**Do You Read from Right to Left? PCS Rosh Hashanah Day**

**2015 / 5776**

**Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan**

When Golda Meir held the office of Israeli Prime Minister, she tried to encourage Henry Kissinger, the U.S. Secretary of State, to make Israel a top priority. He sent her a letter: "I would like to inform you that I'm first an American citizen; second, Secretary of State; and third, a Jew."

Golda shrugged and responded: "So? In Israel, we read from right to left."

When I ask, “Do you read from right to left, what I mean is,” do you go against the grain? Because that’s what Jews have been doing for the last 4,000 years, ever since Avraham, the first iconoclast, or idol-breaker, smashed the idols in the family business, “Idols-R-Us,” and proclaimed the radical idea of monotheism, belief in one God. Therefore, Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, is called a Hebrew, an “*Ivri*,” meaning “one from the other side.” The Midrash Genesis Rabbah explains that Abraham got this name of being “from the other side,” because in an age of idol worship, “the entire world was on one side, but Abraham was on the other.”

Being Jewish has always been defined as being somewhat counter cultural, being different, being on one side with the world on the other. Moreover, we have often had our own ethical standards that have annoyed our detractors. As the wicked Haman complains to King Ahasuerus in the book of Esther (3:8): “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people.”

But what about now? Do Jews still see the world from another direction? What if anything, really makes us different as Jews today, and do we still need to be different?

We can look back at two classical answers. One, the positive view, holds that Jews are God’s Chosen People, with a special mission to fulfill in the world. The second takes the negative viewpoint, claiming that we Jews are in the position of perennial outsiders. This can also be positive as it has given us a certain distance and perspective with which to critique and challenge the larger society.

The Traditional response, of course, is that the Jews are God’s chosen people. The Bible returns repeatedly to the theme of Israel’s chosenness. The prophet Isaiah declared that God appointed the people of Israel “a covenant people, a light unto the nations.” The book of Deuteronomy (7:6) in the Torah states: “For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; of all the peoples on earth,Adonai your God chose you to be God’s treasured people.”

Interestingly, I think that some Christians make more of Jewish chosenness than we do ourselves. Growing up, I was always told that “Chosenness” was really a matter of extra responsibility and higher moral standards. Jews were to live by and demonstrate a way of life, both ritual and ethical, that would be that “light unto the nations.”

But not all Jews are comfortable with the idea of chosenness. In Texas I led a Reconstructionist congregation and in California my congregation, while non-denominational, used the Reconstructionist prayerbooks. This American Jewish movement arose in the 20th century from the philosophy of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Like Abraham before him, Kaplan was an iconoclast, and one of the sacred cows that he challenged was the very idea of Jewish chosenness. As the old saw goes, “You chose us God, but please, just once, could you choose someone else for a change?” Kaplan took out every possible reference to the Chosen People from his first prayer book, a step that prompted some Orthodox Jews to burn it. Some later generations of Reconstructionists even sneaked back in some of the Chosen People references, so you can now choose how much you want to feel chosen.

Of course, being a light unto the nations has its shadow side. Some Jews say it’s not being chosen for a covenant with God that makes Jews distinctive; it’s just that we never quite fit in. We were often persecuted by anti-Semites, and that has led us to a sense of being outsiders.

In the last century, the Holocaust decimated a third of our people, and in recent years anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head once again in Europe. Even today in the United States, the greatest haven Jews have ever known in the diaspora, there are still anti-Semitic incidents. According to the FBI, while most hate crimes in the US are related to race or ethnicity, those related to religion are overwhelmingly directed at Jews.

Comedian Mel Brooks wrotes: “I may be angry at God or at the world, and I'm sure that a lot of my comedy is based on anger and hostility...It comes from a feeling that as a Jew and as a person, I don't fit into the mainstream of American society. Feeling different, feeling alienated, feeling persecuted, feeling that the only way you can deal with the world is to laugh—because if you don't laugh you're going to cry and never stop crying –that's probably what's responsible for the Jews having developed such a great sense of humor. The people who had the greatest reason to weep, learned more than anyone else how to laugh.”

But critics have asked if the younger generation of Jewish writers, comedians and artists is equally alienated from the mainstream of society. I would say that times have definitely changed. Maybe Mel Brooks felt persecuted, and Woody Allen made a career of being an outsider, but Jon Stewart, even as he critiqued society, is certainly of the insider generation.

So let us pause to take a quick vote, and as we say in Texas, you can vote early and often. How many believe that being Jewish means being part of a people chosen for a special mission in the world? And how many feel in your heart that being Jewish means living with a certain perennial outsider status?

