

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

YOM KIPPUR

Last night I mentioned my grandma, and I want to start today by sharing my favorite Grandma Millie story. Last fall my mother and I went to Florida to visit my grandma with my daughter, Sami. One night we got all dressed up to go to one of the fine establishments in the retirement home. As we were eating, the man at the table beside us – easily 95 years old – grabbed his wife’s hand and stared into her eyes, and started to sing her a love song. My mother, Sami and I burst into tears.

‘What happened? Why are you crying?’ my grandma asked.

‘Grandma, it’s so beautiful. Even after all these years that man still sings love songs to his wife!’

‘That’s sweet, Sharon,’ she said. ‘But that lady is *not* his wife. His wife is in the hospital.’

OK, so things are *not* always as they seem.

This past year, the big story on the domestic front in the American Jewish community was the newly minted evidence of what we all already knew empirically: the Jews are in trouble. And I’m not talking this time about anti-Semitism. The Pew Study on the American Jewish community, which came out last fall, revealed that outside Orthodoxy, the Jewish community is in precipitous decline. One might say demographic freefall. And it may be worse that our parents even worry it is. May as well say kaddish for American Jewry.

Perhaps the most salient statistic emerging from the Study (aside from the 4% of Orthodox Jews with Christmas trees in their homes) was the 22% who describe themselves as “Jews who have no religion.” Among young Jews, that number goes up to 32%. These are people who were raised as Jews and identify as Jews, but when asked their religion—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, other, or none—they choose “none.” It’s not just that they’re not synagogue members (had that been the question, the statistics would be significantly higher). It’s not that they don’t believe in God or are not observant. It’s that they disavow a connection to Judaism as a religion altogether.

Let me say that this trend is apparently not unique to Judaism. At an interfaith gathering in Washington, DC, last year, I was cornered by the Dean of one of the nation’s largest Cathedrals who said, “Can we talk sometime? We’re struggling to get young people to come to church. I wonder if you have some tips for us.” It seems that in Christianity, Catholicism and Islam in America, religious life is also waning, particularly among young people. It appears that the United States may be a land that devours its inhabitants, melting away our distinctions and replacing them with some generic cultural Americanness.

The numbers are dismal, and - as we know – numbers don’t lie.

But we also know that things are not always as they seem.

As we have built our community over the past decade, I've had the chance to talk to thousands of people – many of whom are in the room today - who would have self-identified as non-religious Jews or Jews of no religion had they answered the phone when the Pew researchers called. Here's what I have learned from predominantly young, decidedly unaffiliated, religiously disconnected Jews:

I have not yet heard one who rejects the idea of powering down once a week in order to step out of the world as it is and imagine the world as it could be. Not one marginalized or ambivalent Jew I've spoken with has resisted the wisdom of changing her rhythm in order to reconnect with her most audacious dreams, realign with her priorities, and spend time with the people she loves most. In other words, I have yet to meet an unaffiliated, disconnected Jew who fundamentally rejects the idea of Shabbat.

I have shared with hundreds of "Jews of no religion" the spiritual practice of waking up each morning with words of gratitude on our lips. Not one has rejected the idea, nor has anyone objected to the idea of offering words of forgiveness just before bed. Many have hungrily embraced, even, the words of *Modeh ani* (I am grateful) and the language of *krait sh'ma al ha-mita* (bedtime shma).

I have davened with many so-called Jews of no religion. What I have seen is real prayer, even despite all the ambivalence, cynicism and doubt. I have seen many of you come week after week, holding in your hands a book written in a language you can't read filled with theological images you find disturbing, and singing with all your hearts nevertheless, sometimes crying, sometimes even dancing.

Even those who wish we served bacon maple donuts at kiddush, and I know quite a few of you, do not reject the idea that when we eat mindfully we can bring holiness into an otherwise mundane act.

Even non-religious Jews know and understand that ritual can move you to tears, or that it can fill your heart with wonder, appreciation, and a deep sense of connection. Some even feel, in ritual, the presence of God.

While many explicitly do not identify with organized religion, I have yet to encounter one who rejects the idea of community, of showing up for one another in times of celebration and grief. Of dancing with one other in moments of joy, of sitting in silence in moments of pain, of saying amen when someone else needs to say *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah*.

While we argue and disagree on critical issues, not one of you has ever challenged my contention that religious environments ought not only nurture the soul, but also awaken in us a sense of connectedness to and responsibility for one another.

