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“What Are You First: An American or a Jew?”

Dear Friends,

As we gather at the start of this New Year we carry in our hearts joys and sorrows, dreams and fears. We are, each of us, individual selves with yearnings only we can know. But we are also a community of Americans with common hopes for the healing of our divided country, and a community of Jews with shared commitments to our sacred tradition. We may have arrived on these shores from different lands in different generations, but fate and faith bind us in history and in destiny. And so together, as Americans and as Jews, we search for anchors amidst the turbulent waters of our day.

A few years ago, I was invited to join a local club. One of my interviewers asked me without a hint of bias, just genuine curiosity: What are you first: an American or a Jew? While I was a bit taken aback failing to see the question’s relevance to my candidacy, I considered my answer thoughtfully...and still do.

American Jews have long grappled with dual identity: how to negotiate the risks and rewards of acculturation; how to factor our bond with Israel into the difficult equations of Israeli and American politics; how to respond when American cultural and political developments clash with Jewish values and undermine our nation’s moral standing. These tensions have contoured American Jewish history.

Acculturation

None of them are new. Our ancestors confronted them from the very first.

Recall how God insisted Abraham depart the idolatry of his birthplace to cultivate his newfound faith in God in the land to which God would lead him. From then till now Jews have wrestled with assimilation’s threats...and acculturation’s promise.

In mid-nineteenth century America, the earliest Reform temples, concerned for Judaism’s survival in this country, strove to make our religion more compelling and our observance more practical for those who wanted to integrate into their non-Jewish surroundings. These Reformers deemed their innovations fully within rabbinic Judaism’s evolutionary spirit. “Temple Emanu-El,” wrote Stephen Birmingham in *Our Crowd*, “became the symbol of the Germans’ efforts ‘to become one with progress’” through the bold Americanization of the synagogue.¹

And though not all Americans have welcomed us – Peter Stuyvesant tried to expel New Amsterdam’s first Jewish arrivals, and in every generation since we’ve encountered discrimination and hate – though not all Americans have welcomed us, America has welcomed us. This land we love became our promised land, the first nation in fifteen hundred years to grant Jews citizenship² and complete religious liberty. And in the nearly two and a half centuries

¹ Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd*, p.130.

² Robert Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World*, p.135.

since its founding, thanks to our commitment to education, ingenuity in the face of social exclusion, and plain hard work, American Jews have done well. In disproportionate numbers we graduate college, attain post-graduate degrees, and achieve economic success. This majestic building in this most desirable corner of the city testifies to our embrace of America, and America's of us. As Americans, we have made it. That part of our American Jewish identity is intact.

Now how about the Jewish part?

The answer is unclear. Ninety-four percent of American Jews remain proud to be Jewish, but twenty-two percent also "say they have no religion."³ While prior generations cherished the local shul as a touchstone of Jewish identity and continuity, increasing numbers – of younger Jews especially⁴ – consider the synagogue superfluous.

And yet, at the heart of every people lies a nucleus of beliefs without which that people will not endure the passage of the generations. For Jews that is Torah. We survive only if we teach it.

So how might synagogues buttress the long-term viability of a non-Orthodox American Judaism? First, by opening new portals to entry acknowledging, as Emanu-El has, that Judaism encompasses not only ritual, but also the cultural and social aspects of communal life – literature, the visual arts, theater, music, food, philosophy, history, and socio-political discourse – all of which can inspire deeper exploration of religious thought and practice. And second, by throwing open those gates so all who wish might enter. Thousands of non-Jews appear on synagogue doorsteps every year searching for spiritual moorings in their lives. In New York City alone thousands of Jews in their twenties and thirties hunger for meaningful engagement around spiritual and moral questions. As one of America's foremost congregations, we ought to model their embrace: doubling our investment in our Discovering Judaism and young professionals' initiatives; celebrating non-Jewish spouses who support their husbands,' wives' and children's Jewish lives; recapturing young families by extending opportunities to non-members and marrying in our worship the liturgical majesty we treasure with the participatory warmth many young and unaffiliated Jews crave.

We are fortunate. While affiliation nationally continues to decline, Temple Emanu-El continues to grow. Yes, acculturation challenges Jewish commitment. But just as the founders of American Judaism and this congregation answered the exigencies of Jewish life in their time, so will we in ours...not just for ourselves, but as an example for others.

Israel

As acculturation weakens affiliation, it also dilutes American Jewry's commitment to Israel. The further one removes oneself from things Jewish, the further one grows from Judaism's spiritual home.

At first glance, God's Promised Land must have appeared to Abraham anything but promising. Still, given a choice between the fertile Jordan River Valley and Israel's rocky wilderness, Abraham chose Israel.⁵

³ "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, 10/1/2013.

⁴ Steven Windmueller, "The Future of Liberal Judaism: Reflections and Recommendations," E Jewish Philanthropy, 12/6/2017.

⁵ Genesis 13.

