

## WILL YOUR GRANDCHILDREN BE JEWISH?

I am moved by the anguish of Jewish parents and grandparents over the future of their families' connections to Judaism. In this essay I wish to explore the all-too-common predicaments and their solutions, given the elders' life-long hope that their religious affiliation would be extended to future generations. Instead of getting to watch with satisfaction their children and grandchildren inspired by the beauty and wisdom of Judaism, too many grandparents have been experiencing deep sadness when contemplating that their descendants and the Jewish community are parting ways. The losses are in the millions since World War II and this tragedy is only getting worse.

The predicaments to which I refer are all the different ways that children and grandchildren leave Judaism. They include intermarriage along with many other modern distractions or spiritual/philosophical problems. Intermarriage of your children will definitely have a serious impact on whether the grandchildren will be Jewish. It doesn't have to be a complete disaster though; its future can be shaped to a large extent. In almost all cases the Jewish spouse and his/her children will experience a variety of tugging that make a Jewish life difficult. This could result from the attempt to blend Judaism with another religion whose fundamental beliefs are inconsistent with ours. There can even be far more serious demands such as baptism or parochial school, etc. I don't want to dwell on intermarriage at this time; rather I want to concentrate on what parents and grandparents can do to stem the tide of departures. I have suggestions for family and Jewish communal life that will keep the young people within our faith in a strong, healthy way.

Sometimes the predicament is merely a distancing on the part of the offspring based on the current politically-correct beliefs or the in-vogue scientific theories. There are many examples of each. The former would include relativism such as all major religions being equally correct and people-friendly or the notion that Judaism is now superfluous to our ethically enlightened society. The latter might include a young couple's decision not to have their boys circumcised, not to observe the dietary rules, and so on. I feel that many of these nightmares can be avoided by a more viable Judaism.

The large majority of losses to the Jewish families are not all that dramatic. Jews are leaving in very large numbers but quietly. Jewish practice and affiliations decrease to practically nothing. Visualize hundreds of thousands of Jews, a huge crowd, walking away from us without a sound. In reality, holidays have fewer celebrants each year, the synagogues get gradually emptier, there is less interest in Jewish education and social services, and all the institutions have a harder time finding time, energy, and funds. This essay is not about the young adults mentioned above; it is not about the specific problems within families. We want to know where the disappointed parents, grandparents, and Judaism in general, are going wrong and how things can be corrected.

My solution has three components. In other words, a continuing and even thriving Judaism will require a three-fold approach.

1. An interpretation of Judaism that is different than the ones currently offered and that returns to our basic principles
2. Parental involvement in line with the interpretation of Judaism in 1.
3. Institutional reform in line with the interpretation of Judaism in 1.

## 1. A New Interpretation of Judaism Is Necessary

The major Jewish denominations are trying every band-aid measure to stop the hemorrhaging without asking the most basic question: are future generations being offered a viable form of Judaism. I, of course, believe that they are not. We need to stop scurrying about looking for stop-gap measures and concentrate on the really big question, the one that requires deep and brave thinking: are the young being given good reasons to stay Jewish.

As I have written in other essays neither the orthodox nor the liberal denominations are offering a Judaism that can carry our religion into the distant future. Parents can only pass along to the children what their religious leaders are teaching. We have today the choice of an excessively demanding orthodoxy and a Judaism-is-whatever-you-want-it-to-be liberal orientation. Neither one is satisfying to the hundreds of thousands of Jews who opt out every generation. In brief, the large majority of Jews regard orthodoxy as so overloaded with rules and regulations as to be unbearable. On the other hand, the liberal approaches are far removed from the specific suggestions and overall philosophy of the founding documents; their Judaism consists mostly of physical trappings and cultural details (language, culture, foods, humor, etc.) mixed with the present day notions of good behavior. This approach is incapable of inspiring/motivating.

Of course the Jewish leadership is doing a lot of hand-wringing and pretty much regards the present trends as impossible to reverse. They blame too much competition from other spiritual outlets, too much materialism, lack of outward pressure to remain Jewish, or lack of segregation. I think most rabbis feel that in a non-Jewish society we cannot compete for the attention of the next generation. These aspects of modern society do present challenges but they would not be insurmountable if approached by a more logically sound, people-friendly, but idealistic Jewishness. If you ask most leaders what can be done to save Judaism, they unfortunately have no ideas; they can philosophize and rationalize but as for making changes in what they have been doing for decades, they are paralyzed.

Strangely, there are even a fair number of Jews and their leaders who think we are doing well, who don't see any problems at all. This is amazing to me because if a person studies participation in Jewish religious or social activities over time or merely talks to a fair number of families, he cannot help becoming depressed.

Jews need another choice. Fortunately we don't have to create this "new" choice. Rather we only need to go back to the simple but inspiring fundamentals of our religion. This is where my Back-to-Basics Judaism can help. We need to remove much of the heavy baggage (as in rules and regulations) and then add a mission that's worthy of the next generation's energies.

