

PURIM 2014

This year, for the first time in 24 years, Kathy and I have nobody to care for under the age of 21. No children. Not even a dog. There's just us and our increasingly adult world.

We can live in an adult world, for the moment. But even now, we can't forget that children are our future, and it isn't Jewish to ignore the future. In fact, it is Jewish to live Messianistically. The Messiah of liberal Judaism is not a single person, let alone a historical one. The Messiah is a symbol – one that focuses on the warlike, the unjust, and the oppressive, and works effectively to eliminate them. All who take responsibility for ushering in the world of our dreams can collectively assume the mantle of the Messiah. And, taken in that vein, Jewish ethics is at bottom the ethics of Messianism. We have visions of a future that is worthy of our ideals, and we get busy to realize these visions here on earth, not in some hypothetical heaven.

It is with that in mind that I have observed with interest a wave of B'nai Mitvahs in recent years. My friends have put on several such events, and more will come in the near future. Now that I can observe them from a distance, without either my ego or superego kicking in and stressing me out, I've been able to take stock with some objectivity in what it's like to be a Jewish teenager in today's world. And I have watched with interest as the 13 year olds who are forced to serve as teachers of Torah turn into the 15 or 16 year olds who are allowed to determine for themselves what to make of this thing known as a "Jewish identity."

The questions they ask are common to every child whose parents have chosen to raise them Jewish: How Jewish am I? What does it even mean to be Jewish? How Jewish are my parents? If they are hardly Jewish, why should I concern myself with it? And if they are very Jewish, is that what I want for my own life? Do I think of being Jewish as truly special in any way? Or does being raised Jewish mean only that you're allowed to join a club that is not much different than some other clubs? Am I proud to be Jewish, ashamed, or just bored with the whole topic? How much of my time do I want to spend thinking about it? And finally, to what extent do I want my lifestyle and life choices to be informed by my Judaism?

While the Jewish kids who I'm privileged to know have been asking these questions, I have been putting myself in their positions and speculating as to their answers. When permitted, I've asked them these questions directly. More than anything else, I've come to conclude that for each generation we Jews spend on these shores, it is becoming increasingly challenging to connect with our Judaism. In fact, these challenges have grown substantially just in the four decades that have elapsed since my cohort and I were teenagers.

In the early 20th century, most American Jewish families were led by immigrants who were raised in Eastern-European shetls. When they came to America, they settled in ethnic enclaves and raised their own children in heavily Jewish neighborhoods. The faiths of these immigrants may or may not have been Mosaic, but their culture was steeped in their ancestral roots, and they instilled that culture in their children -- in other words, in my parents' generation.

What a Jewish generation that was. No, most of them weren't immigrants. But they were around at one of the most pivotal times of Jewish history. Only one generation removed from the shtetls, they lived through the Nazi terror and the birth of Israel. You would have to be one callous, unromantic soul to be raised by Jewish immigrants, live through those events, and then ignore your roots. For members of my parents' cohort, those roots were a huge source of pride.

By the time I became a teenager, it was a different world. Hitler was buried. Israel had won war after war. Our parents no longer felt the need to settle in Jewish neighborhoods, and our schools weren't composed mostly of Jews. Even back in the 70s, the members of my Jewish-American cohort were already Jews of choice. As kids, we had it in our power to erase any semblance of Jewish identity from our psyches. Then, we could go on to attend college as purely secular Americans and live completely assimilated adult lives. But we were still just a generation removed from those whose most formative experiences took place through a Jewish lens. Yes, we faced a fork in the road, but it was as easy to choose the Jewish path as the secular one.

Is that statement still true for the Jewish-American youth of today? I'm not so sure. For them, reducing their Jewish connections to a nub may have become the path of least resistance.