I have yet to meet a Jew, no matter how disaffected, disinterested, or disgusted, who rejects the idea that the most routine moments in our lives, from going to the bathroom to eating a snack to drinking a caramel frapuccino, can be elevated if we take a moment to be mindful and express gratitude.

Honestly, I have yet to meet a secular, disconnected Jew who couldn't find in Biblical and Talmudic narratives an echo of his own struggles and moral quandaries, insights into living a rich and meaningful life.

But if they are not rejecting the core elements of Jewish religious life—Shabbat, kashrut, community, prayer, ritual, gratitude, forgiveness, holiness, God—what then are a quarter to a third of American Jews opposing when they disavow a connection to the Jewish religion,?

To answer this, I turn to a Benedictine Monk, David Steindl-Rast, who explains better than anyone I know what is broken at the heart of organized religion. Religion, he says, is like an erupting volcano: the lava flowing down the sides of the mountain – fiery, powerful, dangerous, “gushing forth red hot from the depths of mystical consciousness.” But the stream of lava quickly cools off. A couple hundred years pass, and what was once alive is now dead rock, devoid of all traces of life. “Doctrine becomes doctrinaire. Morals become moralistic. Ritual becomes ritualistic... All are layers of ash deposits and volcanic rock that separate us from the fiery magma deep down below.” (See *The Mystical Core of Organized Religion and Lunch With Bokara*)

Every religion, he claims, begins with a powerful mystical insight – a deep sense of connection or communion with what he calls Ultimate Reality, what some of us might call God. I know that many of you have had such an experience – maybe at Yosemite. Perhaps in labor and delivery, or the ICU or even at the breakfast table. I hope at least a few have had one here, at some point in our davening together, and if not – hope springs eternal for Ne'ilah. When the moment comes - pure and unexpected and powerful – you desperately want to hold onto the feeling. You want to find a way to feel its reverberations, its power, even long afterward. So you create a container – call it a religious system - that you hope will hold the sacred experience.

The problem is that inevitably that container – because you can touch it and mold it and compulsively ruminate over it and argue about it, begins to obscure the very core it was designed to preserve. When that happens, rather than give people access to profound spiritual and religious inspiration, the container itself becomes an *obstacle* to inspiration.

In Steindl-Rast's language, this is how “religion left to itself turns irreligious.”

So much of American religious life has become irreligious. Hard, dead rock. It was true half a century ago when Abraham Joshua Heschel excoriated religious leaders for creating ritual environments that were rote and perfunctory, devoid of surprise and spiritual power and soul. And it's true now.

Here's my optimistic read on the unprecedented disaffection, defection and overriding sense of disinterest among American Jews, especially young ones. They are not rejecting Judaism at all.

They don't reject Jewish identity, community or rituals. They don't reject Jewish ideas. It's not even God that they reject.

What they reject is a 20th century iteration of Jewish religious life that just feels too many layers away from the sacred fire at the heart. It feels devoid of life. Of passion. Of spiritual challenge. Judaism in America too often seems to be more concerned with the container – the formalities, rules and rites than soul and spirit. More concerned with what you wear than where you are. It feels like institutional perpetuation for its own sake.

And all of this is in the context of a world on fire – a world of terrorism, hatred and war – much of which is prompted by or justified in the name of religion. Given all of that, if you don't have answers to the biggest questions of the day, if you don't have a powerful counter-testimony to the religion I see tearing the world apart, many say, count me out.

Now this, I believe, is actually very good news. Rachel Naomi Remen once wrote of the experience of walking up Fifth Avenue in New York City and noticing two tiny blades of grass growing through the sidewalk. "Green and tender, they had somehow broken through the cement." Imagine the will to live of those two blades of grass - pushing up against the hard New York pavement! It is a sign of the vitality of our people that we refuse to cede to a religion of dead rock. We *should* reject dead rock – because it's dead. And the very first thing we learned from Abraham is that worshiping dead rock is antithetical to the Jewish religion.

