

THE SURVIVAL OF JUDAISM
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Erev Rosh HaShana 5772

As I began to wrestle with turning my outline into a sermon, I was at our little closet here at PACC and saw a strange book sitting near our file cabinet. After looking at the cover and reading a bit of the introduction, I pushed it aside. Then when I returned to my office, the latest copy of Reform Judaism landed on my desk – and in it an article adapted from that very same book entitled *John Lennon and the Jews; a Philosophical Rampage* (by Ze'ev Maghen – Bottom Books, NY). It centers on the words of one of Lennon's great compositions, "Imagine."

Allow me to remind you of the words:

Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try; no hell below us; above us only sky; imagine all the people, living for today... Imagine there's no countries; it isn't hard to do; nothing to kill or die for; and no religion too; imagine all the people, living life in peace... You may say I'm a dreamer; but I'm not the only one; I hope someday you'll join us; and all the world will live as one....

I am sure that Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Penn Jillette and all the other modern day atheist gurus (wait, can one label an atheist using a religious term – or is that a way of dissing them?) would sign on to Lennon's vision. They will all point to the fact that at the root of most of the great cataclysmic wars lay competing religious views – religion as the source of discord. Shouldn't we get rid of them all? What do they have to offer that a good hearty boy scout (or girl scout) ethic lacks? And if we can't get rid of all of them, wouldn't the world be better if it shared one religious vision? That would take care of the ornery and pesky Jewish folk who always insist on being different.

So is there a place for religion in the world? And if so, does Judaism have a unique contribution that must be preserved?

Religion came into being as the answer to the gnawing questions: Who am I? Why am I here? How did I get here? Where are we going? Religion was meant to frame our existence – give us direction, provide a grounding of values and ethics and responsibilities. And each faith finds its ethical center in the core stories and pathos of history and heritage. Ultimately, religion and faith frames one's identity – to be part of a community with shared history, with shared values. The first error of this Lennonist philosophy, from a Jewish perspective, is that religion is not about heaven and hell – it is about life and the quality of life we seek – and that quality is determined by the way we treat others and the way we are treated. Nothing to kill or die for? Rabbi Joe Potasnick, reminded me of the story of the man who went to heaven and was asked, "Where are your wounds?" What did you fight for? What did you stand for?

The Anglo-Jewish press has been lit up recently by opinion articles penned by those with "the answer" as to how Judaism should survive. Some have proffered a return to traditional practice – others have suggested increased study – still others feel that a visit to Israel is what is necessary. But most of these articles center on how Judaism must survive. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, taking on many of those disposed to these points of view states (in an Op-Ed published by JTA on August 1, 2011), " a Judaism obsessed with survival is a Judaism that will not survive."

So why Judaism at all -- why not just become "Lennonists" (as in John, not Vladimir)? The answer is that Judaism offers a unique vision to the world and where our priorities are found is instructive to all.

Perhaps it is that Judaism is a system more than anything – it is more than the sum of its collective parts. Those who assert that we must study alone, ignore the power of ritual and deed. Those who assert that ritual alone is important, lose the nuance that study provides – the ability to see things from various perspectives. Those who insist that all Judaism is in the deed – the social action – the desire to

fix the world, lose the unique way we Jews think. Al Shelosh d'varim ha-olam omed – Al haTorah, v'al-havaodah' v'al gemilut Chasidim – The world stands on three discrete but related disciplines: the Study of Torah, the practice of worship and the performance of deeds of lovingkindness. Like a tripod, even if one leg is diminished, it cannot stand – these must stand in equal balance. And in doing so, our world continues.

Notice well, that belief in God is not the *sina qua non* of this three-fold prescription – while it is true that Avodah is the second – and avodah is often defined as worship (with its root in the word for “work” since the ancient sacrificial system was hard work) – but worship is a communal activity – it is the collective expression of what binds us together. What we believe is not commanded and it is not proscribed – a diversity of positions on “theology” rest comfortably within the communal ritual structure of Judaism.

That diversity of opinion is a central characteristic of all of Jewish life. Even a cursory reading of our corpuses of Jewish law: Mishna and Talmud, show the vitality of Jewish debate. One would expect a book of law to iterate specific do's and don'ts – not so in Jewish law (despite what our friends in Williamsburg or Washington Heights might want us to believe {and don't forget, I just told you that what we believe leaves much room for a diversity of opinions}). Jewish law is presented as organic and reactive – our sages suggest what the majority opines, but the minority position is preserved, and then there are the opinions of those on the periphery (“yesh omrim – there are still those who say...).

In fact, I would assert that is the very essence of Judaism – this diversity, this willingness to recognize that humans bring their personal experiences and biases to the communal table, and room must be made for those who choose to live within the circle. This flexibility and tolerance is what allowed Judaism to survive – even under the most unfriendly and unaccepting of environments.

