

America 350  
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2nd Day Rosh Hashanah

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This past summer I had the pleasure and privilege to travel with a number of other members of our synagogue on a wonderful trip to Israel. I will tell you a little more about that trip on Yom Kippur but shortly after we returned to the states, Edy and I flew out to Utah to do a little hiking in Bryce National Park and Zion National Park, wow! Incredible stuff. I was sending an email to a friend in Israel from Zion National Park and I wrote: "What a summer, m'zion l'zion - from Zion to Zion!" And upon reflection I realized that inadvertently, in my trip m'zion l'zion, I had replicated a much larger journey, and a much more significant journey that our people had made over the course of the last 350 years.

You are going to hear a lot of America 350 this year. The organized Jewish community, the Academic Jewish community even the religious Jewish community is preparing to focus on this event as an opportunity to reflect, recharge and renew our vision as American Jews. We here at Temple Beth Sholom have established TBS celebrates 350 years of American Jewry - an active and wonderful group of members who are planning a years worth of events that you will be hearing a lot about in the weeks to come.

And so I wish on this Rosh Hashanah 5765, the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jews in America to share with you my perspective on how far we have come and where we ought be going from here.

Over the 10 years I have spoken from this bema, I hope it has become clear how much I love being Jewish, and how much it informs my life and who I am. I hope it has become clear how much I love Israel, of my attachment to that sacred land and my joy in being part of a generation that has witnessed its rebirth and revitalization. But, over these past 10 years, I also hope that it has become clear how much I love America. I love this country!

Go ahead, laugh if you want, I can take it. People get a kick out of the fact that I insist on putting my American flag on display on Labor Day, the Fourth of July and almost any other excuse I can find. I proudly displayed my flag long before it became popular post

9/11. My family used to patronize me and humor this blatant patriotism. When Dina was just 7 and I was enlisting her aid in putting out the flag one 4th of July, she asked, "If it is so important, how come no one else does it?"

Well, fortunately patriotism is back in style; since 9/11 everyone proudly displays the flag and I am less of an embarrassment to my family.

Why am I such an American patriot. Maybe it had something to do with growing up in a wholesome place like Cincinnati, Ohio - where they still don't know how to spell cynicism. Maybe it had to do with my experience back in the 70's of working with the Jewish underground when we were trying to get the Jews out of Russia. Maybe it stems from my contact with the Jewish refusenik movement there and my very short trip to the Soviet Union where I was detained upon arrival at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, interrogated for 24 hours, and then expelled. My Jewishness made me a threat to that country but in this country - well to this day, after that harrowing 24 hour experience in Russia, I remember the puzzled look on the face of the American passport agent as she surveyed my passport - I had departed JFK a day and a half prior, spent 24 hours in Moscow, had been put on a flight to Paris and now I was returning to New York? Well, I guess she concluded - it's a free country and if you want to go to Russia and Paris for 24 hours - that's your business, so she looked up and remarked - "Quick trip - paused and then said, welcome home!" I wanted to hug her! I had just come from a country where everything, even ones most personal beliefs was the government's business and here I had returned to a land of true freedom. Maybe that is when I became the American patriot that I am today.

Or maybe it was when I married into a family of Holocaust Survivors and began to see this land through their eyes- through the eyes of people who had been marked for extermination, battered and beaten by a country that had been their home for hundreds of years; and then even after the war, after the camps when they returned to their "homes" they were told - "you are no longer welcome here". Even when they left they were given no passport - they were officially stateless and yet, America accepted them, welcomed, embraced them - gave them shelter and opportunity: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.." These words, written by Emma Lazarus, herself an American Jew, and inscribed on the Statue of Liberty - capture what America meant to a generation of European Jewish immigrants and also explain why I love this country.

Or maybe it is precisely because of my love for Israel, and my knowledge that for all the discussion today of who would be better for Israel - the Republicans or the Democrats - it is an undeniable fact that for the entire 56 years of her existence - no country, NO country has been a more steadfast friend and defender of the Jewish State than America.

I love this country!

