

Why Jewishness?

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"Why Jewishness?" Because each person's life is worthy of the entire world.

Zusya is a favorite character of mine. He jumps off the pages of Hassidic literature with a message that I believe can serve to introduce a series of answers for the important question that Program Committees have asked, "Why Jewishness?"

Zusya is about to die. According to legend, he is filled with anxiety. He is not sure how he will be accepted in the heavenly realm. He doesn't know what kinds of questions he is going to be asked. Will he be able to present himself in an appropriate manner? He worries whether or not his life was such that he will be assigned to the exalted heights of paradise, rather than the depths of the nether world. In anticipation of this moment of judgment, Zusya calls upon his rabbi. He asked in a soft, but determined voice, "How should I prepare myself for death? What matters should concern me? What kinds of information should I rehearse? The rabbi responds, "Zusya my child, you have only one concern. You must be prepared to answer a question that will surely be asked by the angel Gabriel. His question will not be 'Why did you not live a life like Abraham.' Nor will it be, 'Why did you not live a life like Isaac?' You will not be challenged as to your shortcomings in not living a life like Jacob, but you *will* be asked, 'Why didn't you live the life of Zusya?'

This brief, but poignant anecdote suggests that *Jewishness is synonymous with assertive self-worth*. Jewish identity calls on every person to realize that self-love and self-esteem are virtues. However, they are not only values in and of themselves, but serve as prerequisites for the all-important process of caring for others.

Thus, a first answer to our important question involves accepting our birthright; the birthright of receiving either at the time of birth or at the time of conversion, the identity of Jew. The Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein

phrases this acceptance in a lovely manner. He says, "My bones ache with the dampness of Jewish weather."

The poet within each of us must accept the fact that although we are born free, and although we are born with a clean slate upon which experience can write, we do inherit a name. *We do inherit the potential for being somebody special.*

As Jews, we inherit a family album of society-shaping relatives, and a treasure-house of stimulating celebrations, complete with sights, sounds and smells. We acquire both a multi-faceted literature and a heroic history. As Jews we inherit a concept of God which is most authentically understood in human terms. Indeed, a Roman soldier once taunted a Jew by saying, "When our ruler comes into a city, 1,000 warriors precede him and proclaim: 'Make way for Caesar.' Do your people ever experience such grandeur?" The Jew responded, without a moment's hesitation, "When an average person walks along the road, he or she is preceded by 10,000 angels who proclaim, 'Make way for the image of God.'"

Jewish identity provides us with the opportunity to accept who we are in such a way that we can appreciate the identity of others. We are able to reach out to help others as they confront the world, and we hope to feel hands reaching back to us.

I suggest that a second answer to the question, "Why Jewishness?," relates to the contrast between two words, particular and universal. The second word is very, very attractive. Young people especially love to talk about how they are universalists; they believe in love, justice, truth, beauty, and peace.

In many ways, the "flower children" gave universalism renewed and deserved status. I say "deserved status" because I would not

wish to suggest to anyone that universal values should not be ultimate goals. Indeed, that interpretation of Judaism which motivates my identity, namely Reform Judaism, emerged with the clear message that the biblical prophets and their message of social justice should constitute the focus and priority of all Jewish life.

Nevertheless, universal values cannot, I believe, be achieved without first developing particular skills and values. One simply does not "live." It is meaningless for me to contemplate a state-of-being called Justice unless it can be described and applied in specific ways. One cannot talk about a feeling for space, a feeling for rhythm or an understanding of dance without first having become skilled and appreciative of either ballet, tap, modern disco or another form of disciplined body movement.

Jewishness provides us with skills and basic values which can help us achieve universal relationships. The particular discipline of *Talmud Torah Keneged Kulam*, the study of Judaism, excels all else, can most certainly help an individual recognize and respect the universal qualities of intellect and reason.

In like fashion, by practicing the particular principle that every Jew is a guarantor for the welfare of every other Jew, an individual is conditioned to care for human need, wherever confronted. Jewish particular skills and basic values, by their practice, can promote a generation of authentic Jews; Jews who can then become a community of advocates for universalism.

Another story, I believe, will help communicate a third answer to the question, "Why Jewishness?"

It is told of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, the revered leader of Hassidic Judaism, that it was his practice, every morning, to collect a group of youngsters at their homes and then walk with them through a rather dense forest, to the other side of this village where they would sit together in a *cheder*, a one-room schoolhouse, and study Torah. At dusk, he would

lead them back through the forest, along the same path, and return them to their homes. It so happened that at one point in time, all the evil elements, dispositions and possibilities of life decided to have a meeting. (We know in today's world that if you don't have anything better to do, you get together for a meeting, establish a committee, or if you are really going to do it up big, you have some kind of colloquium. This seems to be what evil, personified, had in mind.)

