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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778: Breathing New Life into Old Bones

It's been four years since I attended the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and had the opportunity to study with its founder, Rabbi David Hartman, who passed away in 2013.

Hartman, a brilliant philosopher and scholar, was born in America, and served as the Rabbi of an Orthodox congregation in Montreal, before making Aliyah in 1971; leaving behind a thriving congregation at the peak of his career, to build a life in Israel.

Hartman was often asked why he left his pulpit. He answered by telling a story that took place on Tisha B'Av, a day that's unfamiliar to the vast majority of Reform Jews. Tisha B'Av commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70, marking the beginning of our period of exile. From that day on, the Jewish people became homeless wanderers in search of a place where we could live in safety and security. For those who observe it, Tisha B'Av is a solemn, fast day (like Yom Kippur), commemorated by many of the rituals that are commonly associated with mourning.

So back to that story. One year, on the morning of Tisha B'Av, Hartman came to his congregation, entered the sanctuary, and found his congregants doing what Jews normally do: they were sitting on the floor, reciting mournful dirges. Yet on this day Hartman found their behavior disturbing. After surveying the scene, he cleared his throat and loudly rebuked his

pious parishioners. He said: "Jews are happy. Jews are dancing today in Yerushalayim." And then he turned his back, walked out of the shul, and took his family on a trek into the mountains, where they enjoyed a peaceful picnic lunch.

So what was bothering him? What caused Hartman to publicly upbraid his congregation for maintaining the traditional observances for a fast day? And why did he ignore the Halakha, the teachings of Jewish law, and take his family for lunch in the mountains?

The answer is that for Hartman, that Tisha B'Av was different than any other. Because two months earlier, in June, Israel fought the Six Day War, bringing the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount into Jewish hands. Rather than mourning, Hartman believed that this year called for a celebration. His actions were in keeping with the passions of his heart which cried out: The Jewish people is alive and well. After 2,000 years of petitions and prayers, Jerusalem has finally been restored to our hands. Could there be a better time than on the anniversary of a devastating defeat and tragic exile, for Jews to stop our mourning and return to living?

This story explains why Hartman made Aliyah. It was his "aha moment" when he fully understood that there was a price to pay for living a traditional Jewish life in Canada, or America, or anyplace outside of Israel. What was the price? For a traditional Jew, it meant choosing to live "outside of time and separate from history." Let me explain what that means.

When I was younger and people asked me where I came from, I was often hesitant to respond. But people would persist: “Where are you from? Are you Italian, Puerto Rican, Mexican” (I used to get pretty dark in the summers.) In the end, I’d tell them I was Jewish.

Typically, this conversation left me feeling awkward, because it seemed like I wasn’t answering their question. They asked me about my nationality, and I answered with my religion. But there wasn’t another answer that I could give. For even though Helbraun is a German name, and my Nana came from Riga, and my mother’s side of the family came from Poland, I knew I wasn’t German or Polish, and had no idea where Riga was. And honestly, it didn’t matter. Because while those were places my family lived, they weren’t where I was from. I was a Jew.

The fact is, whatever happened in Germany, Poland or Riga in the early 1900’s, impacted the community my family lived in, but it didn’t affect their culture, their values, or the structure of my family’s life. My family was Jewish, and the traditions they observed (or neglected) were Jewish.

The communities I came from functioned “outside of time, and separate from history”. It didn’t matter what country or monarchy ruled over the territory we lived in. We followed the same traditions and patterns of life as our ancestors. For instance, to my father’s family in Germany and Riga, and my mother’s family in Poland, it made no difference that it might rain there all summer long. When the holiday of Sukkot was over, all of them started praying for rain. Not because *they* needed it, but because *Israel* did. Their religious life focused more on the climate

of Israel, than it did on the land where they lived. And it was the same thing with Hartman's congregation in Canada. It really didn't matter if Jerusalem was back in Jewish hands after two thousand years, because our tradition told them to fast and mourn on the ninth of Av. So they fasted and mourned; all of us living outside of time, and separate from history.

