

Rabbi Joshua Beraha
Rosh Hashanah 5779
Temple Micah

The 21st Century American Synagogue

At the age of 15, Moses Mendelssohn walked over 75 miles from Dessau, where he was born in 1729, to Berlin, which was the nearest big city. The walk took him five days. But see, it was worth it, because he was following his teacher, the chief rabbi of Dessau. Moses' father was a Torah scribe who had educated him on traditional Jewish sources and the minutia of Jewish law, but Moses craved more, a world beyond.

When he got to Berlin—still a walled-city at the time—he entered through a gate reserved for Jews and cattle. He walked 75 miles to enter the city walls with cattle. Though he did receive a visa to stay in the city, Mendelssohn enjoyed absolutely no civil rights. And though he eventually was able to acquire the liberal education he sought out and make himself known among the other burgeoning German Enlightenment thinkers, he remained forever an outsider. Why? Because he was a Jew. His friends and acquaintances - people like Immanuel Kant and the playwright G.E. Lessing - wondered, for a man so smart why not simply convert?

Mendelssohn was split between worlds, and so he spent his life wondering how he could become a full part of German society while preserving his ancestral roots.

For the two hundred and fifty years since, Jewish communities have continued to ask--in the words of one Mendelssohn scholar-- how "Jewish heritage, while rooted in the past and continuous with it, can be won anew by every new generation in the language of its day and in the light of its own conditions." And there lies a question I ask myself daily--how do we translate Judaism into the language of our day, in light of our own conditions?

Recently I've been thinking a lot about my maternal grandmother, Charlotte, who turned 92 this year, which makes her part of the Greatest generation. 92 and still sharp, and smart as a whip. Born in Pennsylvania in 1926 to Bertha, a first generation American, and Morris, an immigrant from Poland, she grew up in Avoca, a town just south of Scranton. Like many small-town Jews of the time, her father was a small

business owner who had both a gas station and a BBQ restaurant. The Jews in Avoca—and my grandmother can still name them all—were members of a Temple in the nearby town of Pittston where all the Jewish families went. According to my grandmother, there was no question that as Jews you belonged to a Temple.

After my grandmother met my grandfather at Penn State and they were married, they moved to an apartment on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn where they had two children, David and Karen (my mom), before heading for the suburbs of Plainview, Long Island where they had their third child, Amy. In Plainview, the Wasser family saw the decision to join the newly formed Reform congregation Beth Elohim as an obvious one. The temple was not just the center of religious life for them, but a social one too.

But though the walls of Berlin and other walled cities had long since fallen, separateness and particularity were still the order of the day. Like Mendelssohn's, my nana's identity was continuous with her roots, strongly anchored in the past, even as she sought to translate Judaism into the language of her day and in light of her own conditions. Though the context was different--18th century Germany is not 20th century America, and in this country we've belonged more than in others--what held true in both contexts for the Jewish community was the notion of a rigid, inherited, ethnic identity. This was the case for most of the 20th century.

Some history, with gratitude to Rabbi Darren Kleinberg, who in his book *Hybrid Judaism*, brings this history to light.

In the early 1900's the playwright Israel Zangwill suggested, through a play entitled "The Melting Pot," that America, with its influx of immigrants, can be like a "melting pot." The main character, a Russian Jew, is forward looking. After losing family in a pogrom, the future will be brighter, he hopes. There will be no Jews or Christians, Russians or Germans, but instead, *Americans*.

In the 1920's the philosopher Horace Kallen refuted Zangwill and wrote about "cultural pluralism," claiming an immigrant's hold on his or her particularity strengthens our country. He compared America to an orchestra, with its various ethnic groups each contributing to the greater whole; diversity strengthens our nation.

In the 1950's the writer Will Herberg refuted Kallen and moved the conversation from "cultural pluralism" to "religious pluralism" and claimed in his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, that Americans share a common culture but are divided along religious lines. Immigrants are asked to change when they arrive in America, he claimed, but they are not asked to change their religion.

In the 1960's and 70's, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan challenged Zangwill, Kallen and Herberg. They didn't think America had melted into one unified nation, nor did they think religion was a primary identity marker of Americans. They proposed an idea that by the 1980's would come to be known as multiculturalism-- many cultures, one nation.

What all of these theories of identity share is the notion that ethnicity or religion are defining factors and are not easily shed.

But for the Jews, one hundred years since Zangwill's play, I follow my teacher Rabbi Hoffman in stating that in 21st century America, the Jewish community is in a post-ethnic age. As Hoffman explains, Jewish culture hardly unites us as it did in previous generations. As any New Yorker will tell you, *everyone* wants to get in to the new Russ & Daughters Cafe (Orchard, just north of Delancey) opened on the 100th year anniversary of the Jewish deli's founding.