This love affair with America began 350 years ago. According to Jonathan D. Sarna in his remarkable book American Judaism, it was EXACTLY 350 years ago - as it was on a

day, late in September 1654, when a small French frigate named the Saint Catherine sailed into the port of New Amsterdam, a part of the remote Dutch colony of New Netherlands what is present day New York harbor. Most of the ships passengers - "twenty-three souls, big and little" as they were described in a written source that has survived from that day - were Jewish refugees from Brazil. They had been expelled when the Portuguese recaptured that colony from the Dutch and they were now seeking a new home. They were not the very first Jews in America, but they were the very first Jewish community. And their arrival was not without controversy. I may love America - but it seems America did not immediately love me! Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial director-general of New Netherlands sought permission from Amsterdam to keep us out. The Jews, he explained, were "deceitful," "very repugnant," and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." "Ouch" He asked the Directors of the Dutch West India Company to, "require them in a friendly way to depart" lest they "infect and trouble this new colony." Fortunately for those 23 Jews and for Jewish history, the Directors of the Dutch West India Company refused Peter Stuyvesant's request. According to Prof. Shuly Schwartz, who spoke here at Temple Beth Shalom this past week, the Directors, back in Amsterdam refused, in no small part due to the fact that many, on their Board of Trustees were prominent members of the Dutch Jewish Community (plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose) - but for whatever reason Stuyvesant's request was denied, those 23 Jews were allowed to stay - and here we sit, 350 years to the day later - a strong, vibrant, proud and free community - we enjoy equality of political, cultural and economic rights unparalleled in the 2000 year history of the Jewish diaspora. And if the last 350 years have not been without their trials and tribulations they are more noteworthy for their achievements and success.

The American vision of a new kind of society - egalitarian, free, and open, held for us as Jews, a promise to an end of a long and sad chapter of Jewish wanderings, persecutions, and suffering. For 350 years, we Jews have continually tested the welcome of America to determine whether, as George Washington once promised in a letter to the Jews of Newport in 1790, this would indeed be a land that "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Our skepticism is understandable. Our long and turbulent history has taught us well. We have learned that it was not only Cossacks or primitive peoples who were capable of oppressing us and killing us. Yes, we had learned that enlightened nations, sophisticated people were also capable of unimaginable levels of hatred and brutality. We had learned that in times of social and political upheaval, Jews were invariably the first victims - from both the radical right and the lunatic left.

Is it possible that disastrous social, political, or economic crisis here in America could provoke a resurgence of anti-Semitism? Our history is too long and our suffering too deep to discount the possibility. Constant vigilance and continued surveillance is the hallmark of a cautious people.

And yet, for all of our caution, and all of our doubt there can be no denial that the promise of the Declaration of Independence and the protections afforded by the

Constitution of this great land is real. 350 years ago, 23 Jews stumbled off a French frigate into New York's harbor - bedraggled Jewish refugees seeking a new home, and 350 years later we can say that in this great land we found not only haven but home, not only refuge, but abundant opportunity. I love this country!

Yes, after 350 years of Jewish life in America, I believe that I can lead you in the prayer:

ma tov helkeynu, ma yerushateynu - "How wonderful is our portion, how abundant our inheritance!" To which I hope you will all join me in saying: amen.

And yet.... You knew that was coming.

I remember an old joke that came out of Russia during the heady days of communism. One after another speaker was extolling the successes of the Soviet state, how the Soviets were overtaking the American Capitalists in one field after another, defeating the Americans in one enterprise after another. Until one little old man raised his hand and from the very back of the room stood up and said: "Comrade, if everything is so good, why is everything so bad?"

Yes, I am a little surprised that after my ode to Jewish life here in America, that someone did not stand up and say the same thing to me. "Rabbi, if everything is so good - why is everything so bad?"

What do I mean so bad? Well, one problem is that in this wonderful land of opportunity, many Jews have not used that opportunity to become better, more knowledgeable, more committed Jews. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "In America, Judaism remains "the least known religion" to Jews and non-Jews alike. A friend recently commented, "I know of no other group like the Jews who can boast of adherents, who are so zealously committed to inter-faith activities, but who have so little faith of their own."

We are a generation who can identify Mike Piazza and J-Lo- but Rabbi Akiva and Solomon Schechter - these are not names that come so quickly to our lips. There is not a person in this sanctuary who does not know the significance of April 15th - but the 10th of Tishrei - too many will have to get back to me on that one. We can identify Howard Dean - but not a Beit Din - Gucci but not Rashi. We all know that Jesus' mother was Mary - but who was Moses' mother? We can rattle off our full English names in our sleep - but we struggle with our full Hebrew names even when wide awake!! And if you had a difficult time with some of these, remember that you are here- you are in shul on Rosh Hashanah, you are the committed - for every one of you there are 1? 10? 100? American Jews who are not here, less committed, less knowledgeable than you.

What an irony - for generations when Jews lived in lands of persecution - Judaism thrived. And here in this land of opportunity - many of us have not used our opportunities to deepen our Jewish knowledge or to strengthen our Jewish commitments.

And it is not only our identities that need strengthening. Our numbers are down as well. For the first time since colonial days the total number of Jews in America is shrinking!!

