

Passing the Baton of Jewish identity

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When our son Jeremy was in high school at Newton South, he decided to join the track team. He had always been a very fast runner. When he was 2 years old, he was prone to suddenly taking off at top speed in some unexpected direction -- which required his parents to be constantly on the alert. Even at that time he was hard to keep up with. By the time he was in high school, it was quite impossible to keep up with Jeremy. On the track team, he soon began competing in the 400 meter relay. Now if you're going to run in a relay, you have to practice passing the baton, and this is really not such an easy thing to do when you are running full tilt.

So what on earth does this have to do with anything? Jeremy and his fiancée Ali will be getting married in a few months, and their Ufruf will be in two weeks -- I hope that everyone will be able to join us for this simcha! Their upcoming marriage set me to thinking about this concept of “passing the baton” and how it might apply to us. Jews, of course, have been astonishingly successful at passing the baton of Jewish identity from parent to child for thousands of years. How has this been possible? Why have we been so successful in the past? Are liberal Jews losing the ability to do this here in America? Is it that we are somehow out of practice, or is the problem more fundamental? These questions, in turn, relate to the thorny question of what Jewish identity actually means for liberal Jews in America. Why do we want to pass the baton, anyway? That’s the subject I’d like to focus on this morning. I hope that you’re not thinking that I can answer any of these questions...

Anyway, I’ll speak for a while about these issues, and then we can discuss them together.

When our first child Daniel was born in 1981, I felt compelled to join a synagogue, even though I hadn’t belonged to any organized Jewish group since I went off to college 13 years earlier. I wrote to a Rabbi whom I greatly admired, Jerome Weistrop, asking for advice -- and we ended up initially joining a reform congregation in Brookline that he recommended. Rabbi Weistrop had served as the rabbi at the conservative congregation in Upper Darby, PA that my family belonged to when I was a child. Later on, he moved to a congregation in Milton where he spent the rest of his career.

My parents certainly had succeeded in passing the baton to me, and once I had a child, I immediately felt that I must do the same. But why did I feel this so acutely? Partly, it came about because of the way in which the desire to implant Jewish identity is so deeply embedded in the tradition. Just think of how at every service we recite the ve’ahavta’s demand that we “should teach them (the

words of Torah, that is) diligently to [our] children!” However, I think it also had to do with the particular impact that Judaism had on me, starting with my adolescent self.

Not long after my Bar Mitzvah, Rabbi Weistrop started a study group which met after Kiddush on Saturday afternoons. This was my first exposure to Talmud study. The Aramaic and Hebrew were far over my head, and actually the Talmudic lines of argument, even when translated into English, were also generally far over my head. However, what I took away from these monthly sessions was a sense of the importance of argument in Jewish tradition. Traditions that I had taken for granted -- What’s kosher? When do we light Shabbas candles? What blessings do we say and under what circumstances? -- these traditions were all subjects of careful intellectual scrutiny. Not only that, but the Rabbis of the Talmud also argued about non-ritual matters, matters that concerned problems between human beings. For example, what do you do when there is disputed ownership of something? The Rabbis argued about these points with passion and conviction, as if their lives depended on the answers. Every possible variation seemed to be considered, and either accepted or rejected based on logical reasoning.

I have never had any mystical inclinations or, for that matter, any theistic beliefs (as I have discussed in earlier talks). The universe is certainly mysterious. Why does anything exist? How is consciousness possible? Questions like these have always fascinated me, but I am (mostly) reconciled to not knowing their answers. God talk or mystical feelings don’t seem to me to present a way forward. Once we set aside these deep unanswerable questions, however, there is still a vast range of other questions that we can answer by applying our capacity to reason things out. The pages of the Talmud demonstrate groups of thinkers grappling with difficult ideas or difficult situations, trying to reason their way forward through a process of rigorous analysis. These rabbis of the Talmud are modeling for us a way of dealing with the problems of living in a world where our knowledge is incomplete and where there are often good arguments for many different possible courses of action. If only our political discourse were conducted in such an open-ended, nonideological way!