And yet, there are limits to that diversity – there are boundaries, which is why is often use the metaphor: standing within or outside the circle. We are a

community, and there are principles that bind us together – there are values that we share. If someone were to decide to celebrate Shabbat on Tuesday – that would put them outside the circle. If someone were to decide that their theology allowed for panoply of gods, or the worship of idols – that would put them outside the circle. And if one were to have been born into a different community, but finds completeness in joining our community, there are pathways into the circle.

But the perimeter of that circle has been undulating for centuries, absorbing the various experiences of Jews from other lands and cultures. And that, too is part of the secret of how we have survived. Those who come from the outside bring a richness of experiences to the Jewish world and our exposure to the practices of Jews in other cultures and countries rejuvenates and expands our Jewish practice and ritual. We have been witness not just to innovation, but the re-introduction of practices long abandoned. It was only about twenty years ago that through the efforts of our beloved Debbie Freidman z”l and others we were reminded of the power of communal expressions and prayers for healing. And observe what we have learned about the environment impacts the laws of kashrut – so that there are now those who practice “eco-kashrut” – cognizant, not just of ritually mandated proscriptions about proper food, but of the impact on our environment and ecology and ethical values.

This flexibility has impacted our response to scientific and medical discoveries – Judaism has absorbed the wisdom of the common culture, so that even the most religiously rigorous understand the potential of organ donations (of which I spoke a number of years ago) and fertility treatments.

With all this, our devotion to study has continued unabated – we Jews place great capital in learning – rote memorization of religious tracts, recitation of prayers by heart without understanding them are anathema to the Jewish soul. *Hafoch ba v’hafoch ba, v’kula ba* – Turn it over and Turn it over again, for in it is everything. We study Torah to discover not the secrets of the universe, but to discover ourselves. The process of study is engaging in a dialogue with the text. Nothing

in Jewish tradition is understood but a simple cursory reading – we must dig deep into the text and into tradition and into ourselves to divine meaning. We Jews don't take NO or YES for an answer – the answer for us lies in the process. Engaged minds thrive. I recently had an Israeli physicist in my office – who proudly told me that the majority of the world's physicists and indeed the majority of the world's most recognized physicists are Jews – he pointed to the Talmud on my shelf and said that even though he doesn't study THAT – the method of study of Talmud (which he called Jewish study) is what makes great physicists. Now, I don't want to suggest that we Jews are better than anyone else, but there is a remarkable notion behind my Israeli friend's statement – we Jews think differently – we study differently. And that process of study, we brought to the world (yes, Socrates must have been a Jew, or at least hung out with a bunch of them).

And deep in our bones in an abiding need to repair the world. Whether we use the hackneyed phrase of Tikun Olam – or social action – it all stems from the idea l'takayn olam b'machut Shaddai – to heal the world to bring about the Messianic time. And ultimately, what is this Messianic Time? For some it is the advent of a new age – but for many – and for me – it is the time when we humans finally complete the work of Creation that God began. If at the end of creation we read in Genesis, It was Very Good, it is up to us to make it perfect. The call to social justice is the call of the prophets of yore to get the people back on track and to behave better – it is the call of the rabbis to treat the other with kindness – it is following in the footsteps of those who would not accept the status quo and labored to make this world into the world it could and should be. That is a call that resonates deep in the Jewish soul and we have modeled that for the world.

My friend, Rabbi Fred Guttman shared this teaching from Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, (1783-1841) once taught the following gematria on the subject of Tikun Olam and Tikun neshamah (repair of the soul) . The gematria of the word Neshamah is 395. The gematria of the word Olam is 146. If you add these two numbers together you get 541. 541 is the number for Yisrael (by this he means Am Yisrael) The idea behind the drash is that if one wants to be a good Jew, one

needs to be involved in both Tikkun Olam and Tikkun Neshamah. In other words, it is not enough to just do good deeds – but they must be accompanied by things that elevate the soul – study and communal worship.

So the essence of Judaism is not about heaven or hell – or even what is “THE TRUTH” – it is about the balance that leads to a better human experience and a better world. Al Shlosha d’varim ha olam omed: Al HaTorah, v’al ha’avodah. V’al ‘gemilut chasadim – the world, for we Jews, exists because of Study, Communal worship and the performance of deeds of lovingkindness.

Imagine if everyone else understood this lesson. For Judaism has and can teach the world action over simple creed, deed over word – and the contributions of each individual helps maintain the vitality that has kept Judaism alive.

We need not waste time with hand-wringing and worrying about the fate of the Jewish people for our destiny is assured, so long as we remain true to ourselves – as long as we remember what it means to be a Jew in this world.

John Lennon’s vision is a lovely fairy-tale of a rock and roll poet, and with no intended swipe at Lennon’s musical genius, his was a philosophy for simple minds. Like the eulogy by a rabbi for his deceased friend, the atheist – “look at him, all dressed up with no-where to go.” I would not be satisfied with a world without complexity, without diversity and without courage to stand for making this place better than it is.

You may say, I’m a dreamer – but I’m not the only one. And one day I hope you’ll join us....

And discover that our Jewish faith and tradition is still vibrant and essential, and contributing to the betterment of the world around us. Of this, I have no doubt.

Am Yisrael Chai – The People Israel live.