

**From Buffet to Brit:
In Celebration of 350 Years**

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This month, we are celebrating 350 years of Jewish presence in what is now the United States of America. In September 1654, a small ship carrying 23 Jews from Brazil sailed into the port of New Amsterdam--present-day New York. These were Sephardic Jews, descendants of refugees from the Portuguese Inquisition, which had taken root in Portugal 40 years after the Jewish community was expelled from Spain in 1492. Jews who had fled the Spanish Inquisition rather than convert to Catholicism had to flee once again, from Portugal, and some came to Brazil, then a Dutch colony. When the Portuguese recaptured the colony from the Dutch, Jewish refugees once again left to seek a new home.

It is interesting to reflect on the different fates of this first American Jewish community and those Jews who remained in Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition. The latter became what we now know as “conversos” or hidden Jews, having converted to Christianity but continuing to maintain certain Jewish practices and rituals. Many of these secret Jews handed down these customs to their children, without letting on their actual identity. Here is one such story, a true story:

In the late 1980s, an American Jewish doctor was in Spain, visiting a Spanish colleague that he had met nearly 50 years earlier at the end of the Spanish Civil War. During his visit, the American asked his Spanish friend if he or his ancestors were Jewish, since his family name was common among Spanish Jewry. The other laughed and told him that of course he wasn't a Jew, that his family had been active in the Catholic church for hundreds of years. But then, in a hushed voice, he told the American that, since he had asked, there was something he wanted to show him—something he did not talk to others about.

He led his guest into a small dark room in his hacienda, a room with no windows. On one wall was a niche covered by a wooden door that was secured with an antique padlock. The Spanish Catholic told the American Jew, “Whenever I am troubled or need help, I pray to the Virgin Mary or to Our Savior Jesus Christ or to the saints...But if all else fails, I come here.” He then proceeded to unlock the wooden door, and to pull out of the niche an old leather box. In it were a threadbare tallit and an ancient set of tefillin. He bound the tefillin to his forehead and his left arm, draped the tallit over his shoulders, turned to the wall, and began to bow and rock back and forth slowly. He made low, rhythmic wordless singsong sounds. He told his American friend that he had learned this from his father, who had learned it from his father, and so on, back for five hundred years. (*Mezuzah in the Madonna's Foot*, “Old Friends”)

I—and I think many other Jewish folks—find these kinds of stories very compelling. I was trying recently to figure out why. What is so intriguing about those

who carry their Jewish heritage like some kind of secret code, holding on to seemingly meaningless rituals like a powerful but mysterious talisman?

There are a number of possible reasons why we are fascinated by these descendants of the *conversos*, the hidden Jews. One is that even though most of us in America do not share personally in the history of the Inquisition, there are many American Jews who also have hidden Jewish identities in their background, most often because of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

On a less direct level, perhaps these stories fascinate us because in certain ways our own sense of Jewish identity is as complicated as that Spanish doctor's. Many of us feel ourselves driven by a kind of secret Jewish "code" that tells us that we should continue to identify as Jews even if we don't entirely know why. Perhaps we also experience Jewish ritual as a kind of magical "amulet," as practices with no clear meaning but a mysterious kind of power nonetheless. Maybe we romanticize in others the complications of Jewish identity that in our own lives are far less romantic.

While we here are not the biological descendants of those Sephardic Jews who first set foot in New York, we are the heirs of the community they established, a community which grew and flourished over the next few centuries. While things have not always been rosy for Jews in America, our community has never suffered like the Jews of Europe. Overall, it is safe to say that our lot is quite the opposite of those "conversos" in Spain and Portugal. We can wear our Jewish identity openly and proudly; and Jewish culture in 21st century America continues to grow and flourish. We are experiencing a true renaissance of Jewish learning and spirituality. Today we can celebrate the empowerment and inclusion of whole segments of the Jewish community—women, gays and lesbians, interfaith households—who were marginalized or disempowered in the past. While the numbers of those who identify as Jews in America is no longer growing, on a qualitative level we're doing pretty well. We have no need to hide.

And yet—some aspects of hidden-ness and uncertainty accompany us even today. I know that many in our own community and in the wider Jewish community have a deep sense of ambivalence around their Jewish identity. Some of this is the legacy of 2,000 years of anti-Semitism. Whether we think it consciously or not, many of us have a sense that to be a Jew is somehow tainted or dangerous. These hidden fears and internalized negative messages keep us from wanting to appear "too Jewish" –as if Jewish identity were a substance that becomes toxic at certain doses. Some of us feel an acute lack of Jewish knowledge, which makes us feel inauthentic as Jews. We are troubled by Judaism that seems little more than nostalgia, or that manifests negatively as survivalism and parochialism.