Let's begin by stating the obvious. The Jews of my generation were generally raised in families with two Jewish parents. According to a recent Pew survey, 83 percent of living American Jews who married before 1970 had a Jewish spouse. By contrast, that number had dropped to 45 percent for Jews who married in the late '90s, and since 2000 that percentage has stabilized at 42. If you're an American-Jewish teenager, not only are you likely to spend most of your time with gentile kids but even your "Jewish" world consists largely of mixed families whose commitment to the Jewish faith and culture may be half-hearted at best.

By contrast, Jewish teenagers in upper-middle-class America are likely to be raised with a full-throated commitment to a set of values associated with money, status and educational success. These kids don't have the free time my generation had when we grew up in the '70s. They're expected not only to perform ahead of grade level, but also to excel at extra-curricular activities, study like hell for standardized tests, and max out with their choice of colleges. In other words, they're expected to turn the growing process into a competition, one that engulfs so much of their lives that they must become adult-like at an early age. What's more, teenagers know that the Jewish culture has no monopoly over such a phenomenon. Ours is neither the culture that coined the term "Tiger Mom" nor the group that is currently targeted for discrimination by diversity-seeking universities. As a result, kids who view their activities primarily in terms of training and studying, rather than hanging out and reflecting, would have trouble seeing what is Jewish in the way they're being raised. If anything, those values which place more emphasis on competing for accolades than on searching for wisdom are antithetical to the Jewish religion.

Baby Boomers like me knew something of the rat race when we were growing up, but it clearly has accelerated in the recent past. Perhaps that can be attributed to scary economic trends, like

increased competition from abroad, a crippling national debt, and the spike in income inequality. But not all the economic news is scary. In fact, our teenagers realize that they are growing up at a thrilling time where the Information Age is finally in full flight. Even for Luddhites like me, the explosion of technological advancements is awesome. And for non-Luddhites, including nearly all our teenagers, the possibilities must seem endless. Teenagers see this phenomenon even more instinctively than their elders. They realize that sooner, rather than later, they'll be the leaders, and my generation will be asked to follow or get out of the way.

It's an exciting time to be an adolescent. But where does Judaism or Jewish culture fit in to this new era? The Jew celebrates tradition and the wisdom that comes with age. The Jew also forms a community with a group of individuals (past and present) who come almost entirely from a single ethnic group. Today, by contrast, youth is served. And the focus is less on venerating the past than on imagining an altogether new future and making that future a reality. The idea of holy books dating back thousands of years seems antiquated to the new mindset. For that matter, books themselves don't have the status they used to have. Today's youth take in information from all sorts of media and don't simply absorb or interpret that information but use it as springboards for their own creativity. In such a world, if there is to be a place for religion, it presumably would have to evolve considerably from the faiths of the past. For surely, as we create this future sense of religiosity, it will not only involve multi-media inputs and increasingly interactive outputs, but will combine elements from cultures all over the world. At a time when technology is exploding and communities are forged based on common interests and aptitudes, not ethnicities, Judaism can come to be seen as both parochial and dated.

Frankly, being dated is not the biggest crime according to the zeitgeist that our teenagers' encounter. After all, the information to which they're exposed still focuses backwards in time. It may not go all the way back to the eras of Abraham or Moses, but it is, to a degree, "dated." A bigger crime these days is to be thought of as parochial. For in our society, the values of universality are the ones we associate with progress and liberation, whereas the values of particularism are linked to oppression and divisiveness. For Judaism to remain relevant in the world of our teenagers, it can't be seen as pitting nation against nation, faith against faith, narrative against narrative. To the extent that happens, our teenagers will see Judaism much as we Jews have come to see the religious right. Those Christian Conservatives can talk all they want about their debt to the Hebrew Scriptures, but few Jews see them as allies. More typically, Christian Conservatives are viewed by Jews as anti-Enlightenment figures who are the enemy of universalistic values. And ultimately, no matter how tied we are to our own particularity – our family, our people, our story -- Jews see ourselves as the ultimate universalists.

It is with respect to that commitment to universality that the Jewish world finds itself at yet another crossroads. You see, our survival as a people turns on our being able to pride ourselves on our universality while also celebrating our particularity. For my parents' generation, this was as easy as giving the Bronx cheer to Hitler. For our teenagers, however, this has become one of the greatest challenges of all.

