

From the Rabbi

June-July 2014/Sivan 5774

“Real People”

About twice a year we invite our college students to come to the synagogue for a “dinner with the rabbi.” Wonderful volunteer congregants tend to the details and make the food. Our loyal custodial crew sets up and makes it look inviting. As for the kids, they see the email invitation, and many respond, most of them with “regrets.” But a few always show up.

This past month we sat out on the lawn behind the old shul house. Fifteen of us crowded around a single round table. As late afternoon faded into evening and then into night, we noshed and schmoozed and noshed some more.

I always let myself be caught up in the joy of the event, but a part of me can't help standing outside of it looking in. I watch kids we've known since birth, now suddenly mature in body and mind, sitting and engaging one another like “real people,” as my late dad would have said. Clearly they can see right into each other's “issues.” It seems to me that their remarkable insight only brings them closer together in conversation. Cautiously, then not so cautiously, they expose their anxieties and weaknesses to one another over the course of the evening: their doubts about the near future; their negotiations between learning for pleasure and learning to earn a living; their tussles with everything from professional choices to gender and sexual profile to Jewish identity.

Ah, Jewish identity! We send our kids to schools with “universal” values, but those universes don’t always make room for students’ *particular* pathways, like, for instance, Jewish practice or positive identification with the people of Israel. Logic would suggest that a universal atmosphere would encourage one’s own diversity, not simply demand our respect for someone else’s diversity. In such an ideal college world, our kids would feel comfortable being the sort of Jews we raised them to be, whether at a Hillel with Orthodox students, or at a fraternity with students of no religious profile, or in a political club where, depending on the politics, religio-cultural identity may be ignored or even disparaged.

The kids say otherwise. Universities are far from universal. Rather, they are places where each student gets a strong dose of “real life.” They are forced to think about who and what they are – or want to be – and then stand up for themselves against withering criticism. Ultimately, they grow to appreciate the exercise, if not to actually like it.

When I hear our kids tell one another about their Birthright trips – how they loved being in Israel, and how they appreciated the diversity of viewpoints they were exposed to – I’m relieved and happy. When they tell me that anti-Israel sentiment on their campuses is real but mostly overblown, I’m relieved but not totally convinced. When they say that they have allowed themselves few opportunities to partake of the rich Jewish life offered at their schools,

I'm not relieved but not surprised. I think they themselves feel relieved to hear that my college experience – including my Jewish experience – was not radically different from theirs.

And so we continue the fits-and-starts task of making Jewish kids into Jewish “real people.” Right now, they aren't trying to envision themselves as adult members of Jewish communities, though that is precisely what I'm trying to see when I sit and break bread with them. And I even tell them so, and they keep coming back to those dinners, and even to shul when they're in town, so I suppose I'm getting away with it. No, right now, their one and only goal is to live up to the summons of a slowly awakening voice deep within themselves. It's not the voice that calls them to be fine professionals in some impressive field, though that voice certainly calls them. Rather, it's the voice that challenges them to be “menschen.” That's not only something we grown-ups want for them. That's something they want, too, *Gott zu denken*.

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