

From the Rabbi
March 4, 2015

“Hibernation (the Big *Schluff*)”

By the time you read this piece, the snow may have melted. The ballplayers may have wended their way home to the Bronx and Queens. The air may have warmed a tiny bit. The beloved crocuses around the entrance gate to our synagogue may have poked through. And we may have found the motivation to get back into life's joys and routines, after it has been knocked out of us by these months of dismal weather. Who knows? Bigger miracles have happened.

From my sabbatical cave, where I've been hibernating for over six weeks, it has been easy to notice the general tendency of our society to do something akin to hibernation even when we are not at all on sabbatical. By this I don't mean that we are inactive. I mean, rather, that we are active and yet oblivious.

We keep moving, working, playing, interacting; mapping out our schedules and our summers and maybe even our retirement. We think we have little choice other than to proceed apace, just in case things go well. How else to live but to hope for normality and plan accordingly?

One is reminded, however, of Rick and Sam reflecting on the state of the world one sleepy, boozy night in Casablanca. “If it's December 1941 in Casablanca,” asks Rick, “what time is it in America?” (Or something to that effect.) Rick concludes that people all over America are “asleep.”

Asleep indeed. Hibernating, rather. Oblivious to the slaughter marching across Europe being carried out by armies hell-bent on reshaping reality around the values of singular thinking and behaving. (Sort of an extreme form of *tikkun olam*, if you will.) Rick, too, is hibernating, though at least he is aware of it, and is considering crawling out of his cave and getting back into the fight.

For those of us who like to think of ourselves as both concerned citizens and rational human beings, this is a particularly confusing time. We're not asleep. We really do see what's going on, and we want to respond. There are emergencies before us, and we don't want to be caught sitting on our hands.

We also don't want to overreact. We don't want to see ourselves as caricatures of the “crazies” who seem to treat every event in the world as if the apocalypse had come. How does one strike that balance without giving up, turning over in bed, and going back to a comfortable ursine position?

And for those of us who live in the American Jewish community, our dilemma is redoubled. We bear the burden of engaging fully as socially conscious Americans *and* as responsible caretakers of the Jewish people. As such, we need to know when

to be brutally honest and tell the whole truth as we see it, and when to gauge our remarks and actions.

This leaves us with contradictory meanings of the term “wake up.” Sometimes a person seems to be asleep in the face of world issues, but he or she may actually be lying low, calculating when to speak out and in what forum. Sometimes individuals may be screaming and yelling and trying to “speak out,” and yet they are really “sleeping” through the possibility that they may be doing more damage than good.

My rule of thumb on these matters is: Don’t hold back out of fear of what people may think of you, including those here and abroad who are incurably anti-Semitic and who will inevitably peg you as a Jew if they don’t like what you’re saying. But likewise, don’t be oblivious to how you sound, especially when your actions might affect others whose defenses aren’t as strong as yours. In other words, do the right thing, and to the extent possible, do it in the right way. But act nonetheless. The call of the burning bush and Sinai must remain our most audible alarm clock.

My worry is that more and more American Jews will try to return to that comfortable 19th-century western European (and eventually American) *schluff*, to wit, to the perception of Jewish identity as something “post-ethnic” or “post-national.” In that scenario, the State of Israel is beyond nuisance. It’s downright irrelevant to our self-understanding of Jewish personhood. For such Jews, the shenanigans in Jerusalem and Washington around the Iran negotiations – the insidious toying with our political loyalties and our devotion to the Jewish state – does not concern us *as Jews*, since we only need to think of our Jewishness in spiritual terms. Israel’s woes, its wars, its tug-of-war between security and morality, its internal struggle between religious integrity and secular justice – all of this merely gets in the way of our attempt to practice a nice, uncluttered form of Judaism *here* with our children and grandchildren.

Likewise, Jews in other lands, singled out for their Jewishness by hate groups who specifically target them *as Jews*, are simply not our problem. They are co-religionists, yes, but their national identities and circumstances are greatly removed from our own, and as such their “Jewish” sufferings have no bearing on us.

And Jews such as those in Ukraine, caught in the crossfire between their own country and Russian-backed rebels, suffering unbearably, but not because they are Jews *per se*, are not our worry, either. Let them be the problem of their own national entities. The fact that their current living situation is a direct result of having been caught in the pincers of Nazi anti-Semitism from the west and Soviet anti-Semitism from the east – doesn’t obligate us to care about them in any particular way. They are no more our “family” than any other human beings.

If obnoxious rabbis and other Jewish leaders keep insisting that in order for us to be fully responsible Jews we must concern ourselves with these far-away matters, they

will only turn us off to Judaism. They will drive our young people away. They will make us turn over and retreat to our caves! *Schluff on!*

The other extreme also worries me: Total engagement with Jewish peoplehood, with Israel, with the advancement of Jewish education and the strengthening of our communal institutions, yet no sense of urgency when it comes to ongoing matters like voting rights, police-community relations, immigration reform, the environmental crisis, privacy versus security, reproductive rights, the immobility of the poor amid general prosperity, and of course the disintegration of bipartisan government and a sense of the greater social good.

Why, these Jews ask, should these matters concern us? We have our own Jewish problems: assimilation, apathy, Jewish illiteracy, low affiliation among the young, and Israel's isolation among the nations. Let the you-know-who's worry about those so-called "big issues." No one will worry about us but our selves.

Once again, hibernation prevails: That remarkably shocking ability to sleep deeply through the sound of the alarm clock.

Indeed, to pick one profile over the other is to snooze one's way through historical reality. Time to wake up. We are Jews, and therefore we need to be totally focused on the pressing needs of our people here and abroad. We are Jews, and we must therefore go out of our way to be engaged with the troubles of the world entire. We are Jews, and we must therefore nurture our inner spirits, learn our sacred lore, and practice our calendric traditions even while we spend our energies *out there* fighting both particular and universal battles.

The winter nap is over. Pesach returns. The alarm sounds again. As Rick would say, time to rejoin the fight.

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