

*Not Like Everyone Else*

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Torah teaches that you and I are part of an incredibly enduring Jewish community because of a pair of promises made a very long time ago. God promised Abraham that we would be an eternal people, the only such promise made to any people. We would be a people who would experience slavery, degradation, exile and slaughter, but we would survive to be, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, God's stake in human history.

If that were not enough, we were promised during a second phase of our covenantal life at the foot of Mount Sinai, that we would be nothing less than a kingdom of priests, a holy people.

You would think that with such sureties that we would have shouted, "Hallelujah," sang *Shebecheyanu*, and pinched ourselves in disbelief that we were Gods' special, immortal, dare I say, chosen people.

But that has not exactly been our response. Throughout our history, our people often have followed a different, contradictory impulse. We did not crave to be special, God's elect. We simply wanted to be like everyone else; we wanted to be a normal people. Normal. What else could explain how a uniquely covenanted people could embrace paganism as often as they did if the prophets' viewpoint can be believed?

What was the attraction? The great Jewish American scholar Herman Wouk wrote that paganism was Hollywood: blatant, sensual, eye-catching, dazzling display. In contrast, Judaism's outward manifestation was much more solemn—no visual images, no earthen divinity, not even a golden calf.

Hundreds of years later Jews became mesmerized by the architecture and sculpture of the Greeks, the theatre of Aeschylus and Aristophanes, the glorifying of the human body. To Jewish Hellenizers this was an opportunity to loosen or shrug off the yoke of the law in favor of a life of wine, women, and song, pleasures of the table, sport, theatre, the full panoply of epicurean delights.

In the modern era Jews took full advantage of the Enlightenment, which brought new freedoms and prosperity almost everywhere in central and Western Europe. So far and fast did the Enlightenment travel that the mere fifty years after Napoleon died on St. Helena, a Jew, Benjamin Disraeli presided over the British Empire. Western Jews learned to speak excellent French, German, or English, to dress in the latest fashion, and made great contributions to the professions, finance, politics, and the arts. Most remained Jews to be sure, but many reformed their practices, which underscored their desire to be grateful citizens of a country which opened their doors however ambiguously to the Jew.

But, more times than we can count in our storied history, the world would not give us real integration. No matter that we made singular contributions in every aspect of life, no matter that we

fought in their armies to unequivocally show our patriotism, the ruling powers were more interested in choosing to isolate, exile, or destroy the chosen people.

Israeli historian Daniel Gordis captures the world's heartless stance towards the Jews during the last century through the fate of three ships. One that still resonates deeply: the *St. Louis*. In May 1939 the ship sailed from Hamburg to Cuba with 937 passengers. After *Kristallnacht*, the mostly German Jewish passengers had bought legal Cuban visas. However, the Cuban president refused to allow them to enter the country. German Catholic bishop Gustav Schroder heroically committed himself to finding a home for each of the passengers. But when both America and Canada refused the immigrants a safe haven, Schroder had no choice to return to Europe where he negotiated with European countries to take most of the passengers. For others, Schroder found no home. Though they had been just ninety miles from the shores of the United States, these refugees found themselves, once again, under Nazi rule. By the end of the war 254 of them, just over a quarter who had been on the *St. Louis*, were slaughtered in the Holocaust.

The second ship, the *SS Atlantic*, arrived at the shores of Palestine at Haifa Bay carrying 1,730 refugees from Germany. The British mandate refused to let them enter Palestine. More than 250 people drowned, the rest were put in internment camps.

The third ship, *The Sturma*, set sail from Romania on December 16, 1941 carrying 769 Jewish refugees to Palestine. Due to engine trouble they anchored in the harbor of Istanbul where the Turkish government denied passengers even temporary sanctuary. They were towed into the Black Sea with no functioning engine. A Soviet submarine operating under orders to sink all neutral and enemy ships torpedoed the boat. *The Sturma* sank almost immediately drowning almost all the men, women, and children on board. There was but one survivor.

In each instance, in disparate places, including here in the United States of America, we were turned down, turned away. Which is why we Jews absolutely cringe at immigration policies that say no just because a person belongs to a particular people, nationality, religion, and that disregards your character, talent, and everything else folks can bring to this country. We further understand why a people like us that has been expelled over nine hundred times in our history, victims of such callous hatred and indifference, yearned for a place to call home, where such callous cruelty would no longer happen.