Newsflash: New York is no longer the greatest Jewish city in the world. I mean it is still a pretty good city - but it has lost its title as “greatest” to Tel Aviv - and Israel’s population of Jews will soon eclipse that of the United States which used to be the world’s largest. Experts give several reasons for this decline: first you are not having enough children. Simply put, we American Jews are not reproducing ourselves - each year more Jews die in America than are born in America.

And intermarriage remains a significant challenge to the survival of Jews here in America as well. Overwhelmingly children of intermarrieds do not see themselves as Jews. A recent study identified 2, 345,000 individuals whose grandparents had been Jews - but who now practice other religions, mostly as a result of their parents marrying non-Jews. And by intermarriage I mean intermarriage - I do not refer to those instances where a non-Jewish spouse converts - that represents a strengthening not a weakening of Jewish identity - an increase in Jewish numbers and not a decrease.

By a show of hands, how many of you agree with the following statement: “I look at the entire Jewish community as my extended family,” Good, I am glad so many of you do - but while that may still be a popular sentiment in this sanctuary, only 52% of Jews surveyed would raise their hands in agreement with this traditional statement. How about this one: (Raise your hand if you agree) “I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.” Great - this is a bedrock upon which Conservative Judaism was built - but, only 47% of those surveyed agreed with it. To many modern Jews - especially to those in intermarried families - this tribalistic notion of peoplehood seems as Sarna puts it, “uncomfortably alien, at odds with personal autonomy and America’s universalistic and individualistic ethos.”

“Good God Rabbi! Is the news all bad?” No, not at all- at the very same time that all these negative trends are unfolding, there is a rebirth and revitalization of Jewish life going on that is equally unprecedented. The Jewish arts, theater, film, television and print media - are experiencing a renaissance the likes of which we have never seen. Jewish learning, Jewish camps, Jewish day schools, Jewish studies on university campuses, are all experiencing growth and expansion. Just look at the number of kosher restaurants available in New York compared to 20 years ago, or the explosion of fine kosher wines, or the magnificent ketubot you see at many weddings - all these things are indication of a Jewish renaissance that is underway as well.

And if you are searching for good news, we need look no further than where you now sit. One of the brightest stars in the contemporary Jewish galaxy is - believe it or not - the synagogue. A survey in 2001 listed 3,727 synagogues in the United States a number as least as large as in the 1930's when the last count was taken. Federations around the country are waking up to the idea that synagogues represent the future of Judaism in

American Jewish Community and Federation funded programs like the Re-Imagine Project in which we at Temple Beth Shalom are participating and other initiatives like Synagogue 2000 are the product of this realization. The mission statement of Synagogue 2000 says it all: “we believe that synagogues are poised at an historic moment in time to play out the next and finest chapter in the saga of the Jewish destiny.”

It is precisely this good news/bad news scenario that causes Sarna to conclude his epic work on American Judaism by saying - “At one and the same time... American Judaism seems to be experiencing both revitalization and assimilation; it radiates optimism concerning the future of American Jewish life, as well as bleak pessimism.” Indeed, our own Jack Wertheimer, professor of Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary speaks of a ‘bipolar community’, with certain parts of American Jewry...deepening their Jewishness and others ...on an accelerated assimilatory course out of the Jewish community.”

Which brings me to my real question for this morning. 350 years into this wonderful Jewish experiment we call America - we have reached a fork in the road. And each and every one of us is going to have to choose. Which way are you headed?

Not long ago - American Judaism looked like a bell curve - with most of us in this sanctuary as part of that bulge in the middle. We looked over one shoulder and saw the extremely assimilated and knew we did not want to go there. We looked over the other shoulder and saw the extremely committed and felt we did not want to go there either - and we took comfort in being Moshe in the Middle. But for whatever reason, the middle has collapsed and each of us is being forced to choose - one way or the other.

I was on a friend's boat this summer, helping to untie the lines as we prepared to sail. For a brief moment I stood with one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat. But, it was a very brief moment. As anyone who has been there knows - you very soon have to make a decision - you better jump onto the boat, or onto the dock or you will end up getting soaked!

Which way have you been jumping?

During this past year did you deepen your families Jewishness or accelerate their assimilation? Are you part of the incredible story of American Jewish revitalization or the unprecedented narrative of American Jewish assimilation? And now that we have clarified the choice the lies before you - which way do you plan on jumping?

Yogi Berra loved to say: “Whenever I come to a fork in the road... I take it!” Well, chuckle if you want, but it seems to me that many of you have adopted a similar strategy regarding the choices we need to make about a Jewish future. The dock and the boat are moving further and further apart. You are going to have to choose!