For Hartman, the state of Israel changed the nature of Judaism, and he could no longer live with cognitive dissonance. He would no longer close his eyes and mind to the events of the day. He would create a Judaism that responded to the needs of modern Jews living in their own country. His religious life, no differently than the rest of his life, would be lived IN time, and a part of history.

As Reform Jews, our understanding of Judaism is strikingly similar to Hartman's philosophy. We also believe that Judaism needs to respond to the realities of the modern world. Unfortunately, that's not how we act. Instead, we tend to treat Judaism no differently than Hartman's congregants did.

This means that, at best, we see Judaism as the religion our ancestors passed down to us, and we treat it with reverence and respect. At worst, we think of it as an ancient relic that sits inside a tired, old box that we've put up on a shelf in some out of the way place. Every once in a while we take the box down and look inside. We'll take it down on the holidays, for instance, or give it to our children so they can have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But as soon as those events are over, it goes back in the box, up on the shelf, and we go back to living our normal lives.

Even though we call ourselves Reform Jews, we prefer to hold on to the dated religion of our ancestors, instead of grasping onto a living Judaism. And I think I understand why. Because, as long as we see Judaism as an outdated relic, it has no claim on us. A Judaism that remains the religion of our ancestors can easily be ignored. But a living Judaism that responds to our needs, and helps make sense of our world, that is a Judaism that we need to practice.

Earlier this year I traveled to Israel with some of my Chicago rabbinic colleagues. We met with Natan Sharansky, the Head of the Jewish Agency and a true hero of the Jewish people. For those who don't know the name, Sharansky was one of the most famous refuseniks in the Former Soviet Union. For the crime of studying Hebrew, he was sent to prison in Siberia. After enduring many years of privation, he was finally allowed to emigrate to Israel where he became a respected leader.

During our meeting, Sharansky spoke to us about the state of world Jewry. It's not good. He told us that if French Jews could afford to move to Israel, they would have already come. But even though their families aren't coming right now, this is where they're sending their children. He said that, whatever Jews are left in Russia and are young enough to travel, they're on their way to Israel. Ukraine today, he said, is extremely unstable. And Aliyah from Brazil, Venezuela, from South America in general, they're all still coming. Finally, there's a small but stable flow of a few thousand, mostly young Americans, who make Aliyah each year. That said, it won't be long before the Jewish world is down to two: the Jews of North America and the Israelis.

And yet, despite the fact that life in America is stable for Jews, Sharansky had some sharp words for us. He said that historically speaking, a healthy Jewish community needs to have two strong anchors. A community that only has one, may not thrive, but it can survive. But in a community without either, Judaism will disappear.

What are these anchors? The first is Faith – which he defined broadly as meaning involvement with one’s religious community. The second is Zionism – supporting the national endeavor of the Jewish homeland. If we have only one of these in our lives, Judaism will survive. But if we aren’t engaged in our own Jewish community, or working to support our national Jewish project, then the chances that one’s grandchildren will identify themselves as Jews are slim indeed.

Sharansky spoke with precision, but still he berated us as he mentioned that in America today only 11% of our kids go to Jewish day schools, a fraction of the percentage of Jewish children around the world. And if you compare how Jewish wealth is invested in Jewish continuity, in congregations in Australia, South America, or Europe, it puts America to shame. He ended his comments by saying that, he realizes that Israel is not doing American Jews any favors these days (a topic I’ll have more to say about next week.) But you in America, he said, you’re not doing your part either.

I sat there listening. I wanted to defend you. I wanted to defend me. But I couldn’t. While our intentions are good – we want to keep the chain of tradition alive; we join a temple and make

sure our child has a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But it's not enough. Our kids spend far more time in the Youth Sports leagues than they do at temple, and between driving them to their practices and attending their games, I'm pretty sure that you do too.

But still, you're here today. And if you didn't care you wouldn't be here at all. I'm certain that all of you know plenty of people who've opted out. So I'm grateful that you've opted in, and I want to help.