Back in the mid-20th century, there was nothing inherently incompatible between having a Jewish consciousness and a commitment to enlightenment values. Jewish culture was associated with working hard, pursuing an education for its own sake, thinking freely, questioning authority, serving the poor, and destroying icons. We came to see ourselves as a people of teachers, social workers, scientists, civil rights activists, and artists. We recognized that our people didn't share similar success in the realms of athletics or war, but that just supported our narrative that we were the world's Levites -- the ones who were so committed to the fight against injustice that whether the victim was Jew or gentile hardly mattered. According to the Jewish narrative, whereas the other nations have survived by the sword, we survived in spite of it, and because of our commitment to Biblical values, our sense of family and community, and our faith in God. Once we were given the chance to flee the pogroms and the crematoria of Europe and build our own "peace of oath" in the land of our ancient ancestors, we could finally obtain for ourselves the same justice that we've always sought for the poor and the weak wherever we've found them.

That was the Zionist dream. Reflect on it, and you can see why Israel was so beloved by my parent's generation of American Jews. Israel continued to be beloved by my own cohort as well. Whenever that little country beat the odds and defeated the combined armies of its surrounding nations, the pride we felt was beyond belief. Some would attribute it to supernatural intervention, others to our technological ingenuity, still others to the unique spirit that was spawned by centuries of victimization and resolve. But believe me, American Jews came to adore Israel as a symbol of what is holy, just and liberating.

By and large, it's still like that for our seniors. However, the reality is very different for their grandchildren. For many Jewish youth, Zionism has become a dirty word. Even among the mainstream, the "Occupation" has come to be seen as an albatross around the Jewish neck. In suburban America, our teenagers may indeed love Israel, but they are much less likely to associate it with holiness. Why? Because they must repeatedly confront universalistic arguments that are being made *against* Israeli policies to the point where academics and artists in America and Europe are even leading boycotts of Israeli products or institutions.

In short, Jewish-American support for Israel is coming to be seen as existing *in spite of* universalism, not because of it. This has taken a tremendous toll on our youth, who tend to be more idealistic than the rest of us. It is as if Israel's problems have sapped every Jew of her sense of virginity, but at least the members of my generation grew up as virgins and that's how we cemented our loyalty and pride as Jews. For today's teenagers, this pride and loyalty is giving way to cynicism. The Occupation and the resulting international backlash has created so much cognitive dissonance that many of our youth have chosen simply to avoid focusing on what to them is just another crazy war zone.

Put all these factors together, and you'll see why the path of least resistance for American Jewish teenagers is to de-emphasize Judaism when it comes to defining their sense of identity. That, to

me, is a problem. But it also may become a blessing. For you see, while none of this bodes especially well for the *quantity* of Jews in our society, it may be quite a boost to the *quality* of the Judaism that eventually emerges when our grandkids are in their 50s and reflect back as I am now.

When I glance at the crystal ball that is the future of American Judaism, I see that the liberal Judaism that survives will be a *liberated* Judaism. That is certainly a good thing, though it remains the case that change is scary at first. One of the scariest developments in liberal Jewish communities is the rising rate of intermarriage. Demographers have shown that the intermarried Jewish spouse is far more likely to leave the faith than the non-Jewish spouse is to convert. This is why a few decades back, when rabbis were a bit more outspoken, they would say things from the bimah like “What Hitler couldn’t do, intermarriage is doing!” In other words, intermarriage is furthering the Nazi goal of thinning the Jewish herd.

Perhaps so. But intermarriage is also helping to ensure that those who remain within the faith have truly embraced it as a result of a meaningful choice. In intermarried families, you see, practicing Judaism won’t be a perfunctory process for long. It will either take hold in a big way, or will soon be blown off. I don’t doubt that a kid from an interfaith family can go through the motions at a Bar Mitzvah, but by the time he’s 30, if he’s not serious about his Judaism, he’ll probably stop self-identifying as a Jew. By contrast, those who remain with the faith will have gone out of their way to embrace it. They’re more likely to have found it comforting, empowering, even inspiring. They’re more likely to join a synagogue not because they want a Bar Mitzvah mill for their kids, but because they want a stimulating Jewish community for themselves as adults.

