

Purim 2016

This talk is inspired by two sets of images. One comes from America, the other from Israel. From here, I take the figure of Bernie Sanders – the 74 year old Brooklyn-born progressive who is seeking to be the first Jewish-American President but began his Presidential campaign by avoiding referencing his Jewish heritage like the plague. One minute, he would talk about his beloved father as “Polish,” but not “Polish-Jewish.” The next minute he would refer to his “background,” but not his “Jewish background.” While his opponent waxed on about making history as the first woman President, he had little to say about how his candidacy would also be historic. He became a symbol of the invisible American Jew – just another white guy with a big nose and wavy hair.

Let’s not ignore the realities here. With the passage of generations, the Brooklyn accent tends to leave, as does the sense of Jewish identity. Indeed, with the so-called “purely cultural Jews,” a group that Bernie epitomizes, even if the political progressivism remains – which is anything but a sure thing – future generations might find themselves more at home at a Unitarian Church than a synagogue. If someone were to ask them the question, “Are you a Jew first or an American first?” their only answer would be “Is that a serious question or a joke?”

From Israel, where I spent Passover last year, I take the image of

an informal gathering of modern-Orthodox men and women in West Jerusalem who I joined one day for lunch. The language spoken was English, one that is frequently heard in the Holy City. The 15 or so people in attendance all emigrated from the United States or England. They seemed happy in their new land – content to be surrounded by fellow observant, Zionist Jews who weren't racked with anxiety about how to solve the "Palestinian problem." In fact, they seemed at peace with the notion that the Jews have made every reasonable attempt to reach a compromise with the Arabs, who have demonstrated that they will never be partners for peace. Today, these Israelis just want to go about their lives with as little worrying as possible, and they actually seem poised to pull this off. You see, from all outward appearances, they remain confident in the notion that the Israeli economy is self-sustaining and its military strong enough to protect the Jewish State from any threat.

Personally, if someone were to ask me the question, "Are you a Jew first or an American first?" I would hope I would say "a Jew," and I'd say it as a patriotic American. I picture myself in the shoes of Senator Sanders, when a female journalist, Gwen Ifill, had asked him, "[D]o you worry at all that you will be the instrument of thwarting history, as Senator Clinton keeps claiming, that she might be the first woman president?" Surely, I would have acknowledged in the most

explicit terms how proud I'd be to be the first *Jewish* President. I might also take Ifill's question as an opportunity to talk a bit about the history of anti-Semitism in this country, as well as abroad, and to point out that some of us love Israel in part because other than France, which had a Jewish leader during a few brief stints in the mid-20th century, Israel is the only country in the world where a Jew has led the government. Sanders pointed out none of the above.

I have to say, though, that the Israel I visited this past year was very different than the one I saw back in 1981. Back then, there was optimism in the air about the prospects of a two-state solution. But this last Passover, the Israelis I encountered were peddling the idea that "the two state solution" is dead, and they didn't want to talk about other compromise solutions either. The attitude was that we've tried compromising, it didn't take, it's time to move on, Shabbat Shalom. I must say that I felt as alienated from those Israelis' response to the Palestinian condition as I had felt from Sanders' muted response to Ifill's question.

In both contexts, I was observing Jews who I actually liked. I appreciate Bernie. He seems like an authentic progressive with a big heart and no modicum of courage. And I enjoyed the company of the Modern-Orthodox Jews I met in West Jerusalem. They were God-loving, ritually-dutiful, and proud of their heritage, and I don't get

to meet enough people like that when I'm home here in America. But there was something about the way both sets of Jews were behaving that made me question whether they're missing out on what makes Judaism so special, so beautiful, and so damned difficult. It's the notion of a faith that is devoted above all else to *struggling* -- and not just struggling in the abstract, but with the topics of central relevance to Judaism in particular.

When Heschel once said that "I would judge a person by how many deep problems he's concerned with," I'd respond that Heschel was merely announcing his Jewish bias. To be an exemplary Jew, as I understand the term, is to concern yourself with deep problems, face up to them, and devote your life to addressing them effectively. As to what these problems are and how to solve them, that is what we Jews must summon the energy to study.