All evil got together in a big conference hall and they grappled with the question, "Why should we let goodness survive? The world would be much better, if evil ruled everyone's life." They met, conferred, caucused and decided that the best way to get rid of the goodness that was within people would be to break the human spirit. It was agreed, unanimously, that the Ba'al Shem Tov and his students must be killed, for they epitomized life, dedication, beauty, virtue and friendship; all that is cherished as Good in the world.

The master plan called for an efficient, but diabolical procedure. All the evil that had gathered together magically molded itself into the form of a gigantic wolf. This huge wolf planted itself in the middle of the path along which the Ba'al Shem Tov would be bringing his students home. At dusk, on that dire day, the Ba'al Shem Tov, who was busy chatting, hugging and holding hands with his small class, came walking down the path. The wolf stepped out from behind a tree and uttered a huge growl. It could be heard for miles. People thought it was an earthquake. The Ba'al Shem Tov and the children stopped in their tracks. They were frozen. They couldn't move a muscle. The wolf opened up his massive mouth. He was about to swallow the children and their teacher. But, before anything else could happen, the Ba'al Shem Tov walked inside the mouth of the wolf. He walked up the wolf's tongue, down the wolf's throat and arrived in the chest cavity of this enormous beast of evil. There the Ba'al Shem Tov saw a huge, evil heart. Indeed, he quickly recognized that this heart was the embodiment of all evil in the world. He realized that to destroy that heart would be paramount to

ridding the world of all present and future evil. Goodness could indeed prevail. The words of the prophets would come true. "Nation would not lift up sword against nation. The lamb would lie down with the lion. People would love their neighbors as themselves." So he grabbed this evil heart within his arms and began to squeeze it and pull on it. Then, in a moment that achieves an almost mystic significance, the Ba'al Shem Tov let go and fell back, for he felt the heart beat with life. He walked out of the chest cavity, up the throat, out the mouth of the wolf, and took his students home.

Although the story cries out with many lessons, it most certainly illustrates Judaism's madness for life.

"Why Judaism?" Because Judaism serves as a protection against all in society which would threaten the value of life and replace it with the dehumanized values of technocracy, the rule of machines and mechanized systems. The Jewish poet, Rosenfeld, writes: "I am alive or have been. I sink and am lost in the awful tumult. Void is my soul: I become a machine." Make no mistake, Jewish identity welcomes modern information and production procedures. It confronts efficiently and interacts effectively with changing social styles and mores. Indeed, creative Judaism and ethical capitalism work very well together. At the same time, however, Judaism serves to provide a check and balance for modernity. It advertises the pure magnificence of the new born baby's crying and the budding rose opening to the sunlight with almost indescribable fragrance.

"Why Jewishness?" Because each person's life is worthy of the entire world. To save a single life is to save the entire world. The Ba'al Shem Tov's madness for life is an answer to our question.

For many years I have carried with me an Emerson-like quote which reads as follows: "The gods will write their names on our faces be sure of that and man will worship something have no doubt of that either. He may

think that his tribute is paid in secret, in the deep recesses of his heart, but it will out. That which dominates his imagination and his thought will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

When, during my senior year at the Hebrew Union College I had the distinct privilege to arrange a program during which our professor of Talmud, Dr. Ben Zion Wacholder, made somewhat of a biographical presentation, the quotation took on unique meaning. He was in Nazi Germany at the time of the Holocaust and recounted many of his experiences during that awful and awesome period. At one point in his presentation, tears began to fill his eyes and stream down his cheeks. He reached for his handkerchief, amidst the silence of young student rabbis hoping to understand more sensitively and realistically the nature of their people and their profession. He spoke of a time when seated at the kitchen table with his sister, he froze in fear as a group of Nazi Storm Troopers gathered outside his window, and then recoiled at the sound of a rifle shot coming through that window, striking his sister dead.

Dr. Wacholder regained his composure and said to us, "Gentlemen, I want you to know that without the Torah as a constant discipline for my life, I fear that I could have behaved exactly as those Nazis."

"Be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." Like this quote, Dr. Wacholder's answer to the question, "Why Jewishness?," seems to be that *Jewishness disciplines or, if you will, costumes the animal-beast within each of us and permits you and me to become an animal-human.*

Jewish identity should be exercised, because it helps make every person a *mensch*.

Jewish identity provides each person with a dramatic script. The script is not reality. Rather it is the staging of reality, and all its absurdities, making life more humane. Jewish identity, to use somewhat of an allegorical

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manner of speaking, constructs a marquee for those universals about which we spoke earlier. In the living theater of Judaism, Love, Justice, Wisdom and Peace upstage the more natural tendencies: selfishness, inequity, irrationality and violence. Jewish identity helps the individual transform the absurd into the ideal.

1. Jewishness promotes our self-esteem.
2. Jewishness teaches us to act like a somebody before trying to be like everybody.
3. Jewishness elevates life above the rule of machines.
4. Jewishness protects us from our animal nature.