My grandmother inherited Judaism from her two Jewish parents and her four Jewish grandparents. She heard Yiddish, a distinctly Jewish language, spoken in her home. She learned to make these ridiculously delicious blintzes. Her world was divided between her Jewish ethnicity, played out in the Jewish communal institutions of Pittson, PA and Plainview, Long Island, and the non-Jewish world around her, to which she also belonged. It never occurred to her to not be Jewish, do Jewish, live Jewish.

What reigns supreme for *my* generation is individual preference. Our identities are fluid, malleable. We actively construct we who are, choosing bits and pieces of our inherited stories to weave into the narrative of our lives, letting go of the ones that are less convenient, that don't fit the story we want to tell. For most Jews of my generation, blintzes do not unite us, and nothing is a given--where we live, what profession we study or how we bring up our families, if we are to have families at all. Everything is a choice--big school or small, study abroad in Europe or Asia, volunteer here or there, kale

or spinach, city on the coast or in the Midwest, date a Jew or don't, marry or don't. Like every fast casual restaurant from Cava to Sweetgreen--build your own burrito!--everything is a choice.

So, the point I want to raise this evening is this: In an uncertain, Jewishly post-ethnic age of choice, I'm concerned about the continued evolution of the synagogue, an institution I love.

Because the synagogue was built for the age of ethnic Judaism, for an age of fixed identity. My grandmother joined Beth Elohim in Plainview because that's what Jews did. It was a cornerstone of her existence in a way that no longer holds true for young Jews today.

Temple Micah is proof of a kind of vibrancy in the liberal American Jewish landscape. In our building we find moments of joy when a B'nai Mitzvah student reads a touching poem on a Friday night. In our building we mourn, and weep together on the *yartzeit* of our loved ones, we celebrate the newness of birth. In our building scholars lecture. Groups gather. And yet, our walls can be high and intimidating, our doors can seem hard to pass through. So, what about the people who don't make the choice to come through them?

It could be that they'll find meaning and community elsewhere. In a recent report from Harvard Divinity School entitled *How We Gather*, the authors explain that the unaffiliated millennial population craves meaning just as all humans do. It's just that in a world in which choices abound, a synagogue or church isn't the only place to go to find community! In studying the ways in which people gather, the study sheds light on new, emerging spiritual communities built around yoga, cycling or weekly dinner parties.

Likewise, in a new book called *Divergent Church*, Tim Shapiro of the Center for Congregations writes about churches that take new forms beyond the church *building*. Some might even have a hard time calling them churches at all! What new forms? "...Coffee shop, pub, food-oriented churches; business combined with churches; churches focused on a particular social need... house churches or dinner table churches... satellites and multisities ... and so forth."

In both *How We Gather* and *Divergent Church*, the broader message is that we are meaning-making animals who long for companionship. If faith based institutions do not feel relevant to the life of the individual, the individual will find meaning elsewhere.

Everyone here tonight has made the choice to actively participate in the Jewish story. And I'd assume most of us, if not all of us, would argue that to do so enhances or deepens our lives. We find in Judaism roots and a moral center. How can the people who don't make the choice to come through our doors hold the Jewish story as a part of their identities?

Rabbi Mike Uram of Penn Hillel, author of *Next Generation Judaism*, writes, "established organizations need to engage people outside of Jewish buildings and other institutional spaces. We need to find ways to complement what happens 'in the building' by also bringing Jewish life to people without ever expecting them to show up in any particular place."

What does this look like in practical terms? Rabbi Uram answers, "establishment Jewish organizations could ideally run two different operating systems; one for its core constituents who show up and one for all those Jews who do not."

I want to be part of a vibrant Jewish future that includes synagogues as a central feature of the American Jewish landscape. That's why I love being a congregational rabbi. And along with synagogues, what other kinds of Jewish spaces can we build that will allow the next generation to partake in the Jewish story? As the next generation of Jews construct their identities, what would it look like to set up shop where they are, to build a new kind of operating system for the next generation to access the Jewish story in a place outside the synagogue, outside the home?

A new kind of Jewish space. A storefront. A bookstore, maybe. A cafe. In a highly populated urban area. A mom & pop style place. Homey. Comfortable. The concept is in continued evolution, but the foundation of the idea is there. The synagogue can turn outward, evolving beyond its walls and into the public square forming new and different ways to congregate.

250 years ago, Mendelssohn found himself between two worlds--the German one in which he was born and the Jewish one he inherited. Our community still exists between

two worlds, but those of us who know Temple Micah know that it offers us a place to be *fully Jewish* and *fully American*. **We know** that we're a people rooted in a narrative that offers language and wisdom to answer questions about how best to live, even in these dark, uncertain times of unrest. Even when we can't feel sure about the future of liberal democracy and moderate religion in America, **we know** that a holiday like Rosh Hashanah offers us a message of renewal and hope.

But in the 21st century nothing can be assumed. For our central place of gathering, our house of prayer and study, to survive, thrive, and to continue to be in conversation with the next generation and the larger world and affect the public ethic, we have to examine the walls we've built and consider how we might break them down. Shanah Tovah.