Today’s intermarriages, then, can re-energize the liberal Jewish communities of the future. Yes, we’re talking about a thinned herd, but it’s only the casual, bored members of the herd who would leave. The ones who remain may finally know what it means to experience the joy and camaraderie of being part of a *true* Jewish community. It’s an experience that in recent decades has been exclusively the province of Orthodox Jews ... and giggly girls at summer camp.

Just as intermarriage presents opportunities as well as challenges for the future of liberal Judaism, the same can be said about the technological explosion we’re experiencing. Today’s teenagers are growing up at a time when creativity is being rewarded like never before, and vistas are being explored that previously seemed preposterous to imagine. Consider, though, that the further we broaden our horizons -- the more we stretch the bounds of what is knowable and doable -- the more secure we will become in contemplating our limitations. In other words, we will come to be at peace in recognizing the reality of an infinite realm of mystery that lies above the human condition. Don’t take my word for it; ask the creators of Star Trek. Their program was ground breaking, both technologically and sociologically. But for all their devotion to expanding the limits of the possible, they never ceased to remind us of how tiny our realm is in relation to what transcends us. Theirs was a vision of science, but also of spirituality.

Jewish teenagers who throw themselves into the new technologies will face a fateful choice. They can lose themselves entirely in a world of Terabytes – of facts, figures, human inventions and human possibilities. Or they can periodically keep an eye away from the computer and, like Captain Kirk, contemplate the stars and wonder about all that exists beyond our perceptive abilities. If our teenagers truly are devoted to broadening their vistas and not simply moving from one cave to another, won't this leave them open to the realm of spirituality? For how is it possible to leave the caves without recognizing that the source of the light is not a humanlike figure or creation but rather the great, mysterious, transcendent source of all Being?

To some degree, we Jews have always prided ourselves on rejecting simplistic, anthropomorphic views of God. But in recent decades, our rabbis have shown particular willingness to ground their theologies on modern philosophical concepts. As a result, when Jewish teenagers and young adults open their hearts and minds to spiritual questions, they will find in our faith an amenable home for their perspectives. What's more, they will demand from the Jewish communities of the future a radiant spirituality. The days where liberal congregations mindlessly chant the same verses and melodies, week after week, will soon become a thing of the past. No longer will legions of congregants sit back and watch the great one babble on. The rabbi of tomorrow will not be a rebbe; *she* will be a facilitator. And the congregants' creativity – both individually and communally – will be what she will facilitate.

In thinking about a traditional Reform synagogue and the paucity of spirituality it created, picture Captain Kirk in such a community. It's not hard to do; after all, William Shatner is a Jew. Kirk would clearly have grown restless in such a stagnant environment. So, too, will those of our teenagers who opt for Judaism when they become adults. That's both my hope and expectation.

Turning now to the issue of Israel – by which I mean the country, not just the people – let's try to ignore all the Chicken Littles for just a moment and keep things in perspective. Four hundred years ago, we thought of ourselves as God's chosen. Forty years ago, we thought of ourselves as humanity's role models. Now, with all the negative publicity surrounding the Occupation, perhaps we think of ourselves as but one people among many – more comparable to the gentiles than different. But is that a shame? Or is that simply what it means to mature and to realize that the laws of political nature are almost as intractable as the laws of physical nature?

Yes, Israel has perpetrated abuses. But find me a country that hasn't. Israel is 66 years old. Here in the USA, we hadn't repealed Jim Crow Laws until year 190. Democracies take time to find their sea legs and work through their issues. Once we give up our chauvinism, we realize that this applies to the United States and Israel, just like everyone else. Comparatively speaking, when we speak of the Jewish State, we are speaking of an adolescent. Inevitably, she will continue to mature, and we need to support her in that process, which sometimes involves tough love but which *always* involves patience.