Early American Jewry largely rejected Israel as the Jewish homeland. At the 1841 dedication of the temple in Charleston, Reverend Gustavus Poznanski proclaimed: “This synagogue is our Temple, this city our Jerusalem...this happy land our Palestine.” Even the first American Zionists, though supportive of Palestine as a refuge for world Jewry, demurred on the question of Jewish sovereignty there fearing charges of divided loyalty.⁶

The rise of Nazism finally reversed that opposition. And to this day European anti-Semitism proves the Jewish state an existential necessity. “For Jews...Israel is not [our] vanity,” writes Bret Stephens. “It’s [our] safeguard.”⁷

And yet in 2018 the country whose founding represents the greatest project of restorative justice for a persecuted people the world has ever known is increasingly perceived as an illiberal cause. It pains me to say it: some of Israel’s recent actions raise serious concerns. How does one justify denying gay couples and single men the right to surrogacy? We are grateful for the Prime Minister’s renewed efforts to expand the egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel, but how can we accept the police interrogation of a Conservative rabbi in Haifa for marrying a couple outside the auspices of the Orthodox *rabbanut*? What is the explanation for the detention of journalist Peter Beinart and other critics of the government on their arrival at Ben Gurion Airport? Why would Israel disregard its non-Jewish citizens as the new nation-state law appears to do?

Israel’s leadership cannot expect American Jews to abandon our commitments to civil rights and religious liberties and support Israeli policies any more than we would abandon our commitment to justice in this country. “If present trends persist,” cautioned World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder in his *Times* op-ed, “young Jews might not acquiesce to an affiliation with a nation that discriminates against non-Orthodox Jews, non-Jewish minorities and the L.G.B.T. community. They may not...support Israel in Washington and they may not provide it with the strategic rear guard that Israel so needs.”⁸

I must acknowledge that for years I dismissed as alarmist forecasts of America’s attenuating support for Israel. Impossible, I thought, the strategic alliance is simply too crucial. But when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a recent Pew public opinion survey measured Israel’s sympathy among Democrats to be one third that of Republicans.⁹ “For the first time in its history, Israel is becoming a partisan political issue,” warned former Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat. “This is not yet evident in...Congress, but it becomes increasingly evident among the general American public.”¹⁰

This is now a dangerous business. And while I, a liberal American Jew cannot presume Israel’s leaders will forsake their coalition, support religious pluralism and pursue peace with the Palestinians simply because I wish it – only Israelis can effectuate those changes – I can implore them to seek new alliances releasing them from the grip of ultra-Orthodoxy and ultra-nationalism and refrain from further steps imperiling a two-state solution, even if that solution remains years away.

But I have a word for American Jews, too, who may be reevaluating their commitment to Israel. If Israel today is not the romantic ideal its founders envisioned, neither is America. And

⁶ Robert Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World*, p.85; Naomi Wiener Cohen, “The Reaction of Reform Judaism in America to Political Zionism (1897-1922),” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, June 1951, pp.361-394.

⁷ Bret Stephens, “Jewish Power at 70 Years,” *The New York Times*, 4/20/2018.

⁸ Ronald S. Lauder, “Israel, This Is Not Who We Are,” *The New York Times*, 8/13/2018.

⁹ Steven M. Cohen, “Why Are Today’s Non-Orthodox Jews More Detached from Israel?” *Twenty-Five Essays About the Current State of Israeli-American Jewish Relations*, American Jewish Committee, p.19.

¹⁰ Gary Rosenblatt, “Bibi to World Jewry: ‘We Do Hear Your Concerns’,” *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/11/2018.

in America we regard our failings as challenges to overcome not as excuses to walk away. In its seventy years, Israel has never known a day of true security on its borders. First with Egypt and then with Jordan Israel assumed dangerous risks for peace. If Hamas laid down its weapons tomorrow, there would be peace with Gaza tomorrow.

And make no mistake: our faith would be impoverished, if not eviscerated, without Israel. That is why Emanu-El continually celebrates the miracle of creativity and vitality modern Israel represents, and why twice yearly we visit. The largest Jewish community in the world lives there. Our sacred narratives grew in its soil.

A Light to the Nations

Having settled that ancient land and built his family, Abraham encountered the terrible trial we read this morning: God's command first to slaughter and then not to slaughter his son – a deeply troubling passage until one frames it as the Bible's polemic against child sacrifice, and a condemnation of the violence and depravity endemic in Abraham's social context. *Akedat Yitzchak*, "the Binding of Isaac," admonishes us against accepting unchallenged prevailing attitudes and cultural norms for the sake of fitting in.

In mid-nineteenth century America, many Jewish leaders still feared that any collective protest against government policy might endanger their community's standing. Rabbi David Einhorn, then one of American Judaism's towering figures and a rabbi of this congregation, would have none of it. Jews must "fight for the whole world," Einhorn declared, not merely for their own concerns.¹¹ During the Civil War, he preached with such ferocity against slavery, he was driven from his congregation in Baltimore first to Philadelphia and then to New York.