So perhaps, as the American Jewish community celebrates its 350th birthday, and as Dorshei Tzedek celebrates its bat mitzvah year, this is a good occasion to reflect a bit on what it means to us to be Jewish. As we are learning in our process of Community Conversations, there is much that people are happy with at Dorshei Tzedek and in their

Jewish lives. But we are also hearing that many barriers remain to greater involvement, greater meaning, greater commitment. People have good questions about what role Judaism should play in their lives, and how much of their precious resources of time, energy, and care they should devote to Jewish life in general and to Dorshei Tzedek in particular.

To return for a moment to the story of the Spanish doctor: I was struck by the clear image we get of where his Judaism, his Jewish identity, are located: in a small, hidden niche in a dark windowless room at the back of his sprawling hacienda. It might be useful to ask ourselves: what place in the “house” of our lives does Judaism occupy?

For example, our Judaism might be like – the curtains. Nothing fundamental to keeping the house standing, but something to give it a certain feeling of warmth. Ideally, curtains add color, a sense of style, help give the house its aesthetic. I think for some folks, Judaism functions more or less like the curtains. Not essential, not a top priority like the roof or the plumbing, but without it, life inside the house would feel a bit colorless, lacking distinction.

For some folks, Judaism is more like those boxes stacked at the back of a closet. You know they contain something vaguely important, and so you’ve shlepped them during each move, from apartment to apartment, from house to house, for years. You can’t even remember the last time you opened them. You know they’re there, and you’re not ready to throw them away, but you may not even be entirely sure what’s in them anymore.

For others, Judaism may be like the bathroom—on the one hand, you can’t really imagine not having it, but on the other, it’s slightly embarrassing to talk about in public.

Or maybe Judaism is like the kitchen. It’s a central place, a part of the house that nourishes you, a place where you can be creative and feed others.

And what would it be like if Judaism were—the whole house? Not necessarily everything in the house, but the basic structure—the walls, foundation, roof? The electricity and the plumbing? The fundamental structure of who we are, and the frame within which we live our lives?

It would be interesting to know how many of you shuddered a bit when I suggested that last possibility! “The whole house? Why in the world would I want that? A part of the house, okay – the kitchen maybe, or the kitchen plus the master bedroom—but that’s plenty.” It scares many of us, I think, to imagine Judaism defining us in that kind of way. Perhaps an image of an ultra-Orthodox *chasid* pops into your head, someone who has rejected modernity and American culture, someone who lives 90% of their life inside a purely Jewish world. I imagine that for most of us, this is not an image we aspire to.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, coined the phrase “living in two civilizations” to describe the situation of us modern, non-ultra-Orthodox American Jews. He believed that it was possible and desirable to be planted firmly in the ground of both American and Jewish civilization, and to cross-fertilize each with the other. He also believed that a Jewish house was a good place for a Jewish person to live. Kaplan argued for a “maximal” Judaism—he wasn’t interested in Judaism as just curtains or posters on the wall.

At the same time, Kaplan understood more deeply than most that traditional Judaism needed some radical changes to make it amenable to American soil. He wanted American Jews to fully interact with the surrounding American culture, and to bring the best of that culture—to bring values like pluralism, egalitarianism, democracy—into Judaism itself. He wanted Jewish beliefs to be fully compatible with the most up-to-date understandings of the natural and social sciences. The “reconstruction” project that he envisioned would result in a new kind of Jewish house, one founded on the enduring values of traditional Judaism yet translated into an architectural form that a modern person could live in.

Kaplan knew already by the 1920s that the American Jewish house was in need of some serious repair work. Large numbers of new immigrants and of first-generation Jewish Americans were leaving their culture behind. Why?

Kaplan’s analysis was this: The problems that modern American Jews were having with traditional Jewish beliefs and practices were the symptom, not the cause, of a more fundamental problem. And that problem was the breakdown of organic Jewish community in which to experience Jewish culture and tradition. Without an organic Jewish community in which to live life as a Jew, Kaplan believed that people would stop finding Jewish civilization relevant to their lives. If Jews did not connect with other Jews on a regular basis, not just for prayer but in the everyday tasks of living, then Judaism would cease to be meaningful. And if it ceased to be meaningful, then at some point it would cease to exist.

