

The Unbearable Heaviness of Jewish Self-Hatred

By Walter Ruby

I must be losing it. Otherwise, I am at a loss to explain how it can be that although today's newspapers are chock-full of horrifying accounts of escalating Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict and of George W. Bush's ongoing assault on the nation's ecosystem, the fact that has been clinging to the fulcrum of my consciousness all day is the revelation that Joey Ramone, the 49-year-old punk rock idol who died of cancer over the weekend at age 49, turns out to have been Jewish.

I was truly flabbergasted to read in the New York Post that Joey Ramone's real name was Jeffrey Hyman and that he grew up in Forest Hills, Queens, which happens to be the predominantly Jewish community where I am raising my own son. I usually have a pretty good "Jew locator" device in my head, and this is one of those rare occasions when I am stunned to learn that a particular celebrity is Jewish whom I had never remotely imagined might be so. Sure, there were Jewish punk rockers; the Beastie Boys come immediately to mind, but the Ramones? No way! Everything about the Ramones -- the retro name, the garage band look and the dumbed-down message -- all seemed to shout "outer borough Italian" and never, in a million years, "outer borough Jewish."

The thought that is running through my mind and gradually elevating my blood pressure is this: Why the hell would a Jeffrey Hyman want to become a Joey Ramone? Why would Joey and his three band-mates not only name their band The Ramones, but actually adopt that moniker as their collective surname. I can deal with Bobby Zimmerman becoming Bob Dylan -- a la Dylan Thomas -- and aspire toward sublime poethood, especially in that he apparently repented his assimilationist tendencies later in life and intermittently became a Chabad chasid. But what sort of Jewish self-abnegation would turn a Hyman into a Ramone?

Actually, I must acknowledge on second thought that the young Bob Dylan hid his Jewishness just as artfully as did Joey Ramone. It wasn't until 1968 that an early edition of Rolling Stone outed the Sage of the Sixties with the question, "Is Bob Dylan really Jewish?" Yet at least if Dylan was Jewishly closeted during the '60s, he expressed his enormous talent musically in an instantly recognizable Jewish fashion, laying down those classic markers of alienated Jewish outsiderhood in America again and again in utopian lines like "How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?" or in his growl of sneering contempt at Ozzie and Harriet-era America: "You know somethin' is happening here but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

So Dylan was artfully obscure, but it is clear that his strangled cry of tender rage at America sprang full throated from his Jewish neshama. How unlike Forest Hills' own Jeffrey Hyman, an obviously bright and talented heir to a glorious

3000-year-old civilization -- not to mention the local boychiks made good Simon and Garfunkle -- who was evidently so insecure in his Jewishness that he chose to adopt a self-consciously lowbrow disguise and to write self-consciously moronic rock songs like I Want To Be Sedated. Bob Zimmerman might have been masking his Jewishness; Jeffrey Hyman appears to have been trying to annihilate his altogether.

To be sure, it is not kind to speak badly of the dead and, in truth, I barely listened to the Ramones anyway, so what do I really know of Jeffrey Hyman's angst? Very little, and yet I find myself filled with contempt for Joey Ramone who hid his Jewishness until he was safely dead so he wouldn't have to face me with his shame. And the more I think about Joey Ramone, the angrier I feel at other cases of Jewish abasement that have irritated me in recent years, whether it is the nymph-like Winona Horowitz re-creating herself as a hippy-dippy "Ryder," or the film Dirty Dancing -- a shamelessly commercial but quite irresistible entertainment chronicling the romance between an adorable Jewish girl named "Baby" and a goyische dancer from the wrong side of the tracks, in which the word "Jew" was never uttered during the entire course of the film. That was gutless assimilationism of historic proportions by whatever Hollywood Jewish producers or money men were pulling the strings, especially in a film set in a specifically Jewish milieu that came along not in the 1940s or '50s, but in the mid-1980s, nearly 20 years after Goodbye Columbus.

But why does all of this trouble me so deeply? The answer comes to me immediately, hurtling forth like a guided missile from decades long gone and memories half buried. I have been disturbed by the revelation about Joey's Jewishness because I suffered through my own sustained bout of Jewish self-hatred during childhood and adolescence. As I sneer at poor Joey, I catch a glimpse at my not-so-long-ago or far away cringing self.

I went to high school in an overwhelmingly gentile and genteel suburb of Chicago, a leafy, churchy, Republican place with a Main Street right out of Main Street, where I was one of exactly two Jewish kids in my high school class. Throughout high school, I was deep in the closet about my Jewishness. One day I was sitting in the back row of my 10th grade English class, with my face downcast and beet red, during an already traumatic lesson on The Merchant of Venice, when I heard the teacher ask, "By the way, is anybody here Jewish?" It seemed to me that Mr. Lane was looking inquiringly at me as he posed the question, and the several seconds that the question hung unanswered in the air, as I gazed determinedly at the floor until he sighed and moved on, were the longest and most self-lacerating of my life.

Where did my Jewish self-hatred come from and what was it about? I don't have all the answers even today, but I believe it had everything to do with having a refugee from Hitler's Berlin as a mother, and with messages I inferred from her experience that Jews are weak, that they either run away or go like lambs to the

slaughter. The fact that my parents invariably chose gentile communities in which to make the various homes I lived in as a child also may have influenced me to feel that Jews are somehow so unsavory, so un-American, that even we didn't want to live among them. It seemed to me that my parents subconsciously chose places to live where the natives were too ignorant of Jews even to actively dislike them. Indeed, during all the years of my most intense self-hatred, no one so much as ever made an anti-Semitic remark in my presence. Jews were off the radar screen in Glen Ellyn, Illinois and I was doing my damndest to keep it that way.

The worst thing about Jewish self-hatred is that it causes the victim to hate himself. In my case, that eventually turned out to be a blessing because the level of my discomfort with my Jewishness became so profound that I could no longer sweep it under the rug, as Joey Ramone apparently could, and go on with my denial deep into adulthood. I had to confront it then and there in order to retain enough self-respect to be functional in the world. I began doing that by dropping a French course as a freshman at the University of Wisconsin and switching to Hebrew. Over the years I came to love being Jewish, to have the gut sensation that being Jewish is the most important thing in my life-which, ironically enough, it also was during my self-hating days. And I came to make my career as a writer for Jewish and Israeli newspapers and, most recently and most fittingly, for CLAL, the very epicenter of Jewish self-examination.

I healed myself over many years, yet just as an alcoholic is always an alcoholic no matter how long it has been since he or she has had a drink, the same is true of those who have endured self-hatred. Vestiges of the affliction are always there, just out of sight and mind in the recesses of my consciousness, ready to jump out and confront me with searing memories that will never go completely away as long as I live. And now, having come face to face again with the inverted loathing that is implicit in self-hatred, I find that my disgust with Jeffrey Hyman, hiding from his Jewishness behind long hair, black glasses and punk sensibility, has dissipated, to be replaced by a sense of deep sympathy for him that is suffused with complicity.

Like innumerable middle-aged people, I have often bemoaned the lost promise of my youth -- that I never managed to become a famous writer and get all the girls. But I would not trade my own life experience for so much as a second with that of Jeffrey Hyman. I have had the enormous good fortune of living a life immeasurably enriched by having learned to love and connect to the Jewishness at the heart of my being. I don't know for sure, of course, but I have a gut feeling that Jeffrey/Joey went to his grave still hiding from the essence of who and what he really was. And that, in my mind, is as close to a vision of hell, a hell on earth, as it is possible for a person to endure.