So one aspect of Jewish identity, the one that initially drew me towards Judaism when I was an adolescent, has to do with its intellectual tradition of rigorous analysis. Surely this tradition must have something to do with the extraordinary success of Jews in science, mathematics, medicine, law, and so on. On the other hand, the connection of young Jews to this intellectual tradition has been vastly attenuated by the process of assimilation into American society. Maybe in the future American Jews will become less unusual in their degree of intellectual engagement.

But this rather cerebral route (the one that I originally took into Judaism) is clearly not the only way into the tradition. It just happened to be mine. Maybe

the explanation for the mystery of the staying power of Judaism is that there are many different sources of Jewish identity.

Let's take what I think is a more fundamental approach to this problem, what I think may account for the extraordinary longevity of Judaism.

One of the most obvious but largely unmentioned facts of human life is that we are all going to die. We don't like to think about this fact, but nonetheless Jewish tradition forces us to engage with it. Mourners say Kaddish at every service. On Yom Kippur we prefigure our own deaths by refraining from normal biological activities -- most notably, we refrain from eating. On certain holidays, we include the Yizker service, with its particular focus on death. Why is there this preoccupation?

Let's look at it another way. One of the most amazing features of Jewish life is that it has lasted so very long! Depending on how you do the calculation, Jews have been around for at least 3000 years, and maybe for 5000 years. We are at pains to include in our observances references to writings and to rituals originating at many different times in the past. Every Shabbas we celebrate the Torah (compiled around 2500 years ago) by carrying it around and by reading from it, even when the parsha deals with matters of questionable relevance (like the rules for animal sacrifice). Our liturgy quotes from the Mishnah and the Talmud, works that date from around 200 CE and 500 CE, respectively. Passover is a holiday that originates from events that, hypothetically speaking, took place around 3500 years ago, while Hanukah came about based on events 2100 years ago. On Yom Kippur we chant piyyutim composed during the period of the Crusades, around 1000 years ago. Of course, Yom Hashoa derives from the tragic events of the middle part of the twentieth century, and Yom Haatzmaut from the miraculous birth of Israel a few years later. It's striking how our tradition draws on materials from many different time periods and intermingles them.

Here's another curious point to reflect on. The Talmud is written as if the various Sages all lived at the same time, when in reality the text covers a period of at least 300 years. Nonetheless, the Rabbis of the Talmud converse and argue with each other as if they are all present in one seminar room. The Talmud collapses time into a single eternal present, even though the participants in the discussion lived over a period spanning hundreds of years! Why does it do that?

I am trying to suggest that in Judaism, we are invited to participate in an eternal project, one that existed long before we were born and will, we hope, extend into the indefinite future. Our personal lives may be short, but our tradition extends beyond the boundaries of our limited selves. Judaism is a striking example of a kind of collective immortality project. While we are, as Jews, always reminding ourselves of the short duration of our own lives, we are simultaneously reassured that we are nonetheless part of a tradition that will not

die. I believe that this contrast between our short lives and our long tradition is at the heart of the staying power of Judaism.

Our collective immortality project has many different elements to it. It is, of course, not only about Talmudic reasoning. To begin with, there is the liturgy, the prayers and blessings that make up our ritual and our services. These are intended, I think, to induce a certain sort of meditative state, perhaps feelings of connectedness to our long tradition, and to other Jews around the world. For some, the liturgy evokes theistic thoughts, maybe feelings of humility before the vast universe that we are part of, or before the miraculous character of life on earth, or maybe even before God.

There are many other elements in our Immortality Project besides the liturgy. There are the holidays: lighting candles on Chanukah, participating in a Seder on Pesach, building a Sukkah for Sukkot, fasting on Yom Kippur, and so on. There is music: Torah chanting, nusachs associated with the liturgy for particular holidays, folk melodies for hymns like Adon Olam, Klezmer music. There are stories: stories from the Bible, stories from the Midrash, folk tales, Hasidic wisdom tales. I must, of course, add in the pleasures of Yiddish literature. There are foods: matzah, maror, even gefilte fish -- well, Pesach ended just a couple of weeks ago, so I'm still thinking about it.