Our ancestors, whether historians or story-tellers, give us plenty of clues. They talk constantly about God. So we can surmise that to be Jewish is, like our namesake "Israel" (formerly Jacob), to struggle with questions about the existence of God and the nature of divinity. Our ancestors also talk about our moral obligations to our fellow human beings. To read the Talmud is to get a rich education in ethics, economics, law, you name it – and I do mean a rich and *varied* education. The teachings of Judaism are seemingly infinite, and the

overall impression it makes is almost never one-sided. Judaism has a strong idealistic, aspirational component. Yet it also has a strong preservationist, cautious component.

Judaism is universalistic, yet also particularistic.

Judaism asks “If I am only for me, what am I?” And yet it also asks, “If I am not for me, who will be?”

Judaism is pro science, yet also pro faith.

Judaism is Hillel, yet also Shammai. As the Talmud says about the mercy-loving House of Hillel and the rigor-loving House of Shammai, “these *and those* are the words of the living God.”

So what ought we make of this polyglot? To me, we must return to where we started: Judaism is difficult. This is not the faith of those who seek, in Emerson’s words, “a foolish consistency, the hobgoblin of little minds.” Exemplary Jews are constantly testing their willingness to wage intellectual and emotional battles. You can see that in the writings of our Prophets, who were always raging against the machine – meaning the social elites of their day. And you can see the struggle in the faces of our great modern heroes, who seem to have aged well beyond their years. Contemplating problems will do that to you, as is evidenced by what happens to the residents of the office that Bernie would like to occupy.

The type of Judaism to which I aspire to practice has been called

“Prophetic Judaism.” And indeed, in Prophetic Judaism, all of our greatest goals – like peace, justice or truth – remain purely aspirational. This type of Judaism doesn’t promise that we can attain any of these goals. What it does promise is membership in a family -- a family of dreamers and of fighters. In this family, we learn and we teach, we worship and we question, we mourn and we celebrate, we work and we play, we support and we confront, we hope and we fear. The pride we feel is not necessarily from having realized our dreams, but rather from following in the footsteps of great men and women who were devoted to a set of principles and writings that have stood the tests of millennia. Their courage, wisdom and resolve provide us with the energy we need to struggle onward. For there is nothing more humbling than a life of struggle, and nothing more ennobling than continuing to wage these battles in the name of one’s faith.

Unfortunately, many Jewish individuals and communities seem to be looking for escape hatches away from Prophetic Judaism. They seek liberty and comfort, the two most cherished goals in the contemporary world. And they identify well-traveled paths by which these goals can be attained. On these paths they find liberation from cognitive dissonance and seemingly-Quixotic causes. They also find comfort in the fact that the paths before them have been paved and are well utilized, so they never need to know loneliness. Imagine that – contemporary

Jews can avoid being solitary beings and live in comfort and liberty, perhaps even with an inner peace. From a contemporary mindset, this sounds like heaven on earth. But not for a Heschel, a Buber, or a Jeremiah. For them, there is no heaven on earth. There's only the often-lonely life of struggling, and the pride and humility that goes with it.

At the beginning of this talk, I evoked images of two contemporary manifestations of Judaism. The one being personified by Bernie Sanders, and the other by politically-conservative, modern-Orthodox Israelis. Let's return to these images in greater depth, because together they represent such a threat to the Prophetic Judaism that I'd like to see flourish in the future. You can argue that both are superior to Prophetic Judaism in that they are more contemporary – more amenable to providing the liberty and comfort that people crave today. But Prophetic Judaism does not claim to be the most contemporary world view. It merely claims to be among the most timeless.

Let's get back to the man who has caused so many of us to "Feel the Bern." Bernie Sanders is a Jew who has dedicated his adult life to many of the values associated with the Prophets. Hillary has criticized Bernie for being a one-trick pony, but when you read what Heschel has to say about the Prophets, you start asking yourself whether Bernie isn't simply doing what they'd want him to do. Here's Heschel: "Instead of

showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world is a slum.... To us a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is [a] slight; to the prophets, a disaster.”