This Machzor, our Rosh Hashanah prayer book is full of blessings. Many of them are unfamiliar, some of them we know by heart. One of them, the Veahavta, not only can most of you chant it with your eyes closed, you also know what it means. (p. 152) "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Set these word, which I command you this day, upon your heart. Teach them faithfully to your children. Speak of them in your home and on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up."

For many of us, this prayer encapsulates why we're here. We *do* want to pass our tradition, our heritage on to our children, just as our parents did for us. As the prayer says, we are here to "Teach them faithfully to our children." Now what is the best way to teach? We can find that answer in the same prayer, just one line up. The best way to teach is to: set these words which I command you this day upon *your* heart." The most effective way to teach begins with creating a personal connection to a subject. If you want to teach someone else, start by setting it upon your own heart, so that your teaching comes from love, from care, and from connection.

From my childhood years on, I've seen far too many cases where children were turned off from Judaism, precisely because their parents felt an obligation to see that their children were taught, but never took the time to light a fire in their own heart. For their children, going to temple felt, not like a gift or an inheritance, but more like a punishment. If you want to give your children a valuable gift, make sure that what your giving is valuable to you.

One of the blessings of our vibrant, living religion, is that it is truly multifaceted. There are so many ways for us to live, learn and connect Jewishly, and our congregation provides so many opportunities to participate.

This summer, our director of Lifelong Learning, Mandy Herlich, put together a program for our congregation. Rather than something that's "good for you," she created an opportunity for you to identify what you're passionate about, and express that passion Jewishly. The program is based on eight values: Community, Culture, Family, Learning, Welcoming Guests, Repairing the World, Spirituality, and Israel.

1. For some of us, we join a congregation to make connections and find friends. If that's why you're here, there's a booklet called *kehillah* – Community for you to pick up.
2. Others come to a congregation to participate and share in our deep, rich Culture. For you, there's a booklet called *tarboot* – Culture.

3. I'm pretty sure that the number one reason people join a temple today is because they want to create their own family traditions and grow Jewishly. If that's you, pick up a booklet called *mishpacha* - Family.
4. While Judaism is a repository of wisdom, for many of us Hebrew school just didn't cut it, but now you have the time to study. Grab the *talmud torah* – the Learning booklet.
5. For others, a congregation should be like the tent of Abraham, open on all sides, making sure that no one ever feels left out. You'll want the *hachnasat orchim* booklet, where you'll find opportunities to Welcoming Guests into our home.
6. Because the world is still not whole, and there are far too many people still in need, there's a *tikkun olam* booklet, where you'll find ways to Repair the World.
7. Perhaps you need a place to unwind, to become refreshed; a place where you can feel God's presence in your life – you'll find it in *t'filah*, the Spirituality booklet.
8. And for those who feel blessed to live in a world with the state of Israel, pick up the *Yisrael* booklet, and strengthen your connection.

Inside each of these booklets you'll find something like one opportunity a month that corresponds to your passion. Although there are limited numbers of booklets here now, I ask you to take a moment to write your name and email on the sign-up sheet, so we can either send you an electronic copy, or print up additional copies that can be picked up on Yom Kippur. We will also use your email to send you specific reminders as your activities coming up. And of course, if you're participating in services today on livestream, feel free to send an email to the

temple office and let us know your passion – Community, Culture, Family, Learning, Welcoming Guests, Repairing the World, Spirituality or Israel, and we'll get a booklet over to you.

Friends, we must not allow Judaism to remain an ancient relic that we keep in a box and put up on a shelf. Because you know what happens to those boxes? They sit on that shelf until it's time to move. And then, you can try to give it to your children then, but they won't want it. They never used it enough to understand why it was special. And their memories of sharing it with you, are too few and far between.

Instead, let's take that box down, open it up, and look at what's inside. I'm certain that you'll find something that you're passionate about. Pursue it, share it, live it, become enriched by it, let it bring you blessings, let it bless your family. Let it out. Allow your Jewish life to breathe and watch it grow. Your parents and grandparents will thank you – and so will your children.

Amen.