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Upcoming Events:

**Edah at the JCC in NYC-
Dec. 14th,
21st 7:30 pm**

10,000 people are dieing monthly in DARFUR- what are you doing to make NEVER AGAIN a reality?

Vayetze: Woe to the Messenger Who Forgets the Message!

by Rabbi Bob Carroll

Like Yitzchak and Avraham before him, Yakov experiences a theophany which defines not only the course of his own life but which reveals to him much about the fate, and mission, of his descendants. At the end of his dream-vision at Beit El, God speaks to Yakov thusly: "I am the Lord your God, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land on which you lie, to you I will give it, and to your seed. And your seed will be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, east, north, and south. And in you and in your seed will all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold I am with you... and will bring you back into this land..."

These verses hint that in some sense the sufferings of exile are necessary in shaping the character of the Jewish nation. When thinking of "the dust of the earth", one is reminded of Gandhi's comment that "The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him." This essential humility is a defining element for any truly spiritual personality. Indeed the Rashbam understands verse 14 in a similar way, though without making the causal connection explicit: "Only after your seed has reached the lowest depths of misery and degradation and is treated like the very dust of the earth will salvation come..." "But it seems to us that in some sense the exilic experience and the humility which it brings is preparatory for our ultimate role: "...in you... will all the nations of the earth be blessed."

Why should this be so? At first glance the answer seems obvious – The Torah itself speaks about the Jewish soul, and our ethical sensitivity to others, being forged in the crucible of exile. The early German Reformers spoke of galut as a positive thing, a natural historical step which enabled the Jewish nation to fulfill its universalist mission to teach that all human beings are Images of God. They saw Zionism as a step backward, a retreat into less lofty, more primitive nationalistic values. It is natural, even for us, to think of these two thrusts, particularism and universalism, as being mutually incompatible. Liberal Judaism, which emphasized the universalist thrust, has not been able to ensure its own survival. Our own camp, which has been rather more successful at ensuring that our children remain Jews, is more inner-directed, yet we too have challenges: It is undeniable that we have become experts at devising strategies to survive as a tiny minority culture without a national home or center. But there is a danger that after 2000 years of exile we have begun to see survival as an end in itself; we have perhaps forgotten, or at least submerged, what we are surviving FOR. Woe to the messenger who forgets the message!

For Rav Kuk, the dichotomy between self-concern and universalism is an illusion which arises from our limited vision, which tends to see things in parts rather than grasp the totality. In truth there is no opposition between universalism and particularism because they are in need of each other – without a goal of redemption for all mankind, our national survival is pointless and self-serving. Yet a Judaism which has no backbone, which has no courage to stand against the tide and remain true to itself will neither survive nor ennoble the world.

Paradoxically, it is the return to Zion and the rebirth of Jewish nationalism which actualizes and energizes our universalist mission, because it is only in our own land that the Jewish spirit can apply itself creatively, and manifest the Torah's imperative to build and model for the world a truly utopian society – in the economic structure of our country; in the distinctively ethical actions of our army; in art, in music, in literature, in health care, in the legal system, in agriculture, in labor practices, and in the affairs of the marketplace too. God's Kingdom is not merely a kingdom of the spirit, or even of the synagogue and study hall.

Diaspora Judaism is stunted because it cannot apply itself to these concerns in their full breadth, and because of the tendency toward xenophobia and spiritual timidity that millenia of focusing on our survival in exile has engendered. But a Judaism which is whole and healthy doesn't merely know how to survive; it cherishes its true nature, in humility and servitude, as ultimately other-directed. We do not only exist for ourselves, and neither do the rest of the nations exist for our sake. To be a Jew, as Heschel wrote, is "to carry the gold of God in our souls to forge the gate of the Kingdom" - for all peoples. So there can be no contradiction between loving Israel and loving humankind. Writes R. Kuk: "Restriction in deed and expansiveness of spirit jointly constitute the primary core of the nature of Israel, which is, at one and the same time, 'A people that shall dwell alone' and 'A light unto the nations.'"

Interestingly, this interrelatedness of particular and universal concern gives us a means to evaluate the claims of new movements or ideas to Jewish legitimacy: A principle of endogamy is valid and must be maintained because our role in history requires our physical survival. But anything which devalues or denies the Divine image that resides in all humankind is not valid, for this would deny the very message that we are charged to bear witness to throughout history.