In raving against social and economic injustice, Bernie has tapped into the vein of the Prophets. He is following in the footsteps of many Jews before him, including Marx, who was himself the descendent of a lengthy line of rabbis. Together, these Jews created a robust socialist breeding ground in New York City, one that included so many members of my own family, including my parents. For them, Judaism was above all else a set of values and a culture that transmitted these values. The values were unmistakably Prophetic – or should I say, passionately *anti-injustice*.

But there’s a problem. Like so many others of his generation, Bernie identifies with his people’s folk, not their faith. He even put on his website that, while raised Jewish, he is “not ‘particularly religious.’” That’s probably a euphemism. According to Brandeis Professor Jonathan Sarna, Sanders is “totally secular.” Neither his wife nor his grandchildren are Jewish. And you’d be hard pressed to hear him talk about wrestling with God or with Jewish spirituality.

Nobody questions Bernie’s Jewishness because you don’t have to

be religious to be Jewish as long as you're born as a son or daughter of Jacob. But you have to wonder whether Bernie has done away with Prophetic Judaism and replaced it with Prophetic Secularism. In that regard, he represents a large swath of American Jews in their 60s, 70s and 80s who self-identify as Jews for purely cultural reasons. As for the spiritual side of Judaism, they see no reason to be bothered by such trifles. In fact, they likely reject the term "Prophetic," since the whole idea of the Prophets is that they were the ones who spoke for God, and for progressive, secular Jews, there is no God, supernatural or otherwise, or at least none worthy of our day-to-day concerns.

I'll admit that Bernie Sanders, the American socialist political icon, is an original. But his fellow secular Jewish progressives can be found in abundance. Many of them are cocked sure that their way -- the secular, progressive path -- is the only one worthy of the both the heart and the head. In that view, they can find all sorts of reinforcement among their family and friends, virtually all of whom are Democrats and virtually none of whom spend much time in shul wrestling with this mysterious concept known as God or the Infinite.

I'm not here to put down the world view with which so many of my Jewish friends and I were raised. But I am concerned about its staying power. We've already seen the death of the Borscht Circuit -- the ethnic enclave where my parents met at a leftist resort and where I

spent some of the best summer weeks of my childhood. I'm now concerned that once the generation of Bernie Sanders' dies out as well, what will be left of their legacy *as Jews*? How will their great-grandchildren differ from those who share their hatred of injustice, but not their ethnicity? Divorced from the Jewish faith, will those Prophetic values even continue to be transmitted from generation to generation? We're now seeing some of the results among Jews who are my age or younger, and who are often indistinguishable from their gentile neighbors in virtually every respect. Demographers tell us that the progressive, secular American Jew is becoming a rarer and rarer breed. So we had better enjoy Bernie Sanders while he lasts.

By contrast, when it comes to the modern-Orthodox ultra-Nationalists who I lunched with in West Jerusalem, the demographic picture is very different. Orthodox Judaism in all its manifestations seems to be thriving. Those of us who open our hearts to Judaism as a *faith* want to see it practiced authentically – with the same kind of passion that Bernie brings to the fight for social justice. The Jews I met for lunch in Jerusalem were indeed passionate. They believed in the importance of observing the Mitzvot, which to them is crucial to living a Jewish life. I didn't get the impression that theology was as important to them as ritual, but at least they were interested in theology. They were wrestling with questions of God, just as Jacob

would have wanted.

What they weren't wrestling with, or so it appeared, was Jewish guilt over the fate of the Palestinians. There, I saw a simple resolve: a resolve for Israeli Jews to stop worrying about the plight of their Arab neighbors or whether Israel has become an occupying power. According to this mindset, if innocent Palestinians have been suffering in the Territories, they can blame their own people, not the Jews. After all, we handed them the Gaza Strip, and they proceeded to vote in Hamas, trash the greenhouses we left them, and turn the Strip into a terrorist military base. I can just hear the diatribe: "The more we talk about two-states, the more we play into the hands of our enemies. We should just enjoy the fact that we have strong leaders and a powerful army and raise lots of Jewish children who are prepared to keep it that way. If the Arabs don't like living here, let them move to some other Arab-controlled country; Lord knows there are enough of them."