This, of course, is exactly what Isaiah was preaching 3,000 years ago, which we just heard a few moments ago. I'll be honest with you: I'm an Isaiah Jew. I wait all year to hear the Prophet Isaiah on Yom Kippur. Isaiah, who demands that we wake up. Isaiah, who rebukes us for abandoning our core commitments, who mocks us for our pretensions, our empty gestures of religiosity. Isaiah, who despises a religious life that is not what it seems. I love the subversiveness of our Rabbis, who place Isaiah right in the middle of the day, just when we're starting to notice that we didn't eat breakfast. Isaiah channels God: You think I care about your self-congratulatory fast? Your bellies hurt for one day, you feel a little queasy? That's too bad. How do you think My children feel, who go hungry day after day while you stand before overflowing cupboards and complain that there's nothing to eat? You think I want your perfunctory recitations, your empty rituals, your dead rock and ash? I want your outrage! I want your fire – your commitment to justice, mercy and compassion. You beat your chests but leave the tired, the hungry and the poor to starve on the streets! Religious expression detached from its core is worse than nothing. It's sacrilege.

So what are we to do?

"Push through the crust," says Steindl-Rast, "and rediscover the fire within." Remember: "Every religion has a mystical core. The challenge is to... access it and live in its power. In this sense, *every generation of believers is challenged anew to make its religion truly religious.*"

Chip away at the rock to rediscover the the *nekudah pnimit*, the precious and sacred fire buried deep below.

So let's go back today to the core, mystical insight of our tradition to see what we might learn:

Having fled Egypt, Moses is tending sheep in the wilderness of Midian. He sees a mysterious fire that ignites his curiosity because it seems to contradict the laws of nature, burning without consuming the dry shrub. He turns to explore it more deeply. As he approaches, God calls to him from within the fire. Moses has never before heard from God. He holds no aspirations for greatness. All he really wants is to dwell in the wilderness with his sheep, away from the cries and confusion and danger of Egypt. But God is calling him, so he listens.

From the fire, God calls out:

I have heard their cries, I know their anguish. The first thing Moses learns is that God cares deeply about human suffering. That the cries of the most vulnerable, the oppressed, persecuted, abandoned, are not in vain. That there is a force in the universe that bears witness to our struggles and our pain.

Second: *I will rescue them from the hand of Egypt and bring them to a good, expansive land, a land flowing with milk and honey.* The Jewish story - our story - does not end in suffering. History is not static. Life may feel chaotic, but know that it follows a trajectory from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from narrowness to expansiveness, from degradation to dignity.

Third: *Now GO – I send you to Pharaoh to take My people the children of Israel out of Egypt...* God will not simply enter human history and eradicate suffering. Liberation is not a gift from the heavens; it is the result of human commitment and dedication. It depends on us.

Fourth: God's name is revealed as *אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה - Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh – I Will Be Who I Will Be.* The Rabbis in the Talmud (Berakhot 9b) explain what this means: *'I Will Be with you in this suffering, and I Will Be with you in future suffering.'* In other words: Do not believe for a moment that this is the only hurdle you'll face. It doesn't end here. There will be future exiles. There will be oppression and persecution. There will be pogroms and gas chambers and terrorist attacks. There will be wars and there will be struggle. What I can promise is that I will be with you for all of them, to help you find life and freedom once more.

One revelatory moment. Four eternal messages:

1. God is awake to human suffering; your pain is not in vain.
2. Your life is on a trajectory from darkness to light.
3. You must walk toward your own liberation.
4. And even in the depths of darkness, you will never be forgotten and you will never be alone.

Excavate. Chip away at the dead rock and you'll find these promises, so revolutionary that they merited the building of the whole Jewish religious system. At the heart is a sacred fire: a deep, pure, profound and unmediated mystical revelation that courses through history, giving shape and direction and eternal hope to our people, inspiring the whole world.

The memory of this mystical encounter, these Divine promises is preserved meticulously and ubiquitously. The first seder takes place before the Israelites even leave Egypt. Before setting out on their long walk to freedom, they are already working to preserve the memory of these insights: freedom, dignity, human adequacy and hope. They are already contemplating how they will pass these promises on to their children.

And from that point forward, the memory of *yetziat mitzrayim* – the Exodus from Egypt - is baked not only into our matza, but into nearly every Jewish experience, from Passover to Shabbat to daily prayer to all manner of spiritual practice. This story and the mystical insight that catalyzed it remain vital and central 3,500 years later.

Even facing liquidation in the Warsaw Ghetto, Jews prepared for Seder. Stories abound of Jewish prisoners in death camps who made makeshift provisions to celebrate Passover, who stole flour to make matza, who whispered the words of the Haggadah late into the night. The eternality of this story and these insights has been a source of strength through the darkest chapters of our history.