We are now several generations past the massive immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to the US, and farther still from the arrival of the German and Spanish Jews that preceded them. The American Jewish community is proud, assertive, well-educated, and successful. According to sociologist Michael Burstein, studies of the American Jewish community reveal that over the past half century, the Jewish community has become better educated, more professionally accomplished, and more economically successful than most other religious or ethnic groups in the US. Can we really claim to be outcasts three Jewish justices serve on the Supreme Court and both the daughter and granddaughter of recent presidents married Jewish men with Jewish clergy present?

Frankly, most Jews just aren’t as different as we used to be. Jews were formerly distinguished by our religious observance, our calendar, and our kosher diet. Now only a minority of Jews strictly or even regularly adhere to these observances. A generation or two ago, even non-religious Jews were more recognizable by our ethnic and social mores. We identified more with the triumphs and tribulations of the Jewish people.

My parents’ generation always skimmed the newspaper to note which Jews were bringing us pride and which were creating a “*shande* for the *goyim*,” a scandal that would shame us in the eyes of the gentile world.

Personally, I’m not so concerned about remaining “different” as Jews. Yes, we have certain cultural traits, but these lessen with each generation as we become more diverse and assimilated. Or we could note that a minority of Jews are different and becoming more separated: the very Orthodox, while the majority of Jew become more and more like other secular, generally liberal Americans. In fact, there’s an old saying, “Jews are just like other people, only more so.” The general population is also divided into polarized Conservative and Liberal camps, but among Jews the liberal/secular contingent is much larger, the Orthodox so much more fervent.

Today, when not every Jew wants to claim membership in a Chosen People, and being an outsider is more of a posture than a reality for most, what, if anything, still makes Jews different? And if we aren’t different any more, then why should we stay Jewish?

**It is not *we* who are so different anymore. I believe that it is Judaism, our living heritage, our divinely inspired and accumulated ancestral wisdom, that is our unique contribution to the world, our reason for continuity**. Judaism is what is different, counter-cultural and challenging.

Torah, not just the scroll but all that it symbolizes, has so much to offer the world at a time when the world desperately needs an infusion of its deep and ancient wisdom.

Call it our privilege, our covenant, or our burden as Jews, as you will: learn Torah, live it, exemplify its values and share them with the world. Here are a few examples of the Torah’s contrarian contributions:

First of all, Judaism places a unique value on the sanctity of this earthly life. Not that Jews can’t believe in an afterlife, but we focus on this world and what we need to do here. This Rosh Hashanah that we celebrate is not about gaining eternal life; it is about striving for a better life in this world for every human being. “Le-Chaim! To Life!” is our favorite blessing. In a world of careless violence and the devaluation of life, the Torah reminds us that each human being is stamped with the divine image, *tzelem Elohim*. Rosh Hashanah takes place on the day that the first person was created, according to tradition, and we *all* share that common ancestor. *No* one’s blood is redder than another’s. In Judaism, we are instructed to break almost any commandment in order to save a life, *pikuah nefesh*, for whoever saves one life saves an entire world, whether that life is a child in Syria, a gay man in Russia, or a teenager in an American inner city. Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish World Service, which works in the developing world, or Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, HIAS, which helps refugees, carry out this supreme Torah value that is one of Judaism’s greatest contributions to humanity. This is a time of year for extra Tzedakah and donating to AJWS or HIAS (or Mazon) is a first step in upholding Judaism’s primary value of life.

And the Jewish love of life is not our only countercultural stance. The world is obsessed with material progress and gain. The Jewish practice of Shabbat runs counter to that, teaching us that we need to take one day a week to unplug from the rat-race and reconnect with our loved ones and our souls. Paradoxically, that can energize us to contribute more to others during the week. In Judaism, the spiritual and the material are not in binary opposition, but part of an integrated whole. If we celebrate Shabbat with joy in our homes and community, we will be living the message of Torah.

The rest of our sacred calendar offers more holistic experiences teaching important values. For just one example, my youngest daughter’s high school friends were astonished that Jews have a holiday celebrating and planting trees. The Torah views the natural world as the dwelling place of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, that is our obligation to guard and to tend. This message has always been inherent in the Torah but is being reclaimed and made central in a time of environmental crisis.

Food is one of the biggest challenges in the world: sometimes too little, sometimes too much or too unhealthy. But Judaism teaches us other dimensions: that food needs to be *kasher,* proper.