These various elements that I am alluding to all go into the composition of a culture or, perhaps better, a Jewish Civilization -- as Mordechai Kaplan suggested. But I'd like to assume now that we all know what these elements are, so I need go no further in describing them. The question that I'd like to think through is this: why do we want to identify ourselves with this Civilization? Why do we want our children and our grandchildren to be Jewish? Why do we want there to be more generations of Jews? Why do we care so much?

Before I try to respond to these questions, I must make a confession. My own identification as a Jew, although it has always been a strong one, is nonetheless full of ambivalence. Whenever I read about the behavior of our coreligionists, our ultra-orthodox brethren, about their treatment of women, their contempt for secular knowledge, their fundamentalism, I am filled with dismay. I think fundamentalist religion, whether of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, or other variety is highly dangerous and often destructive. How can people believe such preposterous stuff as is proclaimed to be beyond dispute by fundamentalists? If you have an answer to this question, please see me afterwards!

I recently read a short book by a philosopher at NYU named Samuel Scheffler. It was entitled "Death and the Afterlife." But Scheffler is a naturalist. He doesn't believe that there is some mysterious form of afterlife that follows our own personal deaths. He is referring to the life of other people that goes on even after we die. Scheffler poses the question: how would our lives and our

values be altered if we knew for sure that, for example, there would be no more children? The current residents of Planet Earth would live out their lives, but there would be no future generations. His thought experiment was inspired by a PD James novel and subsequent movie, in which this is exactly what happens. Scheffler argues that much of what we take for granted as being valuable in our lives would become as ashes in our mouths. What would be the point of working to cure cancer? Or of working to prevent the degradation of our biological environment? Or, more generally, what would be the point of working to improve the future state of mankind? Scheffler and PD James both imagine that society would actually disintegrate before our eyes.

Scheffler's view, which I agree with, is that many of the core values of our lives are actually based on the assumption that there will be a future, a future for human beings even after we die. I think that Judaism is an example of an immortality project that gives meaning to our own short lives. We engage in rituals, in study, in life cycle events that are embedded in a long tradition. That embeddedness makes it easier for us to accept our own aging and our own mortality. I think that our sometimes desperate desire that our children carry on as Jews arises, in part, from our wish that they too should be part of our collective immortality project. Indeed, when a child rejects the parent's immortality project, it can cast a permanent shadow over the value of the whole enterprise. But conversely, the child may wish to feel free to choose his own immortality projects!

Now once you start thinking about these sorts of questions, there is no end to it. There is a kind of infinite regress! So why do we wish to be part of an immortality project? Let me approach this question somewhat indirectly. Certainly the fear of death is a deep biological fear. It is easy to understand how it would have arisen through the process of natural selection. Creatures without a fear of death would undoubtedly leave fewer offspring on the average! To put it a different way, we are alive because we are descended from creatures who did fear death! Given that the fear of death is simply part of human nature, we cannot get rid of it. However, we can build a civilization around ourselves that can assuage our anxieties and provide us with opportunities to transcend our biological limitations.

Now, of course, there are many immortality projects available nowadays. Preserving and developing Jewish Civilization, if I can describe it that way, is only one of them. Science is another appealing immortality project, one to which I have devoted my own professional life. An individual scientist may only make very small contributions to his narrow subspecialty but he can take pleasure and find solace in his involvement in the larger project to achieve a deeper understanding of how the world works.

Unfortunately, there are also destructive immortality projects. The Nazis wished to conquer the world and impose their "Aryan Civilization" (whatever that might have meant) on all of humanity forever. There are proselytizing

fundamentalist religions that obviously wish to spread their ideology to the entire globe... In some ways, the future of human beings depends on which Immortality Projects are most successful at spreading their influence.

