

Sliding Home

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, Temple Solel
Yom Kippur Morning, 2019

Let me ask you all a simple question.

If a rabbi in America wants to be successful, what do you think that he or she should know?

You would say: Torah. Bible. Rabbinic literature, like midrash and Talmud. How to lead a service. Medieval and modern Jewish thought. Jewish history. Counselling. Public speaking. Management. Fund-raising.

You would be right.

Except, that was not the advice that one of the America's greatest rabbis offered his students.

That rabbi was Rabbi Louis Finkelstein.

Louis Finkelstein was the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the seminary for Conservative rabbis, between 1940 and 1972. He actually lived to be close to one hundred years old.

He was a friend of President Roosevelt and President Kennedy.

In 1957, he enticed Chief Justice Earl Warren to spend a Shabbat with him – hanging out and studying Talmud.

Louis Finkelstein was so important that he appeared on the cover of the October 15, 1951 issue of Time magazine – the only time that a rabbi has appeared on the cover of a national news magazine.

Back in the 1920s, Rabbi Finkelstein was talking to a young rabbinical student, and he was giving the young man some professional advice.

"Young man," he said. "Do you want to be a rabbi in America?"

"Yes, Rabbi Finkelstein. More than anything else in the world."

"Then, do you know what you need to know about? The most important thing?"

"Yes, Rabbi Finkelstein. Tell me."

"Baseball. If you want to succeed as a rabbi in America, you have to know about baseball."

Rabbi Finkelstein was telling the truth. Because, for American Jews, who are the real heroes of this season?

Hank Greenberg -- who refused to play baseball on Rosh Ha Shanah.

And, of course, Sandy Koufax -- who refused to play on Yom Kippur.

Why is there such a deep connection between the Jews and baseball?

It is very simple.

Baseball is the ultimate Jewish sport.

Baseball is Jewish history.

Stay with me on this.

You start at home, which is the land of Israel.

You journey into the infield -- which is the exile into Diaspora.

And, what's the whole point of the game?

To come home.

And, if you have to: to slide home.

Let me share with you what it means for Jews to come home – or even slide home.

Every fifty years, according to the book of Leviticus, something must happen. We don't know if it ever really happened. Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps it was an aspiration. Perhaps it was simply an imaginative sketch of the way that society is supposed to work.

This is what happened. Let us say that your family had fallen into poverty, God forbid. You lost your home. You lost your land.

You count seven years – a Shabbat of years. You multiply that by seven. You add one.

That is the fiftieth year. Seven times seven plus one. In the fiftieth year, you could reclaim that land. It meant that you would not be permanently homeless. It means that poverty was not eternal. This idea is so important that it even appears on the Liberty Bell: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." Liberty – meaning not just freedom, but economic freedom.

That is the idea of the jubilee – what the Torah calls the yovel.

Leviticus then goes on to say – that in the fiftieth year, in the year of the yovel, in the year of the jubilee – they would blow the shofar – when? On Yom Kippur. That was to be the beginning of the jubilee year!

And as a result of that proclamation: Ish el mishpachto tashuvu: everyone must return to their family.

You must slide home.

Which brings me to this moment in the history of Temple Solel.

Fifty years ago, God said to a man named Abe Durbin, just as he had said to Abraham 2500 years before that:

Go forth from thy native land, yea, even from Miami Beach. And go to the land that I will show you.

He came unto this wilderness, this great and vast desert and/or swampland that lay west of where any Jew had ever gone before, the place between the waters, the waters of the Atlantic, and the waters of the Everglades.

Abe Durbin said unto himself, and unto those who had come with him:

This is the land of Emerald Hills. Look all around you, and you will see no hills. Maybe speed bumps.

But I say unto you: The Jews shall live here, for I shall build them houses, and on Sheridan Street, we shall build a temple unto the LORD.

And he called unto Rabbi Robert Frazin, and he said unto him: Thou shalt be our Moses. We shall name this place Solel. It means pathfinder. It means trailblazer. That is who we are, and that is what we will be.

This year, as you know, marks the fiftieth year of Temple Solel. We sit in this sanctuary, and we say to our founders: We have kept faith with your vision. We are here.