There is a legendary story told of an elderly Quaker woman who heard of one Joseph Jonas - the first Jew to settle in the city of Cincinnati in 1819. This Quaker woman had

never seen a Jew before and before she died, she wanted, to see a member of the people of the bible, one of God's chosen people. So she traveled over 60 miles to introduce herself. She looked Jonas over, studied him carefully, and then cried out, "Why thee are just like any other man!"

And that has been the wonderful dilemma of this great land - here, for the first time in a long and storied history - we Jews have the option of being just like any other man, like any other woman, like any other teenager or child - and many of you, too many of you are thrilled with the possibilities.

When Sandy Koufax decided not to pitch for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the first game of the World Series on October 6, 1965 because it was Yom Kippur - he was elevated by most Jews of that generation to the closest thing we have to sainthood. Someone who had become "just like them"; actually far better than all of them, made a conscious and free choice to be like "one of us" - and that this outstanding representative of the most American of sports chose the World Series to affirm the uniqueness of his Jewishness - was, well worthy of celebration. And yet when Sean Green decided last year that he too would not play ball on Yom Kippur for those same Dodgers and as he has also informed them that he would not do this year - it was for this generation no longer that big of a deal - not for them and not for us. "Why thee are just like any other man!" Indeed we American Jews have become too much like every other man, woman and child in this great land - and the simple affirmation of one's Jewishness no longer qualifies one for sainthood - no I am afraid the issues that confront us and the choices we each are being called upon to make are much more challenging, much more difficult.

Sarna concludes his book, which I encourage you to purchase and read and I am pleased to inform you that he will be speaking here at Temple Beth Sholom in May as part of our TBS celebrates 350 years of American Jewry - Sarna concludes, with four challenges, four uncertainties, four issues confronting American Judaism at this fork in the road, which he feels are particularly daunting. I intend to make them the subject of conversation at our synagogue in the year to come. I present these challenges to you this morning in the hope that you will give them serious thought and participate in these discussions during the course of this year - for the answers to these questions will determine not only the direction of this synagogue, but your future and the future of Judaism in America.

First: Maybe once it was enough for Sandy Koufax to merely affirm his Jewishness by not playing ball on Yom Kippur - but today we are being asked to make much more subtle distinctions. The very question of who is a Jew has become a subject of enormous controversy. Orthodox, Reform, Conservative Secular and Religious are divided over the most basic issue of how to define who we are. A convert may be a member in good standing in one shul and not even recognized as Jewish in another. Jews for Jesus insist that they can simultaneously identify both as Jews and Christians - while most of the normative Jewish groups insist they cannot. There are JuBus - who try and syncretize Judaism and Buddhism. What exactly are the borders of Judaism? Who is a Jew and who is not? This is a question that will engage us and perplex us in the years to come.

If the first question is “who” is a Jew, the second question is “what” is Jewish and who decides? These are the critical challenges of authority and leadership.

Is gay kosher? And who gets to decide? What are we to say about an Orthodox Rabbi who openly admits that he is gay? Not possible you say? Then you might want to read Orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg's: *Wrestling with God and Man: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition*. And for us in the Conservative movement the challenges are no less daunting: from fidelity to Jewish law to the language of liturgy; to the question of whether we are going to ordain gay rabbis, or perform commitment ceremonies these are vexing issues and we are a movement in danger of fragmenting as we deal with them. And who does get to decide? Almost two-thirds of Conservative synagogue members surveyed feel that religious authority has devolved into their own hands. “Conservative Judaism,” many of you insist, “lets you choose those parts of Judaism you find meaningful and discard those you do not.” That certainly doesn't seem right? Is it any wonder that I was invited to serve this past year on a top level group of leaders in our Movement titled: “Commission to Inspire Commitment to Halacha - Jewish observance” We wrestle with questions like: Is a Conservative Jew anyone who says he or she is one; does paying dues to a Conservative shul entitle you to the label - or are there objective criteria for these determinations?

Some even wonder whether the old distinctions of Conservative, Orthodox or Reform even matter any more. Should we even be highlighting the differences between movements or blurring the lines of distinction? Some argue it is time to enter what they call a post-denominational or trans-denominational Judaism. What do you think?

And thirdly, there are the tough questions regarding our relationship to contemporary culture. Sexual freedom, gender equality, personal autonomy, gay and lesbian rights, openness to intermarriage and a host of other liberal 21st century American values raise anew one of modern America's perennial questions: accommodate to contemporary culture or resist it? There are young Christians who now wear wrist bands with the letters: WWJD - What Would Jesus Do? To help guide them through the dilemmas of contemporary life. The challenge is no less daunting for committed Jews who perceive a conflict of loyalties with faith pulling in one direction and America in the other. What say ye about this?