And it is not only Jews who have found strength in this narrative. African-American slaves identified with the Israelites, they saw white southern slave owners as Pharaoh, and Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass and others were modern-day Moseses. Scholars of African-American religious history have noted that the Exodus from Egypt functioned “as an archetypal myth for the slaves... [They believed that] the sacred history of God’s liberation of the people was being reenacted in the American South... In times of despair, the slaves remembered the Exodus and found hope enough to endure the enormity of their suffering” (Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*).

Michael Walzer writes that the power of the Exodus story is that Egypt-like conditions persist in our time, and across the world. “Wherever you are, it’s probably Egypt.” And, not surprisingly, “one can find the Exodus almost everywhere... Wherever people know the Bible, and experience oppression, the Exodus has sustained their spirits and inspired their resistance” (*Exodus and Revolution*).

And it’s not only political movements that are stirred and inspired by this story. It’s also personal. Thousands of years after God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, the sacred promises articulated there give hope to women in abusive relationships, to parents of sick children, to people struggling with grief and trying to make sense of loss. *You dwell in darkness now, but you will find healing and light. You must walk toward your own redemption. You are not alone.*

It just might be that irrefutable evidence of the disinterest and dissociation of young Jews from Judaism is a blessing in disguise. There is a generation of Jews that won't simply buy in, that demands a rearticulation of the WHY of religious life. This is a population that refuses to pledge allegiance to the container without understanding the core, one that resonates to sacred Jewish ideas and impulses, but might want to design a different kind of sacred space to hold those ideas.

So now we must consider: what would it mean for Jewish religious life to be driven once again by the light of this core mystical impulse?

It would mean one's religiosity would be gauged not by his unwillingness to sit next to women on El Al flights, but by his attunement to the cries of the oppressed. It would mean, rather than slipping into a language of despair and inevitability, speaking a language of hope and possibility. It would mean seeing as a sacred religious obligation the need to stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable as they take steps toward their own liberation.

It would mean recognizing that a core Jewish religious message is that as descendants of slaves, we must beware not to become intoxicated by power and wealth and acceptance. It would mean being driven once again by the call, at the sacred center of our tradition, to recognize holiness in every human being. Even in those who seem irrelevant, invisible or inconsequential, for we once seemed inconsequential too.

And what would that really look like?

It would look a lot like the long time IKARite who shows up at literally every shiva in the community, despite her family and work obligations, because she wants to make sure that every mourner knows that his cries do not go unheard. It would look like the hevre – friends for decades – that is present in the holiest of ways, standing again and again by one another's side through the darkest chapters. Or the teenager who somehow in the midst of SATs, exams, papers and adolescence, feels the sacred obligation to take her friend, who buried her father last year, out to dinner on Father's Day so that she knows that she – and her pain – have not been forgotten.

It would look a lot like the person who, even while going through a rough chemo treatment, still shows up for her PATH commitment, quietly demonstrating with every meal she serves to hungry people that the greatest promise God made to human beings is that our journey doesn't end in darkness. I suspect it would look a lot like the 30 year old woman who has fought through a mysterious and debilitating illness, knowing that with every step forward she'll likely take two steps back but fighting valiantly anyway, strengthened by faith and love. It would look like the man with two little ones at home who spends most of his time these days schlepping to meetings in east and south LA, talking with former gang members about second chances. Or the one who actualized Minyan Tzedek into a powerful force of activists, now mobilizing Angelinos to vote for a measure that will make the laws of our state more just and equal for all. It would look like the person who spent nearly every day for the past two months by his mother's

bedside, searching for ways to relieve her of her pain, just so that she knows that even in her deepest darkness, she is not alone.

I don't know if these people – all of whom are here today - would call themselves religious Jews (though I hope after this sermon they will...). But I know that through their actions they are the very best reflection of religious Jewish life.

Let us no longer stand for a Judaism that privileges the container over the core, the rock and ash over the sacred fire. Let's dig beneath the edifice and the artifice to rediscover, and then live out the greatest Jewish ideas, born out of fire on top of a mountain.

Our generation is called to holy excavation. Let's make our lives a testament to what Judaism, at its core, has bequeathed us.

G'mar Hatima Tova -