American Jewish teenagers may not have their parents' pride when it comes to the state of Israel, but perhaps they too will mature and come to view the Jewish State less in terms of pride or shame and more like the way adults have for years viewed our own teenagers. We love them, respect them and care for them, yet we also see them as a challenge. When it comes to the state of Israel, if we're smart, we embrace that challenge. Inspired by the word of the prophet Isaiah, all Jews have an obligation in our own way to help Israel become "a light unto the nations." That requires us to get involved in the fight for peace between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors and citizens. We also must help Israel figure out how to balance the interests of different types of Jews. Today, when it comes to religious practice, Israel categorizes its Jews in three ways: secular, traditional, and observant. We American Jews must lend our encouragement to help those groups live symbiotically and with mutual respect in the Holy Land.

Sadly, American Jewish teenagers today face increasing rhetoric about how Israel stands out among affluent nations by its *lack* of commitment to equality and justice. The leftist community asks us to regard Israel as a moral pariah. And somehow, our teenagers must summon the wisdom to strike a ticklish balance. They must avoid applying to Israel the same double standard that anti-Semites have employed for centuries. But they must also enlist themselves in the fight for peace and justice within any state that calls itself Jewish. Achieving this dual set of objectives is difficult. But truly discriminating Jewish teenagers appreciate that finding the golden mean here is a great birthright. They realize that we all live in an interrelated world that is getting smaller by the day. And they recognize that as Jews, they have a built-in calling to apply their ancestral values to perhaps the world's most pivotal hotspot. For those teenagers looking for meaning in life, this is one hell of a place to start.

So we've spoken about the trends resulting from the explosions in intermarriage, technology, and Arab-Jewish enmity. There is one more trend that hasn't exploded yet, but it will. When it does, those of us who have both embraced and modernized our ancestral religion will be at the forefront.

We've mentioned already how Judaism as a civilization balances an ethic of universality with a devotion to our own community and its traditions. In that regard, our teenagers will find that deepening their relationship to the Jewish faith fits perfectly within a trend that will soon become a terrific counterweight to the power of the religious right. I'm referring to the growth of the interfaith movement.

Anti-Semites can complain all they want about Jewish separatism. But our teenagers will recognize that the parochial aspects of Jewish tradition need not threaten the viability of Judaism as a 21st century faith. Universal values have forever been our guiding light and our greatest source of pride. For no matter how much we falter as individuals or as a people, we will always be able to rejoice in the values of the Torah. These basic values -- written thousands of years ago and analyzed ever since by rabbis -- are timeless. Whenever I apply them to our contemporary world, I am struck by how much they dovetail with the teachings of the interfaith movement.

The future of liberal Judaism, as I see it, is *interfaith Judaism*. It is a movement of people who embrace our own ancestral tradition, strive to share our wisdom with members of other traditions, but never doubt that our own faith can benefit profoundly from exposure to non-Jewish sources. As our teenagers surely appreciate, no one faith has a monopoly on truth. But just as we have a lot to learn from Christians, Muslims, Buddhists ... or for that matter non-theists, we can't forget that the interfaith movement needs Jews who are steeped in Judaism. Take it from someone who devotes much of his time to interfaith activities – that movement will never fully mature unless enough of us bring to it an authentic commitment to our own cultures and faiths, and then share our knowledge freely with one another. And as long as the interfaith movement remains in its fledgling stages, progressives will cede the immense power of spirituality to the right wingers ... and heaven help the poor, the weak, and the environment.

In conclusion, I can envision a time when liberal Jewish teenagers will become “interfaith Jews.” But that is hardly the death knell to liberal Judaism. It is just one more step in liberating our faith so that it may become the most beautiful vessel it can be. And when it reaches that promised land of serving as a light unto the nations, we won't worry so much about counting heads. We'll just be taking pride once again in our hearts and in our souls.