So according to Kaplan, the fundamental purpose of Jewish community is to create a context in which Jewish people can continue to build, revitalize, renew, and reconstruct our Jewish civilization. And he saw this as a mutually enriching process. Judaism needs Jews to keep it alive and dynamic, and Jews need Judaism as the path on which to achieve what Kaplan called “salvation.” What Kaplan meant by salvation was the full flowering of human potential within every person. He thought that this was essentially the goal of every civilization, and that individuals can best achieve “salvation” in the context of their own culture and tradition. So for a Jew—whether born into that heritage or choosing it—Jewish civilization is the means by which that person can best fulfill his or her human potential.

Even more, the collective effort towards salvation by the Jewish people was seen by Kaplan as an integral piece of the larger human effort to create a world where no one

is made to be less than who they are—where every person can achieve his or her “salvation.” So Judaism is good for the Jews, and good for the world as well.

Mordecai Kaplan wanted every Jew to live in a Jewish house, because he believed that it’s in a Jewish house that we can really come to know who we are. It’s in a Jewish house that we can best achieve our “salvation,” our fullest sense of self, our greatest power to act with others to repair the world.

So why is such a house so hard to build, and why are so many of us not even particularly interested in taking such a project on?

A lot of it, I suspect, has to do with the fact that the demands and contours of Jewish life and Jewish community are profoundly counter-cultural in modern-day America. While Kaplan spoke of living in “two civilizations,” the reality is that in most of our lives, it is the American civilization which is completely dominant. We are the products of a diverse, hyper-individualistic society. In societies like ours, one sociologist explains:

... People belong to many groups, but aside from their nuclear family don’t feel extremely bound to any of them. Moreover, they choose these groups (clubs, churches, careers, and so forth) from a buffet of possibilities, and stay or leave as meets their needs. (*The American Paradox*, David G. Myers, p. 173).

Does that sound familiar? Community for us is not experienced as a necessity, or as a given, but as a choice—a choice of which community, or whether even to have community at all. We may or may not experience our Jewish identity as a matter of choice, but if, as Kaplan argues, we can’t meaningfully maintain that identity outside of some kind of Jewish community, then to experience Jewish community as a choice is to essentially make our identity as Jews just one more item on the American “buffet of possibilities.”

The other central aspect of our American culture is that we expect and demand to have choices. The freedom to choose is perceived as a very fundamental American right. Whether it’s college, or work, or where we live, or whom we partner with, or what we believe—we tend to expect these to be a matter of choice, and feel disenfranchised if we lose our personal autonomy in these areas.

I mentioned a book last night, entitled *The Paradox of Choice*, written by Barry Schwartz, a professor at Swarthmore College. Schwartz discusses how, in our culture, the values of personal autonomy and choice are fundamental to our identities. We make choices to express who we are. He writes:

Choice is what enables us to tell the world who we are and what we care about. This is true...of almost every aspect of our lives as choosers. The food we eat, the cars we drive, the houses we live in, the music we listen to, the books we read, the hobbies we pursue, the charities we contribute to, the demonstrations we attend—

each of these choices has an **expressive** function, regardless of its practical importance. (*Paradox of Choice*, p. 100)

Judaism and Jewish identity are, for many of us, one such “expressive value.” Choosing to identify as Jewish is an important—but far from the only—marker of who we are.

Schwartz goes on to note something very interesting. Surveys and studies consistently find that—once we have our basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing met—what is most important to people’s sense of happiness and well-being are “close social relations.” Family connections, good friends, participation in religious communities, and other kinds of associations—these are the basis for happiness. The paradox that Schwartz points out is that “in many ways, social ties actually *decrease* freedom, choice, and autonomy”—those things that, as Americans, we hold up as our highest values! To make real connections with other human beings is to negotiate, to compromise, to give up certain things that we’d prefer to have our way. Schwartz goes on to say that “counterintuitive as it may appear, what seems to contribute most to happiness binds us rather than liberates us.” (*Paradox*, pp. 107-8).

And so here is the paradox facing us as modern, liberal American Jews. We choose to be Jewish, to participate in Jewish community, as an “expressive value”—as a statement of who we are and what is important to us. We want to be able to choose this—to decide for ourselves whether we stay or go. And yet—once we make that choice, once we choose to affiliate, the fact is that our choices are now going to be restricted! To function in community—any community—you have to be willing to sometimes abide by the majority’s wishes, even when they’re not your own. To be part of a Jewish community, you have to be ready to cede personal preference on some occasions to the demands of tradition and in the service of the greater communal good. To take on Jewish practices in any meaningful way, there are life choices that will of necessity become limited.