It's a coherent narrative, really. But I just can't ignore the fact that it doesn't comport with *Prophetic* Judaism. Believe me, I would never question whether the Israelis I lunched with are living an authentically Jewish life. Who am I to say that a community that joyously observes the Mitzvot, abides by the secular laws, and studies the ancient texts aren't really practicing Judaism? But in the way that they're washing their hands of the fates of their neighbors, who are truly suffering, I

don't see the spirit of a Jeremiah, an Isaiah, a Buber, or a Heschel. I see plenty of Shammais, just not nearly enough Hillels.

The Baal Shem Tov, who founded Hasidism and clearly emerged from the Hillel-side of the Jewish house, preached about the importance of loving all of creation. But today, many Orthodox teachers are pointing out that we have one set of obligations toward our fellow Jews and a lesser set of obligations to gentiles. Take for example, the increasingly popular Orthodox modification of the Talmudic statement that he who has taken but a single human life is as guilty as one who has destroyed an entire world. That, at least is the formulation of Sanhedrin 37a that I learned at an Orthodox yeshiva back in 1981. Today, however, young Orthodox students are commonly taught that what that passage really says is that he who has taken but a single *Jewish* life is as guilty as one who has destroyed an entire world. Universalism, it appears, has given way to particularism. Or stated differently, our humanism has given way to Jewish nationalism – not just in terms of politics but in terms of basic ethics. And this is why Palestinian children can suffer, and an increasing number of their Jewish caretakers can sleep just fine.

So there you have it – a path for Jews that is completely secular. And another that is insular and nationalistic. Both offer social support, and no small measure of simplicity, the simplicity of ignoring a domain

that had previously been viewed as fundamental. We all have enough to worry about in contemporary society. Maybe such simplicity is just what the doctor ordered. “Don’t concern yourself with ritual, or spirituality or God. If that doesn’t work for you, then fine. It’s not for everyone.” Or, if you prefer, “Don’t be one of those Jews who has compassion for everyone but your own kind. We have only 0.2% of the world. If the other 99.8% is going to discriminate against us, it’s time for us to put Jewish interests first.”

I won’t lie. Those perspectives do resonate with me. Both of them do. But just not enough. Because every time I consider either one, I see the faces of Buber and Heschel and yes, Spinoza, who was never one to blow off an entire set of Jewish values, whether political or spiritual. I also envision the teachings of the Prophets and the Patriarchs and Matriarchs before them, who commanded us to care – about all living things, about all human beings, and yes, about God. I just can’t contemplate the great Jews of the past and then decide that it’s my right to blow off any domain that they taught was fundamental.

And then there’s this notion of the struggle – this holy idea from which the people of Israel ultimately got our name. When I look back on my eight years of active involvement with the interfaith movement, one of the most critical principles is that all of the great faiths have something uniquely beautiful to emphasize. At bottom, these faiths say

many of the same things and advocate essentially the same basic values. But their *emphases* are profoundly different, and to search for religious wisdom is to open your eyes to the special emphasis of each of the great faiths. Christianity emphasizes altruism and gentleness. Islam emphasizes submission and worship. And Judaism? We stand for grappling – with God, with ideas, with ourselves. This means that we question authority, we value our questions as much as our answers, and to the extent we can put away our humility for a moment and feel pride, it's the pride in being strong enough to do the right thing, even if it's not the easiest solution.

When Spinoza taught that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare,” he did so as a Jew. When Heschel walked into the NBC studios to give his final interview, he looked like he was 90 whereas in fact he was 65, but that's what happens when you devote your life to one great struggle after another. I'm not saying that we should choose battles just for the sake of them, for that would be foolhardy. I'm only saying that if our ancestors developed a whole realm of teachings – whether it be about universalist ethics, spirituality, or whatever – it is only respectful to tackle it head on. It doesn't so much matter where we come out on it. It only matters that we wrestle with it when we're young, when we're middle aged, and when we're old. Then, hopefully, we can face up to our grandchildren and they will know what a Jew

looks like.