Famed Israeli novelist Amos Oz told how at age eight he rode on his father's shoulders in the surging crowd of celebrants in Jerusalem. November 30, 1947 at three o'clock in the morning he crawled exhausted into bed, where his father related that students at his Polish school had stolen his pants, so his father went to the school whereupon boys and girls also attacked him. A story of utter humiliation. That morning Amos Oz's father said: "From now on, from the moment we have our own state you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew. Never again. From tonight on that's finished forever."

Oz continues, "I reached out to touch his face and my fingers met tears. At no other time in my life, even when my mother died, did I see my father cry."

What is surprising is that Israel's Law of Return, offering citizenship to every Jew, used the same definition as the Nazi's infamous Nuremberg laws. The Nazis defined a Jew as anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent. The Law of Return used the same definition. "If you were Jewish enough for the Nazis to want to kill you," the Knesset essentially said, "you were Jewish enough to be taken in and protected by the State of Israel." Jews migrated to the newly created state in unprecedented numbers. Hailing from seventy different countries, Jews constituted the largest single migration of the twentieth century and the most extraordinary absorption of immigrants in modern history.

Listen to this: In 1948 just six percent of the world's Jews lived in Israel. By 2015 that number had grown to forty-six percent, almost half of the total of the world Jewry.

Israel is the story of a homeless people that kept the dream alive. Their people did not give up, in part, because they simply had nowhere else to go. In time, Israel began its slow climb out of poverty and showed the world how a tiny nation no larger than New Jersey can defend itself against those who would destroy it through conventional armies or suicide bombers. Israel has also shown the world examples of great humanity. Thousands of Syrians seriously injured in that endless, brutal war up north have been treated by Israeli doctors. What other country would do that? What greater example of love thy neighbor as thyself is there?

At seventy, there is so much to marvel at. The fulfillment of the dream first embodied by Abraham and articulated by Herzl. But truth be told, now that we have an independent Jewish state, a true Jewish homeland, you and I now realize that we do not want Israel to be a state just like any other. Most of us are not content with a government whose leadership, in order to ensure the support of ultra-Orthodox parties in their ruling coalition ignores or scorns millions of world Jewry who have supported Israel politically and economically for years.

Two weeks ago we at Rodeph Shalom played host to some of the heavy hitters of Israel's Knesset, a UJA-sponsored event. They came because they wanted to learn more about American Judaism. Some had never been to America and most had not talked to the array of New York rabbis from every denomination who sat in our boardroom. It was an important and feisty sharing. They said it was the most important meeting they had in the United States and now know that our relationship needs to be much more mutual. One MK held court and said the Reform Movement should not go to court so much to amend the conversion bill, for example, so people we bring in to Judaism will be accepted in the Holy Land. "And you shouldn't go to court to demand that the agreement on the *Kotel* be instituted. You will only stir up the *haredim*, the ultra-Orthodox."

I asked, "Why don't you solve the problem legislatively?"

Silence.

"Well, we can't do that right now."

I then had the *chutzpah* to quote the abominable words of the chief rabbi of Jerusalem:

The rabbi actually said: “Reform Jews are worse than Holocaust deniers. They don’t have Yom Kippur or Shabbat but they want to pray at the *Kotel*.”

“Why are you paying any attention to them?” called out the deputy speaker of the Knesset.

“Because,” I responded, “this profoundly ill-informed and idiotic statement is an embarrassment to the entire Jewish people.”

I do not know if they can be held to their word, but the deputy speaker swore he would be either censored or fired outright for this abomination.

So, we live in hope, don’t we? But we also have to live with resolve. In fact we Jews need to learn from history. Talmud teaches that the holy temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of *sinat chinium*, internal strife. Truth be told we are a small people who very much need each other. I played the unpaid and uninvited political consultant and advised that any candidate from any party who stands up to say, “My number one plank is the unity of the Jewish people.” There is room in this country for Jews of every religion, there is room at the *Kotel* for all Jews. If we are united we will have more strength and resolve to bring justice to Israeli citizens of all religions and to address the incredible challenges of a country still surrounded by hatred and the heartbreak of endless war.