And finally there is the challenge that American Jews living in a society that prides itself on individualism faces of preserving Jewish identity and unity. What if doing my thing does not promote our thing? Whose thing wins?

Sean Green - the outfielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers, the one who refuses to play not only on Yom Kippur but Kol Nidre eve as well -still a model for all Jews no? Well, he like many of us -is a complicated story. Sean Green never had a Bar Mitzvah, he is intermarried, and he is raising his daughter both as a Christian and as a Jew - but he won't play ball on Yom Kippur! That sort of says it all - don't you think? Many of us are

still trying to keep one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat - and it is getting harder and harder!

“With so many questions and issues and tensions confronting us - is it any wonder that on this 350th anniversary of our arrival on American soil, many of us feel a little bewildered and uncertain?

Should our focus be on quality to enhance Judaism or should we focus on quantity to increase our numbers? Should we embrace intermarriage as an opportunity for outreach or condemn it as a disaster for the children? Should we build religious bridges or fortify religious walls? Should we strengthen religious authority or promote religious autonomy? Should we harmonize Judaism with contemporary culture or uphold Jewish tradition against contemporary culture? Should we compromise for the sake of Jewish unity or stand firm for cherished Jewish principles? Posing questions that could cross a rabbi's eyes....

The questions that confront us are daunting. But if there is one thing that has never frightened a Jew - it is tough questions. In the 4000 years since Abraham first challenged the Creator of the Universe with the question: hashofeyt kol haaretz lo yaaseh mishpat? “Will the God of the whole earth not do justly?” We Jews have never run from an argument, never shied away from a debate.

Do you have an opinion on the critical issues I raised this morning? Of course you do! We need you and we need your opinion and we need it now! You are the only resource we have to sustain and renew Jewish life. We here at Temple Beth Sholom are committed to the deepening of the Jewish experience and the enhancement of Jewish identity here in America.

This past Monday night well over 100 High School teenagers - your children, gathered for the first night of our MBS, our Machon Beth Sholom Hebrew High School. I wish all of you could have been here to see what I saw. Our shul was filled with young people - young people who didn't have to be here - young people who chose to be here - coming to gather in a celebration and affirmation of their commitment to be Jews here in America. Oh, they might not have exactly realized or been able to tell you that was what they were doing - but they were. I sat with 15 High School seniors - and we discussed their plans for college, I asked to what extent Jewishness factored into their choice of which schools to apply to - and these incredible children, your children - were able to talk, discuss, debate - intelligently and articulately what they wanted for their future as American Jews. These young people were choosing their path for the coming year - what about you?

Some 40 people from our congregation are embarking on a new process called Project Re-Imagine. It is a two year process of study, conversation, and exploration about what we are and what we should be as a synagogue. It is a continuation of our Vision Beth Sholom study that we completed last year. Everything from the way we educate our children to the way we worship as a community is up for discussion. These members -

your friends, are choosing a path of Jewish commitment for the coming year - what about you.

23 TBS members joined me in an incredible trip to Israel this past summer, another 12 of our teenagers participated in teen tours to Israel - they made a choice to explore and expand on their Jewish identity - where will you be traveling this year?

I love this country. I love its challenges and I love its opportunities. On this the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jews in America - I call for a Declaration of Jewish Independence. Let it be resolved on this the 2nd day of Tishrei 5765, corresponding to September 17, 2004, in solemn assembly, we hereby affirm our intention to renew the contract for Jewish life in America, I propose that it be one based on the simple affirmation that we can best serve the interest of this great land that has bestowed so much upon us - by being authentic Jews.

As amateur gentiles we have little to offer this great land that it does not already have. But as Jews we have a vital and precious gift. For centuries we lived in poverty and persecution, not only surviving, but building vast communities of learning and piety. And so must our task be in this land of acceptance and affluence. For centuries we Jews - imprisoned in our ghettos, clung to our Torah and had something to say to mankind - but no one was listening. Today, we Jews have the ears of non-Jews on every level of society - they are listening with curiosity and interest. We are a force to be reckoned with - in America and in Israel. We have achieved prominence in culture, business, government and academia. Do we have the will to shed our light on the landscape of this great nation?

350 years ago, 23 Jews first stepped on these great shores with nothing more than hope and determination - we are the fulfillment of their hopes, we are the culmination of their dreams, we are realization of their prayers we are their children, we are their heirs.

What will they say of us 350 years from now?