I’d like to return to that statement by Professor Schwarz that “what seems to contribute most to happiness binds us rather than liberates us.” There is a rabbinic teaching that expands on this insight. In the book of Exodus, we are told that the 10 commandments were “*harut*”—engraved—onto the two stone tablets. The early rabbis of the Mishnah taught: “Don’t read this as “*harut*”—engraved—but as “*herut*”—free.” For our rabbinic ancestors, the commandments, the teachings and norms of a serious Jewish path, were a road to freedom. That which binds us doesn’t only make us happy, it in fact liberates us!

What the rabbis called “freedom,” Kaplan called “salvation.” Today we might call it wholeness, fulfillment. I like to call it “transformation.” Whatever we call it, this seems to me to be the essential point of Judaism. To live a Jewish life means to recognize that the world as we know it—including ourselves—are not as they might be, and it is up to us to do something about it. To know this is to be liberated—from cynicism, from hopelessness, from meaninglessness. To commit to Jewish community is, ideally, to be

liberated—from loneliness, from social dislocation, from the myth of self-sufficiency. To take on a meaningful Jewish practice is to be liberated—from the excesses of our materialistic culture, from spiritual emptiness. To commit to Jewish identity as a given and not a buffet item is to be liberated from rootlessness, from the endless need to reinvent ourselves.

During one of our debriefing sessions during the Community Conversations process last year, I began to wonder what it is that people are seeking from our congregation (or from any Jewish congregation, for that matter). Are people primarily seeking comfort, or transformation?

I think the answer, somewhat to my dismay, is that too many of us don't even realize that transformation is on the menu. I don't mean to dismiss comfort—Jewish community and Jewish practices have an enormous amount to offer when we are in need, and I am always glad when folks find comfort in them. But if we are **primarily** seeking comfort in our Jewish affiliation, then we will place a very high premium on feeling comfortable. We will not want our Jewish community, or the Jewish tradition, to set us on edge, to provoke us, to make us uncomfortable. In fact, we will get quite mad at it when it does. But a Judaism that is only about comfort is both unlikely to survive too long (because at some point, comfortable becomes boring), and ultimately is a Judaism that is not fulfilling its true purpose.

Transformation, both personal and social, is at the core of Jewish civilization, and the hard truth is that transformation can't occur without discomfort. So instead of shying away from our Jewish discomforts, our communal uneasinesses, we should be embracing them! They are the key to the kingdom. They are the signs that we are on the right path.

Does the fact that we have an economically diverse congregation make some of us uncomfortable around other members that we perceive to either have a lot more or a lot less than we do? Good! Then we are on the path of tackling one of the trickiest problems in the modern world—the issue of economic class and how it divides us. Let's see if we can not avoid this issue, but confront it with honesty and compassion.

Are you frustrated or saddened by what seems to be an insurmountable wall of Jewish knowledge—a wall that you think you'll never successfully be able to climb? Then I'm glad, because your frustration means that you care, that you want to peek over and see what's on the other side—and from my own experience I know that that wall has many footholds and handholds to grab on to, and that together we can get anyone who wants up and over.

Do you harbor deep ambivalence around the very fact of being Jewish? Do you fear being “too Jewish”? Then here is a huge fruitful area for you to explore—an entire realm of internalized Jewish oppression that needs to be unlearned, so that you can be happy with who you are, and be strong enough in yourself to work fruitfully with others of other backgrounds.

It is very interesting to me that Reconstructionist congregations are particularly attractive to folks who are suspicious not only of organized religion, but who are also wary of any sort of communal obligations that may be oppressive to personal expression. Yet we also attract a lot of people—I am assuming often the same ones—who are very critical of current trends in our political and economic culture; who are adamantly opposed to efforts to privatize the social safety net, to the government reneging on its social responsibilities, to the endless promotion of a “me first” social and economic policy. So many Reconstructionists are diehard libertarians when it comes to religious community, but communitarians or socialists when it comes to socio-economics!

This disjunction is a great area to explore. If we can’t figure out how to make community work on the scale of a few hundred families, how can we expect to make a nation of 250 million people work in such a way that all of its citizens are lifted up, and not ground down? If we, among the most privileged and educated people on the planet, are resistant to being empowered in the creation of our own Jewish community, how in the world do we expect those with far less personal resources to be empowered in creating new forms of social organization? Let’s use our anarchic discomfort to learn about ourselves and others, to become the first step in an experiment in successful democratic community-building.

Every perceived barrier can be a path to transformation, if we commit to exploring it in the right spirit. If we can take the “buffet” and turn it into a *brit*, a sense of sacred covenant with our Judaism and our Jewish community, then we are well on our way. Let us celebrate 350 years of American Jewish civilization, and get to work on making the next 350 even better.