

Torn Between Value Systems

We each think of ourselves as one single person, but I believe all of us have multiple selves, different aspects to our identities. Inside me, for example, is an entire Jewish committee. It's got my orthodox ancestors who insist on rigid adherence to tradition; it's got my parents' generation of American Jews who largely assimilated into mainstream society; it's got the rebellious kid in me who flips his finger at the whole thing; and there's even a Gentile or two.

My committee members don't get along that well. The ancestors are shouting: "Your grandfather died in Auschwitz for being a kosher butcher, and you're eating *bacon*?? And dating a *shiksa*? Look what we've been through just to keep our identity *alive*! It's your identity too, or have you forgotten? Where is your loyalty to your tribe and your Lord?"

And then my rebellious boy retorts, "Loyalty to the Lord? Are you joking?! You call him God the Father. But a father is supposed to protect his children! Has God protected us? Look at all the atrocities He has visited upon the Jews. We're his special people? I could do without such specialness! Where's the loyalty FROM God in this equation?"

The assimilated American Jew inside me just stays quiet, trying not to attract the attention of either side, just wanting to get along comfortably. The Gentile stays contentedly neutral, watching the show. But the most problematic committee members are the ones who try to stay really hidden: the internalized anti-Semite, the terrified Jewish shopkeeper in the court of the Inquisition, and so many others.

What this adds up to in my day-to-day experience is a softly droning layer of background guilt, alloyed with loyalty. On the one hand, this is a coercive pull, as if the massive stone tablets from Mt. Sinai are in the air above my head, threatening to pound down and clobber me "if I forget who I am" (as the ancestors might put it).

But I also feel enormously grateful for my heritage. I love our holiday cycles; I love Shabbat, and the new moon ceremonies, and saying a prayer before every meal. I love the mysticism of the kabbalah. I love the euphonious beauty of the Hebrew and Yiddish languages. I love klezmer music, shtetl stories, Jewish humor. I love the wisdom and ethics within our traditions.

I love our abiding sense of community and tribal roots, and the way that Jews have always taken care of each other. So many Jewish organizations sprung up after the Holocaust to support the survivors! And we also have a more inclusive charitable tradition. For example, the hospital I was born in, Mt. Sinai (darn it -- those tablets again!) Hospital was founded by a Young Ladies Hebrew Association as a charitable medical institution that treated Cleveland's urban poor, regardless of race and religion, in the early-to-mid 20th century.

So while the orthodox rabbis in my head sometimes give me a headache, I bow deeply to them for their having fought so fiercely to preserve Jewish identity and traditions over the millennia.

Also intrinsic to Jewish identity is an intense passion for learning and truth. Rabbis over the centuries debated the meaning of the Torah, and the best ideas would ultimately be propagated. Even our famous “secular” Jewish thinkers like Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud were “people of the book” in this sense. Albert Einstein pursued truth in physics; Karl Marx in the realm of social justice; and Freud in the nature of the human psyche.

I think what fundamentally drives our unending search for truth and knowledge is the fact that we’re exiles, longing to return home. We’re yearning for a reunion with something larger than ourselves. In our quest for truth, we imagine we may get there. Exile is an extremely powerful psychological force in Jewish culture. We were driven from our historical homeland millennia ago, but I think the archetype of exile goes even deeper than that. The ancient sense of exile is universal, living within the psyche of every human being. It is a prototypical Jewish signature story, the longing to return.

We start with Adam and Eve, exiled from the Garden. Thus humanity is cast into the territory of exile, out of Paradise, into a world where atrocities happen, a world that isn’t safe. Jewish people commemorate the first and second destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and continually yearn to return. We are not home.

Exile means *separation from home*. Freud, the original guru of anxiety and neuroses, said that the feeling of separation or exile is THE primary anxiety. And, as Freud showed us, we’re also “exiled” from our own consciousness; i.e. substantially disconnected from our subconscious minds.

We’re birthed, pushed out of our mothers’ wombs, our first physical home on Earth. And this primal, existential sense of separation is both individual and collective. This persists wherever we go, in our yearning to return to oneness, unity, wholeness ... where the committee comes to resolution.

For thousands of years, the *longing to return* has been voiced in Hebrew prayers. And one way to look at the Hitlers and evildoers of the world is to recognize that these individuals are exiled not just from God, not just from the place they came from, but also from their own souls. They are completely lost, and so they inflict pain on others.

When we see them in this light, can we hold them in compassion? Or do we wish that somehow all the pain they’ve caused will come back at them, and that they’ll be “punished” by karma or by God? My inner committee is divided on that, as is our larger culture.

In all of this ambivalence and longing, I can never forget that I’m Jewish. For thousands of years, orthodox Jews have worn *tefillin* on their forearms and foreheads – tiny black boxes containing scrolls of verses from the Torah, so that we might remember the teachings constantly. As for me, I don’t consistently light candles, say blessings or wear a yarmulke on Shabbat ... but I have a conspicuous birthmark on my upper arm, in the exact spot near my heart where the *tefillah* would be worn, were I an observant orthodox Jew! So I too remember the Torah constantly (whether I want to or not).

Traditions are necessary for the preservation of a culture. Tradition “fleshes out” and brings color to a culture. Traditions are the elemental touchstones of a people. If Jews weren’t telling stories in the oral tradition of the Talmud, if we didn’t have Klezmer music in Yiddish, if we didn’t have our holidays and all

the various (and often arcane) rituals that we've observed for millennia, we would be lost; we'd no longer be a people.

And yet, I remember how, on Sunday evenings throughout my childhood, my extended family would all meet at the Chinese restaurant, and we'd merrily order sweet and sour pork, and shrimp with lobster sauce. All my aunts and uncles and cousins were there, along with my older brother and my parents and me. A gathering place of and for Holocaust survivors (especially on Christmas!). Nobody blinked an eye; there was no rabbinical debate concerning our food choices, or the implications of our abandoning *kashrut*, an essential tenet of the Jewish religion. If there was any debate at all, it was about who would pick up the check.

But then at home, my mother began to keep all our meals kosher, and our orthodox friend commented, "Look, either you're kosher or you're not. If you eat pork at the restaurant, then you're not kosher. You can't have it both ways."

And yet we do have it both ways. We observe the laws and traditions that we choose to observe, we ignore the ones we deem it necessary or convenient to ignore, and we call ourselves Jews, and we *feel Jewish*.

But we don't really have it both ways. Because we're also ingesting a little bit of guilt with that sweet and sour pork -- a guilt that harkens back to a sense of loyalty, the loyalty which is in turn the expression of an ongoing responsibility for preserving the integrity of our tribe.

We have it both ways, and yet we don't. We're split. We're torn between our secular values and traditional ones. As modern American Jews, we walk unstably with a foot in both worlds.