But, let us be honest. As we look back fifty years in time, let us recognize that we live in a different Jewish world from the world of our founders. There are challenges that face us today that they could not have imagined.

First, they could not have imagined the most striking demographic change in American Jewry.
Fifty years ago, we thought that Orthodoxy in America was essentially dead, a relic of the old world. We were wrong.

Fifty and forty and thirty years ago, this is where young non-Orthodox families were moving.

But, the goddess of real estate is a capricious goddess, and it is impossible to mollify her.

If Jewish history has taught us anything, it is that communities come, and they go. Jews come, and they go. We are a wandering tribe.

Emerald Hills has become increasingly modern Orthodox, and Israeli. They are good neighbors. Our young people, in particular, know what it is like to grow up in a rich, textured, diverse Jewish community.

But, the number of non-Orthodox Jews in 33021 has most likely diminished.

Second, they could not have imagined the sociological tsunamis that have engulfed America.
The truth is: people do not join institutions the way they used to. It is not only synagogues. It is churches – all churches, even the evangelicals. It is civic organizations. It is PTAs.

Because, what is the real religion of the American middle class?

The religion is individualism. I – in my sacred individualism – have desires. I have infinite desires. I have infinite choices. I can buy whatever I want -- whenever I want it. I don't even have to go into a store. I can go online. I can go to Amazon. I need not even interact with anyone.

Everything is a transaction – and you can have **transaction**, or you can have **transformation** – but you cannot have both. You must choose.

How do I measure the worth of something? By how good it makes me feel – at the moment. Where do I get meaning? From things and experiences that belong to me.

Notice how I am going to flip this.

Judaism says: we can live our lives differently. We can live our lives better.

Where do I get meaning? Listen carefully.

You get meaning from you -- belonging to something bigger than you.

It's not just about you. It is about you as part of your family, as part of your community, as part of your people, as part of the world.

Third, they could not have imagined the theological transformation of American Jews.

What do the surveys tell us about American Jews?

- Jews show lower levels of religious commitment than the general public.
- Jews believe in God less than the general public.
- Jews attend religious services less than the general public.

Rabbi Sharon Brous asks the questions that haunt me:

We live in a culture of narcissism, of over-entitlement, of personalization. Everything has to be about me. How do we get from there to a sense of community?

We live in the culture of the Iphone. My attention span is no longer than that of the average gerbil. How do we make Jewish study – which means serious attention – how do we make that compelling?

We live in a culture of logging in and logging out. What does it mean to live as part of a people -- where you just can't simply log out – or, where you can't unfriend each other on God's Facebook page?

The answer is right there in Leviticus.

Ish el mishpachto tashuvu: each of us must return to our family – that phrase that Rabbi Frazin first placed upon our lips -- the family of Solel.

In a world where people throw around that phrase “family values,” let me explore with you what Solel’s family values might be.

First, the family is more than the sum of its parts.

The Shabbat after my father’s death was the first Friday evening of the month. That is always our Friday Night Live service. The band plays. It is festive and joyous.

One of our members asked me: You are in mourning. Wouldn’t the service be too festive, too joyful for you?

I was clear in my answer to the questioner – who only meant well, who was utterly sensitive, utterly solicitous of my feelings.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “But, let there be music, and let there be joy.”

Why? Because of the deepest truth I know about Judaism.

The emotions of the community, and the emotions of the calendar – always take precedence over the emotions of the individual.

Communal joy overrides private sadness. Shabbat, which is a public time of joy, curtails shiva, which is an individual time of sadness. The mourner stops mourning for the day.

Communal sadness overrides private joy. Yom Ha Shoah, which is a public time of sadness, trumps a wedding, which is a private time of joy.

Second: the family that prays together, stays together.

I am going to ask you to do something for Solel – at the moment, a very small thing.

Come to Solel in the coming year – **worship with us three more times than you normally would have.** Read your family's poetry. Sing your family's song. You're your family's stories. In a world where the word "tribal" or "tribalistic" has become a slur – reclaim it. Own it. Be a tribe. This is the family table. Be with your family.

Third: a family stands not only by itself. It stands for things. We have stood up in the face of three of the greatest sins of our time.