Today, as well, the "task of religious believers tending to the secular world remains...contentious...for Jews," writes Steven Weisman in his new book, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion*.¹² Many Jews still choose to separate their private faith from public concerns. Yet as Justice Louis Brandeis urged us: "To be good Americans, we must be better Jews...The highest Jewish ideals are essentially American."¹³

The highest Jewish ideal is welcoming the stranger. No fewer than thirty-six times – more than any other *mitzvah* – does the Torah command it. "You shall neither wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" – Exodus 22. "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" – Exodus 23. "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" – Leviticus 19.

So how can we not respond to today's dehumanization of immigrants and asylum seekers – what John McCain described in his final memoir as the "exploitat[ion] by opportunists" of "old fears and animosities that have blighted [American] history."¹⁴ The American Jewish experience alone demands our response! Let us not forget how, following the arrival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of sixteen and a half million immigrants¹⁵ – a million and a half of

¹¹ Steven Weisman, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion*, p.168.

¹² Steven Weisman, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion*, p.xxxii-xxxiii.

¹³ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/american-zionism>.

¹⁴ John McCain, Mark Salter, *The Restless Wave: Good Times, Just Causes, Great Fights, and Other Appreciations*.

¹⁵ Robert Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World*, p.140.

them Jews – established Jewish communities supported their coreligionists from Poland and Russia.¹⁶ Let us not forget the ensuing nativism that resulted in the passage of the 1924 National Origins Immigration Act with tragic consequences for European Jews a decade later.¹⁷ Let us not forget it was a Jew, Emma Lazarus, who penned the words beneath the Statue of Liberty.

Thankfully our history still lives within us. Last month the leaders of the Orthodox Union, the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism, and the Union for Reform Judaism spoke as one on the urgency of American leadership on the refugee crisis. In June members of Temple Emanu-El marched protesting the separation of children from their parents at the border, shipped hundreds of articles to those children and other detainees, and sponsored an immigrant family from Pakistan.

But we have more to do. Election Day is at hand. And immigration is but one area of Jewish concern. As the late Leonard Fein reminded us, “In the era of the modern state, there is no path to the fulfillment of Jewish interests and ideals that does not lead through the halls of government.”¹⁸ Matters of war and peace; environmental protection and ruin; a woman’s right to choose; gender, racial, and religious bias; voting rights and marriage equality; trust in our nation’s institutions; and America’s standing in the world – they all hang in the balance. For most of our existence Jews had no political voice. We can’t remain silent now.

I am aware that some would prefer such topics not be addressed from the pulpit. And I have no desire to share Rabbi Einhorn’s fate. But I do believe that when America runs afoul of Jewish ideals as I understand them, I have a responsibility to speak.

I am a Jew

So to return to my interviewer's question – what am I first, an American or a Jew?

Once before I shared with you a recollection offered by the great entertainer George Burns of an episode from his childhood here in the city:

When I was seven years old...I was singing with three other Jewish kids from the neighborhood...Now, there was a big department store...that threw an annual picnic, and the highlight was an amateur contest with talent representing all the churches in New York. Right around the corner from where we lived was a little Presbyterian church...They had no one to enter in the contest, so the minister asked us four kids to represent the church. We jumped at the chance...and won first prize. The church got a purple velvet altar cloth, and each of us kids got a...watch...worth about eighty-five cents...I was so excited I ran all the way home to tell my mother. When I got there she was on the roof hanging out the wash. I rushed up to her and said, “Mama, I don’t want to be a Jew anymore!”...She just looked at me and calmly said, “Do you mind me asking why?” I said, “Well, I’ve been a Jew for seven years and never got anything. I was a Presbyterian for one day and I got a watch.”...She glanced at [the watch on my wrist] and said, “First help me hang up the wash, then you can be a Presbyterian.” While I was hanging up the wash some water ran down my arm and got inside the watch. It stopped running, so I became a Jew again.²

¹⁶ Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd*, p.291.

¹⁷ Robert Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World*, p.140.

¹⁸ Leonard Fein, *Where Are We: The Inner Life of America’s Jews*.

I am American by birth, and by good fortune. My great-grandfather came to America as a homesteader. We have his certificate of citizenship: “In...Kansas City...on the 7th of March, 1894...Henry Kulka...[a] man of good moral character, attached to the principles to the Constitution...renounc[ing]...forever all allegiance and fidelity to the Emperor of Austria...is admitted a citizen of the United States of America...” I am grateful and proud to call my home this promised land that welcomed my family three generations ago and guarantees me the opportunities of all Americans.

But when the watch stops, I am a Jew. My story reaches back thousands of years to the birth of our people in the cradle of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. And I will live my Judaism in such a fashion as to strengthen others in theirs; to support Israel as a democratic, pluralistic Jewish state at peace with its neighbors; and to champion America as a harbor of compassion, justice and freedom for all its inhabitants, and as an example of these virtues to the entire world. So may it become.

Amen.