

Being Builders: Just What Are We Building?

Following in the footsteps of Rabbi Lionel Blue (*zichrono livracha*), Britain's best loved Rabbi, and a teacher to both me and Rabbi Silverman and many of us here – I'm going to start with a joke, which you may have heard before:

A Jewish Grandmother is watching her grandchild playing on the beach when a huge wave comes and takes him out to sea. She pleads, 'Please, God, save my only grandson. I beg of you, bring him back!'

A big wave comes and washes the boy back on to the beach, good as new.

She looks up to heaven and says, 'he had a hat.'

Humour is one of our survival tools – it often enables us to express what is really going on at times when we feel vulnerable. I have always loved this joke as it talks to the Jewish characteristic of *chutzpah* – being audacious – even with God. And as a people we have been audacious from the beginning – literally re-writing the Near Eastern law books to include a duty to look after the stranger; re-inventing Judaism after the destruction of our Temple to democratize Judaism and fundamentally shift how we practice our religion; ordaining female rabbis; championing LGBT rights and so on and so on.

Here at Jackson's Row as we stand months away from this building coming down and the re-build of our modern, functional building, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves whether we are continuing in line with our radical, audacious roots, or standing still. Does the Judaism we practice today work for us and for our society? How can we, as the only synagogue in the city centre, positively impact upon our city and our country? Just what is it that we are building?

I want to offer up four suggestions using the words of Hillel, our first century sage, from *Pirke Avot*, the sayings of the fathers – a saying well known to us. The first part of the quotation reads: *If I am not for myself who am I?* For many, Judaism is just bagels, blintzes, and *bris*. Our practice of our religion, for many, has become cultural – it often revolves around food and it's just what we do. Gal Beckerman in his recent article in the New York Times, warns us that the situation is dire by stating that, in his context, American Jews are two or three generations away from being as Jewish as "Irish" people whose Irishness consists of drinking green beer on St. Patrick's Day.¹ Will we in years to come celebrate our

¹ - American Jews Face a Choice: Create Meaning or Fade Away

Judaism by limiting our practice to baking challah and cooking cholent? For some Judaism is a banquet where we, literally and symbolically, have lots of tasty food on the table to pick and choose from. This form of Judaism can work as it's empowering – we choose what works for us. But the danger is that the religion is made of scraps and morsels – it is not coherent or grounded. It does not talk to our deepest needs and for that reason it won't survive.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro succinctly explained the evolution of Judaism as follows, using keeping kosher as an example: 'my grandparents kept kosher because God demanded it. My parents kept kosher because Judaism demanded it. I keep kosher because life depends upon it'.² For me as a Rabbi, I believe that to ensure Judaism's survival we need to commit ourselves to making our Judaism meaningful and relevant to us and accessible to all by returning to our radical roots. We must mine our religion for its beauty – its wisdom, mysticism and Jewish meditation – for there is so much. We have to use our rituals intentionally to connect with each other and with divinity. We need to engage in critical and radical thinking through grappling with our texts. We need to build text based communities which root their Judaism in our words and our world today. The Open Yeshiva – a project we run jointly with Menorah Synagogue and Finchley Reform Synagogue – is such a project. We empower learners to question, to learn in dialogue with others, to find the nuance in Hebrew and to enjoy their study.

We start with ourselves – with spiritual tools to guide us through the struggle of the everyday. With critical and dialogic learning that enriches and excites us. Hillel's quotation continues - *If I am only for myself what am I?*

Any learning, any praying we do has to be rooted in and lead, ultimately, to action. Our religion is not separate to our lives – they must be intertwined – as one. I felt this sharply on one Shabbat in October when we came for our services and found that a rough sleeper (whose name is still unknown) died steps away from the door of the synagogue that morning. Our text based communities need to experience something like that as a call to

By Gal Beckerman, 12 November 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/books/review/steven-weisman-chosen-wars.html?fbclid=IwAR1uE8cnh2Sadd8VtJduk6AcxVoRkN-FI00D3k-rKY8oClbm-YMcVily8nl>

² Letter to a New Rabbi – Rabbi Rami Shapiro; Monday, July 2, 2012; <http://rabbirami.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/letter-to-new-rabbi.html>

action – a prophetic cry. We live as Jews here in the synagogue, and at home, and in the workplace and on these streets.

Our learning and the practice of our religion should mean that we are obsessed with making connections and relationships across our community and with others which is exactly what we're doing with the listening projection here at Jackson's Row. Care and action have to be at the heart of who we are and what we do. The third part of Hillel's quotation - *If not now, when?* Rabbi Benay Lappe, the head of Svarah, the traditionally radical yeshiva in America, dedicated to the serious study of Talmud and committed to the Queer experience, says that Judaism in 100 years' time will be unrecognisable. That's scary for us to hear but also incredibly exciting. We are a people who wander, deconstruct, subvert and build – over and over again. Without our willingness to re-build our Judaism again and again it will not last. The time is now - for if not now, when? That's, of course, where the Hillel quotation ends. Yet our teacher Rabbi Sheila Shulman (*zichronah livrachah*) taught us of a fourth line that the feminist poet Adrienne Rich added: *If I am not for myself who am I? If I am only for myself what am I? If not now when? And, they add, if not with others, how?*

If not with others, how? Feminism and grassroots organising has something to teach us. Collective action is key. Here in Manchester we model how working together, with others, can create a strong sense of community, and the ability to create lasting change. We can't do all of this alone. Individually we contain potential – divine sparks. Together we can create fires which light the way and bring healing to the broken parts of our world. It is not about charisma, ego or being indispensable but always developing leaders, empowering each other and taking responsibility and action together. May we work on building and co-creating, contemplative, courageous, *chutzpahdik* text based, activist communities. *Ken yehi ratzon* – may this be God's will. Amen

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