Against the sin of complacency. Our tikkun olam committee has been the singular group of Jews in the entire Reform movement – to raise to national and international attention the single most pressing existential issue that faces our community, our state, our country, and our planet. That is climate change – in particular, Sea Level Rise. We have made a difference in the world.

Against the sin of Jewish ignorance. Every Shabbat morning, a crowd of some of the finest people I know, and that you know, gather in the library for Torah study.. Every Shabbat we dig into the texts of our people to figure out: what does this mean? What does this mean to me? What does this mean to the world?

Every Sunday morning, our students and their parents and the cantor and I sit in the chapel. We pray. We learn together. We have a brand new radical curriculum. We teach values. We are teaching our children how to learn together in pairs – which is the most ancient way of Jewish learning. We have new technology. The spirit has never been better.

Every Tuesday evening, our teens and I sit in my study – and we learn. This is not just Jewish education. This is leadership training. Who wouldn't want that for their kids?

Ask yourselves: do you really want your kids to go to college, and to be completely unable to answer the challenges of their suite mates and/or tenured professors who tell them that Israel is an apartheid state, that religious ritual is for fools, that God is merely an illusion?

Against the sin of Islamophobia.

I have not told anyone this story. I have been saving it for Yom Kippur.

This past year, thanks to the generosity of Joyce Bloch, we welcomed to this congregation a noted Muslim scholar and leader. It was a powerful weekend for this congregation. Our friend enjoyed it immensely.

Days later, Congresswoman Ilhan Omar made the first in her series of outrageous comments about Israel and the Jews. I called my friend: “Is there anything that you can do about this?”

He said to me these words: “We are working on it.”

Several days later, Ilhan apologized (it turned out to be empty words, but that is another story).

My friend texted me: “You see. It worked.”

What worked?

I cannot be sure. But this is what I believe happened.

The “we” of “we are working on it” referred to our friend and other American Muslim leaders. I think that my friend and his colleagues contacted Ilhan and told her to just stop.

I believe that his weekend at Solel had so touched our Muslim friend that he took a real risk in his community. He went out on a limb to reprimand Ilhan Omar.

One Muslim teacher’s relationship to our people made a difference. That is what it means to be Solel. That is what it means to be a trailblazer, what it means to be a pathfinder.

That is what it means to come home – to come home to our family – to our sense of togetherness, to our rituals, to our values, to our vision.

You might ask yourselves: why does it matter? Why does Solel matter? Why does any synagogue matter?

It is because of the story in which we located ourselves.

Not just the fifty year old story of Temple Solel.

How about this? There is a fifty times fifty year old story. That is your story. What story is that?

It is the story of the Jewish people.

Why does it matter? Why does what we do matter? What are we trying to do here?

Here goes. This is your story. This is our story. Way before Emerald Hills. Way before Brooklyn. Way before Poland. Way before.

God created the world — something like 5780 years ago.

God created Adam and Eve.

God placed them in the Garden of Eden.

God gave them one measly mitzvah — don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

They ate from the tree.

God exiled them from Eden.

It only got worse. Cain killed Abel.

Ten generations later, humanity had debased itself so much that God needed a lot of water to clean up the mess. That was the story of Noah.

Except, right after the flood waters had receded, Noah got drunk.

It got worse. The people of earth built the Tower of Babel. They tried to storm the heavens, just to appease their grandiosity.

At this point, God was done. Done. God gave up on the project of creating a perfect world. Wasn't gonna happen.

So, what did God do?

God chose one branch of Noah's family. God chose one man. God chose Abraham. God told him to leave his homeland and to go to a place that God would show him.

God said this: I'm taking one man, one family, one people, one land — and I am giving them the task of modeling for humanity what the world could be like. I am creating a people — not only of the book, but of the laboratory. I am creating a people of the moral laboratory. I am creating a people that would transform the world and lift the world from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the profane to the holy.

That's us. That's Judaism. That's Solel. That's why we're here. That's how we roll. That's how big the stakes are.

It is the mission of the Jewish people to be trailblazers and the pathfinders.

To where?

Back to the Garden of Eden. Back to the way that God dreamed of the world at the very beginning of time.

That is what it truly means to come home.