But we cannot heal others until we ourselves are whole. May all of us, as Yakov's children, merit to play a role in the rebirth of Judaism in our own land, and therefore in healing and bringing blessing to both Am Yisrael and the world.

Rabbi Bob Carroll is Edah's Program Director.

Why Be Jewish?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Stern

A vision-oriented Judaism is a sacred endowment for the future of Jewry.

It seems that the American Jewish community will do just about anything to make future generations Jewish. Through their demographic studies, our community tracks the rise of Jewish assimilation and intermarriage and the rejection by many young Jews of their identity. To remedy this problem, the Jewish community tries numerous strategies: getting twenty-year old hipsters to attend Jewish events, employing advertising gimmicks, giving free Shabbat lunch buffets, and disseminating Guide for the Intermarried handbooks. Many of these initiatives and programs have had great value. They have given rise to new Jewish identities and have forced Jewish elites to think outside the box. But they have still failed to address the real question facing every Jew under the age of forty. Why be Jewish in the first place?

The project of making Jews committed to their identity has been taken up by groups across the Jewish spectrum. Some try to convince people that being Jewish is cool. Others claim that neither a psychiatrist nor a social worker but Judaism and only Judaism will truly improve emotional health. Still others promote Judaism by telling young adults that through it they will meet their marriage partners. Unfortunately, such approaches miss the fact that people do not need Judaism to make them cool, emotionally healthy or sexually fulfilled; there are more effective ways of achieving those ends.

Advertising executives, media gurus, and Jewish entrepreneurs have carefully crafted these groups' messages based on poll-driven strategies. Now while such poll-driven Judaism may lure people to synagogue pews for a week or two, it often fails to provide compelling reasons for them to stay in those pews. Ultimately, telling Jews to come and be Jewish but not being prepared to offer them a good reason why is comparable to running estate-planning seminars for the childless elderly at minivan dealerships: they'll come, but they won't buy.

For many baby-boomers, the narratives of Zionism, Tradition and Change, and Judaism as a Civilization, as well as the synthesis of Torah Umadda (Judaism and Science), adequately explained why to be Jewish. These answers were not thought up overnight, however. They emerged from a Jewish universe that saw the production of great Jewish essayists, writers, and, most importantly, public thinkers as a communal priority. Did anyone at the recent General Assembly even address the lack of public intellectual leadership in the American Jewish community?

Sadly, long gone are the days when the Reform movement could boast of the all-encompassing ethical worldviews of Rabbis such

as Jacob Petuchowski. Who today has filled the shoes of the Conservative movement's Robert Gordis and Milton Steinberg? Where are the intellectual descendents of Orthodoxy's Eliezer Berkowitz and Walter Wurzberger? And it does not begin to do justice to the memories of public intellectuals to ask what is being done to continue the legacies of Soloveitchik, Kaplan and Heschel.

Of course there were many flaws with that bygone era. Embarrassingly for all the above movements, not one woman is on this list. Yet, in American Jewry today the cultivation of intellectual public leaders of either gender is almost extinct. How many widely recognizable Jewish thinkers are there under the age of fifty? Magazines and journals such as Judaism, Shema, The Reconstructionist, and Tradition that provided a forum for many of the aforementioned thinkers, have been reduced to a shadow of what they were. While some new embryonic web journals have appeared, none have received the type of support needed to produce a serious group of writers and a critical mass of readers. As some have noted, there is a serious brain drain affecting American Jewish life – a brain drain whose effects will only become more pronounced with the passage of time.

Rabbinic seminaries, think tanks, Jewish organizations and the broader philanthropic community must give greater priority to generating religious vision and bold new narratives. Some nascent projects such as Alan Brill's Kavvanah fellowship and some more established national foundations like Michael Steinhardt's Jewish Life Network are now trying to re-infuse vision and grand narrative into the Jewish conversation. These efforts should not only be applauded but should also be supported irrespective of their immediate impact.

A vision-oriented Judaism is a sacred endowment for the future of Jewry. In an age where initiatives are judged by their quick, statistically verifiable results, a long-term plan for a rebirth of great Jewish narratives explaining why to be Jewish can sound both slightly nebulous and daunting. But before we dismiss this pressing issue as but one of many pressing issues facing us, do the future of Judaism a favor and imagine a Judaism in which no one cared to answer the question "why be Jewish?" I cannot.

Rabbi Eliyahu Stern is Scholar-in-Residence at Park East Synagogue and is finishing a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies at the University of California at Berkeley

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