This has a whole new meaning in today’s world as eco-kashrut, a term coined by Rabbi Zalman Schacther-Shalomi, asking what is “kosher” as far as the environment and the treatment of workers, and how to make growing and eating food a sacred practice. Through organizations like Hazon, Jews have been leaders in the natural foods movement.

Political polarization has become a crisis in the United States, sometimes preventing our government from functioning. With the rise of social media, we seem to have split into camps who are shouting past one another. While the world likes everything black and white, classical Judaism embraces shades of gray. Fundamentalism in religion or politics is all about absolute answers. The Talmud, the classic masterpiece of Rabbinic Judaism, is all about questioning, arguing, seeing things from multiple angles, and respecting the minority opinion.

Once I was driving home on the highway in San Antonio, and a saw two groups of people standing on opposite sides of the road, as they did each week: one a conservative religious group protesting for their cause, and the other side a liberal group protesting for the opposite viewpoint. They were facing each other across the empty divide of the highway median. I had a moment’s vision. The classical Jewish position would have been out on the median, turning to one side and then the other, saying, “You each have some important value in what you say. Things are right or wrong in different contexts. Stop shouting, listen to the other side, and find a nuanced response.”

Judaism also goes against the grain of much world religious thought by embracing human imperfection. There is no perfect person in the Hebrew Bible. Even Moses wasn’t perfect, and neither are we. But each of us lowly individuals has a personal responsibility that we cannot shake off. We are our brother’s keeper. All religions value good deeds; Judaism teaches that they are divine imperatives. *Tzedakah* is justice, not just charity.Each human being must do some small part of *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. A just and compassionate society is a supreme religious value, more important than worship, according to our Yom Kippur *haftarah*.

Of course, I don’t espouse a triumphalist view of Judaism, as if we have it all right and someday everyone will come around to believe the same. Rather, I follow my teacher Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who said that *each* religion is a vital organ of the planet and we need to maintain the health and vitality of Judaism for the good of the whole. As a scholar, I know that Judaism has never existed in a vacuum and that we constantly learn from and share with other religions and cultures. Furthermore, with the scale of problems facing our world, such as global warning and the divide between haves and have-nots, we all have to join together as human beings to save our planet. But I believe that we can do this best by embracing who we are and sharing the very particular insights of our heritage for the greater universal good (the true meaning of the Aleynu prayer).

Therefore, I don’t think that Jewish continuity should be based on a perennial posture of being an outsider. I’m not very concerned with being chosen or special, either. What I think is important for Jews today—along with our many fellow travelers and spiritual seekers—is learning, and living, and wrestling with Torah, our millennia-old treasury of values and insights that has much to teach and offer a world in crisis.

When I was preparing this sermon, I searched, “Jewish outsider,” on the internet, and besides some results that Google kindly deemed offensive, I was surprised that most of the posts were not at all about Jews feeling like outsiders in the gentile world, but rather about Jews who feel like outsiders in the *Jewish* community.

Our challenge at Pleasantville Community Synagogue is to welcome in our brothers and sisters as well as other spiritual seekers and sojourners, to help them feel like insiders in our own community and tradition. As a rabbi, my job is to share this vast, wonderful, and challenging heritage that belongs to all of us, whatever our background or personal path of observance.

Judaism is uniquely a religion of deed rather than Creed. We are judged for what we do, not what we espouse. That doesn’t mean that beliefs aren’t important, but that we are given the freedom to articulate them for ourselves. Reb Zalman, my Rebbe, taught that in every generation each Jew should write his or her own Credo.

Edmond Fleg was a French intellectual who abandoned his Jewish faith but then reclaimed it. In 1927, he wrote a famous essay, “Why I am a Jew,” and it includes a statement of Jewish principles that has inspired me since I was a teenager and used it in my Bat Mitzvah service.

I will read it now to close this sermon, and perhaps it will inspire you, too, to formulate your own reason for being Jewish (and recognizing that today, not everyone in our community is Jewish, you can formulate your reason to be connected as a fellow-traveler with the Jewish community). It is printed on the front cover of your handout and you can read along with me if you are so moved:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands of me no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel requires of me all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not yet completed; people are completing it.

I am a Jew because, above the nations and Israel, Israel places humanity and its Unity.

I am a Jew because above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the divine Unity, and its divinity.

This year I invite you to join us often at PCS, to go out into the world with us to do good deeds, to dance and sing and pray with us, and to join us in studying Torah and exploring, debating and wrestling with our amazing, countercultural tradition.

Let us learn to see the world from right to left.