While we are talking, let me now explode two myths:

Israelis no longer support a two-state solution. I am here to tell you: do not believe those poll numbers. Even during the height of the *Intifada*, an overwhelming plurality of Israelis favored a two-state solution. Numbers today reflect the dispiriting sense of the moment and the lack of will and ability of all stakeholders to find a means to that end. Give them some hope, a renewed vision, an encouraging response from our enemies and watch those poll numbers change.

Second myth: our kids feel less connected and some are truly alienated from Israel. Do not believe it. Through *Birthright*, RSS and CRS trips to Israel, etc. our kids have a real understanding and bond with Israel. They can get whip-sawed a bit on campus, but let’s not confuse love of country with love of policies. It would not shock anyone in this congregation if I tell you that many of us are deeply disturbed by personalities and policies in Washington. Must we conclude, therefore, that we do not love America and remain proud to be Americans? Same for Israel. Exasperation, even disgust with personas and politics does not mean that we do not love the Jewish homeland. That is true for us and it will be true for our kids. *L’dor V’dor*.

As American Jews, we have experienced a roller coaster of incredulous emotion. Though we thought we had seen and heard it all, nothing could prepare us for Charlottesville.

We saw with our own eyes the wanton evil of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen. Then from the president of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, we heard that the Nazi websites had posted a call to burn down their synagogue. In America, 2017. We heard about parades of Nazis passing the Temple shouting, “There’s the synagogue! *Seig heil!*” Rabbi Gunter Hirschberg heard the same when he was on the bimah for his Bar Mitzvah in Berlin. But, this is America, 2017. Did we ever expect to hear “*Seig Heil*” outside of our own houses of worship?

No one should ever have to utter these words:

*Mr. President, there were no good people marching with the Nazis in Berlin.*

*Mr. President, there were no good people marching with the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville.*

Now, I am not drawing a historical parallel here. I categorically do not believe that we are in any real danger in this country. The lunatic fringe will not make significant inroads to undermine the constitutional guarantees we enjoy and keep in mind all the citizens who did speak up and rise up whenever anti-Semitism, racism, or any forms of prejudice reared their ugly heads. For us, Rabbi Michael Latz wrote in a poem (I am just reading the conclusion):

*We Jews know the cost of silence. We will link arms because when you come for our neighbor you come for us—and that just won't stand.*

That is what history has taught us. So we will protect gay and lesbian and transgender people. We will protect Muslims who are victims of ugly discrimination. We will protect free speech, including the kneel-down, as long as those actions do not endanger the lives of others. When I.C.E. bursts into homes and drags children out of their bedrooms, we will stand up loudly and say, “This shall not stand, in 2017, in the United States of America.”

You have heard Marty Flumenbaum’s strong endorsement of the work of Peter Ehrenberg and the Refugee Resettlement Committee. We have applied to HIAS, the organization that has played a wonderfully historic role in resettling refugees of all faiths. Our congregation which has been in the vanguard of social justice for many years, now has applied to resettle a refugee family in New York City. With the Administration unconscionably trying to limit immigration to a paltry 45,000 people, we may never get this opportunity. But if we do, we most likely will be asked to resettle a Muslim family, desperate to flee their personal and familial horror. These will be people who probably have never met a Jew and may know only animosity in their heart for us.

So why are we working so hard to become eligible to resettle such a family? Because 36 times the Torah reminds us, “You were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Because door after door was slammed in our faces throughout history. We were not let in, we were expelled, we were exterminated. We have never forgotten what it has meant to be the *Other*. And now you and I have the opportunity to redress historic wrongs, to treat others like we wish we were treated. And, if approved, we will help this family learn English, find schools, find a religious community, find employment. Again, we will do for them what we had hoped and prayed others would do for us. Because we are Rodeph Sholom. Because we are Jews.

You and I have a crucial role to play here and in Israel because of the covenant, which teaches us we were not put on this earth just to survive and take up space, nor are we content to be a people like all others. Normal just isn’t enough. We were put here to be the caring, compassionate people of the Book, placed here not to stand still for outrage, not to stand for hatred of any people, ethnicities, nationalities or sexual identities. And we will stand up against bigotry sanctioned by or winked at by our government. And we will welcome the stranger because we know precisely how they feel.

On this holiest of nights we resolve to rise above selfish and narcissistic pursuits, we resolve to hear and heed God's call:

*Be thou not like them who avert their eyes, be not like them who are just too busy to notice.*

We are here to heed God's call:

Be not like them!

*Be thou a blessing.*

Amen.