a burden.

I am tempted to talk about the Jewish gift of Shabbat, though I worry that it will brand me too much of a traditionalist. Still the need for a time off when we are not required to be productive, time when we are not engaged in competition or maximizing is real—after all if Charlie Kirk, who had no love for Jews, could write a book about such an important Jewish value, there must be something there.

Perhaps what's worth preserving is not just Shabbat but how Shabbat remind us about what Judaism teaches about time. Shabbat is part of a system where all days are not the same: along

with the seasons of nature, there are seasons of meaning on our Jewish calendar that can help shape our lives.

Psychologists tell us that it is not just the vacation that adds joy to our lives, but its anticipation and the memories we create. Thus we can look forward to Hanukah and remember Passover celebrations, see our year colored by Elul and by Tu B'Shvat. I remember one of my kids, having just lived through Rosh Hashanah, Tashlich which we celebrated in a big way at a park between the holidays, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah, looking at the Halloween decorations in late September and saying, "I guess Christians don't have enough holidays".

Judaism also offers a perspective on time that is unlike our usual American outlook, in another way as well. For Judaism time is not measured in billable hours and in quarters that need to be reported. It flows from generation to generation, over centuries, and even over millennia. That can help us withstand current pressures, and it also causes us focus on what is truly important. Which of the things that are happening right now, will shape the next ten years, hundred years, even the next thousand years in our history and the history of our planet? Judaism reminds us, in Rabbi Tarfon's words: "the day is short and the work is great". We cannot afford to be indolent. As individuals we may not be able to accomplish the change that is needed, but that is not an excuse for not joining together to do what we can.

A second thing Judaism offers is a way to see value in our lives that is separate from our accomplishments. Perhaps you'll say that I focus on this, in particular, since I am a retiree. But at every age, it is important to know that our ultimate value is not our grades, or the wonderful college to which we or our children have gained acceptance, or the bonus we got last year, or even the way our work is so important that we haven't slept a full eight hours in years. If these are not the full measure of our significance then perhaps we can step back a bit, we can feel less pressure to cut corners to get ahead.

I was asked recently what does Judaism teach about retirement? I had a hard time calling to mind a Biblical verse or a Talmudic sugia that deals with that. It's true that our extended life span now offers a new period of life, after retirement but before we become fragile, a third act as it were, but it isn't true that no one grew old in generations past even when the average life span was 35. Instead, I think Jewish texts don't talk about retirement because you don't retire from being a Jew. When my friend Rabbi Laura Geller writes about the new Jewish life cycle ceremonies we need, for leaving a longtime home, for accepting physical limitations, it is because one does not fall off the Jewish map when one retires from work.

Finally, there is another contribution that Judaism makes, a way it shapes our way of thinking that is just or perhaps even more important and more likely to be central to the non-Orthodox Jewish community.

That is our attachment to learning and, in particular, to the style of our study of written texts. This isn't like studying for a test, but is a particular type of intellectual engagement, with (shall we say) vigorous conversation and open ended inquiry.

I recently heard a talk by the librarian at Columbia University responsible for their Judaica collection, and she pointed out that Jews embraced printing early and with great enthusiasm. That was the new technology and it made books much more readily available. Think of the difference between printing, even when it was only 50 books at the beginning, rather than having to hand write a manuscript.

We are in the middle of another technological revolution which is impacting us today as I look at SEFARIA.ORG (I'll spell it out, in case you haven't accessed it yet). Infinitely better than the old Bar Ilan University floppy disks, it allows access to more Jewish texts from your phone, ipad, or laptop, than the typical rabbinic library contained when I was ordained in 1981. With caution, they are also using AI for translation. This requires a knowledgeable proof reader, but it is making texts that were thought obscure available to the American Jew who reads only in English.

Why was the availability of books, and especially in the early days of printing, the Talmud, so important? Not because these books provided rules. The Talmud rarely comes to a conclusion that is adaptable to practice. But books allowed engagement with the text, the kind of study that is typical to Jews. We ask: What does it say? Why does it say that? Does that make sense to us? Do we accept it? This style persists. I see it at Torah study here at Temple Sinai.

It is not about amassing details, but somehow grappling with our tradition. It is looking at things from the outside and being willing to criticize. It is the opposite of the old bumper sticker: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Nothing in Judaism is so settled that one can't ask a question about it. And this style is something that Jews have taken with them in their secular roles as journalists, professors of English literature, sociology and even physics.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, is the author of several of the prayers on the left side of the page in Mishkan Tefillah. You might know his poem "Unending Love", which has been set to music, it begins *We are loved by an unending love... and ends: Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices; Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;. Perhaps you've heard it.*

In commenting on the book Holy Envy, he tells the story of being with a Hindu religious leader who said, "I am jealous of what you have in Judaism". And Rami responded, "jealous of what?"

" I am jealous of your tradition of arguing". This is not the two Jews, three opinions joke. This is the honest grappling where one is allowed to challenge all authority, even God. This is Jewish families negotiating discipline with their kids (an unusual parenting style). It is noisy discussions

around the dinner table, that sometimes shock new non-Jewish members of the family and don't mean that people are angry or walking away.

This is seeing Abraham arguing with God as his heroic moment and Moses demanding: Shall one man sin and the entire community be punished?"

Especially in our own time, this Jewish way of thinking, remains important.

It is stepping outside for the moment, and looking critically. It is bringing our loving criticism even to the highest authorities.

Along with our sense of generational time and of the value of every human, I believe this attitude of informed challenge is what we have to contribute to the world and need to preserve. I hope that you will find the words this year to share what you value most in Judaism to those in our families and community who are tempted to opt out at this critical time.