I want to return, though, to one of the questions that I raised at the beginning of my talk. Why has it become so difficult for liberal Jewish parents in America to transmit a strong sense of Jewish identity to their children? One possible answer is that immortality projects of this sort have become less important to 21st century people than they used to be. In that case, Judaism's sustainability problem is just an example of a broader problem. I think that there is some truth to this, but I don't think this can be the complete answer. Just consider the amazingly successful fundamentalist religions: the Evangelicals, the Muslims, even the UltraOrthodox Jews (whose reproductive capacities never fail to astound me). I recall reading in the Forward about a great grandmother in Israel with 1000 descendants. She had 10 children, each of her 10 children had 10 children, each of her 100 grandchildren had 10 children. You can see that the demographic future of Israel could well be an UltraOrthodox one.

I think the question is this. Why have non-fundamentalist religions, more rational religions like Reconstructionist Judaism, been far less successful at transmitting their values than have their fundamentalist counterparts? I think it is partly because we do not actually explain very well what we are trying to do. Moreover, I think we don't explain ourselves very well because we are perhaps somewhat confused about what we are trying to do. Certainly I include myself in that category!

Let me give you an example. It is, I think, pretty clear that a very large fraction of Reconstructionists do not actually have any supernatural beliefs. Let me go further. I think that a very large fraction of non- Orthodox Jews do not actually have any supernatural beliefs. Maybe even some Modern Orthodox Jews fall into this camp. Yet our theologians, our Jewish intellectual leaders, generally have not tried to reconstruct our way of looking at Jewish Civilization that fully takes account of our contemporary sensibilities. Children respond to incoherence in their environments, and they may then look elsewhere for immortality projects as they mature.

And indeed, other immortality projects are available in abundance! We liberal Jews face a lot of competition. Just consider the welter of possibilities. One can, for example, fully throw oneself into professional activities. For many mathematicians and scientists, their professional colleagues are also their closest friends. Weekly seminars substitute for weekly Shabbat services. Annual conferences bring together colleagues from around the world, for many of whom the search for knowledge in their fields is a kind of religious quest. The most successful scientists become icons, almost like holy men in some cases. Think of Einstein, for example.

For others, environmentalism has become an immortality project and, in my opinion anyway, a very important one. The earth's biosphere, after all, is in grave danger. More generally, social activism of various sorts can serve as immortality projects: for example, the quest for a just society. I could go on for some time, giving examples of other immortality projects, but you get the idea, I think. So, in short, Judaism has a lot of competition.

So what reason can we offer for why we should carry on with our own ancient community project, when there are so many new, exciting alternatives? Now, first of all, it is not necessary to focus all of our attention on just one immortality project. A human being can have several of them. One can work hard at saving the earth's climate, and still practice Judaism. In fact, two different immortality projects can draw strength from one another. For example, one can be inspired by the Jewish Prophets to work towards a more just society.

Secondly, and I think this is a central point, Judaism connects us with a very wide assortment of people from around the world today and over an enormous expanse of time. It has an ancient history and because it covers such a vast array of time and cultures, it has a way of enlarging our sense of what it is like to be a human being. There is a richness to the tradition in the way that it embodies so many different kinds of stories and traditions.

But there's something else that's different about the Jewish project — if I can call it that. It has something that “secular” immortality projects do not offer. Jewish communities like ours exist in large measure to provide comfort and security in a heartless universe. You do not need to have a PhD to join. You do not need to have any particular beliefs or qualifications. All that is needed is that you wish to be part of the Jewish project. We cling to each other and to our tradition as a kind of bulwark against the randomness of a cold world. We find comfort in our traditions, in our shared knowledge of our literature, in our holidays, and our life cycle events. We find wisdom in reflecting on what Jewish stories and Jewish laws (Aggadah and Halacha) have to teach us. Our lives may be short, but we have faith (if we have faith in anything) that our tradition will survive.