The fact that the Jewish people have a special role to fulfill in this world, namely, to demonstrate the benefits of our laws/values, is so important. The idea of "mission" or being "chosen" for a purpose is very politically incorrect these days but young people and really everybody wants some life-long, building-a-wonderful-society type of meaning to their lives. Everyone wants their life attached to something beneficial to humanity, something serious and long-lasting. You would never hear this type of authentic Jewish zeal from today's more vocal leaders. Instead they harp away at how we have nothing unique to offer, that the only thing unique about us is our past. That message is coming through loud and clear to your children and grandchildren, causing them to reason that Jewishness is a cute bit of family history, the source of some childhood memories, but having little relevance to their adult lives.

## 2. Parental involvement

So, will your grandchildren be Jewish? It will only happen if you take your Jewishness seriously and set a good example for your family. It is one of the most beautiful and fundamental ideas of Judaism that we teach by example. We should model primarily four things:

- a. Jewishly ethical behavior, which is not always the politically correct behavior
- b. Interest in Jewish law, as given in the Five Books of Moses, and its interpretations
- c. Involvement in the Jewish community and its various institutions
- d. Celebration of Judaism at the times and in the ways recommended by the Five Books of Moses

Foremost among parental responsibilities is the teaching of the law to the children. The bible puts much emphasis on this. This educational effort should be a daily feature of home life and could take the form of discussing appropriate behavior in the young people's and in the parents' daily activities or discussing community and national challenges from the Jewish standpoint. The Jewish law should permeate all of life, at home and outside.

Nobody promised that it would be easy to transmit Judaism. Dropping off the kids at Hebrew school and taking no interest otherwise in their studies, talking sports or other stuff instead of the ethical challenges of the day, and in general continuing with the watered down food, music, or humor-based Judaism of our times is much easier. Taking your children occasionally to the synagogue will not do it. Even diligently following the sensibilities of the current denominations will not do it because present-day Judaism is not very much Jewish fundamentals oriented.

I feel that Back To Basics Judaism can raise the chances that your grandchildren will be Jewish. In addition to that, they will be proud Jews, proud of having something very valuable to give humanity. The parents must convey to their children that we are part of something important. The parents must believe this because there is no other way for Judaism to thrive and for your grandchildren to be part of the Jewish future.

## 3. Institutional Reform

Jewish institutions are not doing a good job of supporting the survival of Judaism. Instead of raising and maintaining vital Jewish interests, they miss valuable opportunities. Here are some recommendations:

- a. Abolish "hebrew school" as we've known it. There should instead be a Family Jewish School, offering classes for every age group and attended by the whole family. Please see my article about JEWISH EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES, where I urge adults to set an example for their children in the area of lifelong Jewish education. Parents and grandparents, are you willing to do this?
- b. We must seriously alter the nature of synagogue services, by making them more interactive and intellectually stimulating. You must demand that your synagogue stop doing business as usual and start engaging people of all ages. If services were more interesting, young people might actually go of their own free will. Don't stand by and watch the congregations crumble for lack of energy and creativity. When the average age of your synagogue approaches seventy, you know that the services are not appealing to younger people. How much longer must that continue? Please see my article about PRAYER AND RELIGIOUS SERVICES.

The two foci of the service should be discussion of the weekly Torah portion and the relationship

between those teachings and personal, community, and national issues.

Interaction between congregants is crucial. Passion is also. There should be more singing and instruments. Even in the holy temple of ancient Jerusalem there was plenty of music. Our services have become extremely somber (i.e.dull) and tend to imitate the surrounding religions.

- a. Jewish celebrations are not linked enough to our values. For example, bar-mitzvahs are notoriously overdone and apparently they are seldom successful in keeping the youth involved with Judaism. Why is that? Unfortunately there is the feeling by the youngster that he is "finished".The relevance of Jewish values at every stage of his life has been underemphasized up to that point. A sense of mission or special purpose for the Jewish people has been completely omitted from all discussions. No wonder the child feels that there's nothing much left to being Jewish.

Weddings are another good occasion to emphasize Jewish aspects of a married couple's life together. The celebration should refer to a life-long participation in the Jewish community, to Jewish love, Jewish marriage, Jewish modesty, Jewish fidelity, and to bringing up a new Jewish generation.. In other words, the wedding should be genuinely and thoroughly Jewish.

- b. Jewish social services are an opportunity to demonstrate the Jewish approach to charity, responsibility, justice, and so on; but when have you seen or heard anything at such an agency that even hints at their justification being Jewish law or acknowledges that Judaism has a lot of specific things to say about helping the needy or obtaining justice for all. It is politically correct these days not to claim that our motivation is Jewish but unfortunately our helpful inclination is still not a universal thought-pattern.

In summary, to help your grandchildren stay Jewish, demand a Judaism that offers them simplicity, ethics, pride, and mission, and then live your Judaism so that the grandchildren will understand more clearly what the benefits of Judaism are.

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