

**YOM KIPPUR
WHO IS A JEW?
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Over the course of the centuries there have been many definitions of “Who is a Jew?” Some of those have been Halakhic, still others have been more in the philosophical realm. Some of them, unfortunately, have been quite derogatory as racial and anti-Semitic views have been enunciated. Some have suggested that it may be in genetics, in the DNA that make up the human being that the definition of a Jew is found. And still others define it through our cultural tendencies.

This summer at the Jewish Agency for Israel Assembly I heard another definition, one that will challenge all of us on this day of Yom Kippur. The speaker was the President of the State of Israel, Shimon Peres, who at age 89, continues to challenge not only the State of Israel, but the Jewish people throughout the world with his willingness to think about the future and ways to benefit all humanity. In fact, only a few days earlier I was invited to the President’s Conference entitled *Tomorrow* convened by President Shimon Peres, where 5,000 people came to discuss the world of the future in science and politics; in religion and sociology; in the creative arts and culture.

He suggested in his lecture that there are three components to Jewish identity. Each of them defines aspects of Jewish behavior, thought, and contributions to the world. Each of the components has been part of the Jewish legacy of the past and now the challenge of the future.

The first component that he conveyed to us is that a Jew strives to be a moral human being. He reminded us that the Ten Commandments were given not only to the Jewish people, but to all humanity. In fact, a Midrash informs us that a mountain in the wilderness of Sinai was chosen as the place of revelation to emphasize the fact that no land could claim the commandments for itself; the wilderness belongs to all. It is interesting to note that in the context of the Ten Commandments only one of them is specifically Jewish – that is, of course, the Sabbath, perhaps the greatest innovation of our people. The rest of them are applicable to all human beings and the establishment of a moral and just society.

To be a moral human being is not simple. The prophets of old reminded us that sacrifices in and of themselves are not sufficient in the worship of G-d. One must also be a just and ethical human being. On Yom Kippur nine times we recite the long confessional and ask forgiveness from G-d for transgressions that we may have committed through deceit, speech, cheating our friends, demeaning parents and teachers, through deception and through lying. We must set lofty standards for which we must strive.

On September 12, 2011, in a column entitled *If It Feels Right*, David Brooks, the syndicated columnist, described a poll conducted by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, where interviewers asked open-ended questions about moral dilemmas and the meaning of life. Brooks writes: “When asked to describe a moral dilemma they had faced, two-thirds of the young people either couldn’t answer the question or described problems that are not moral at all,

like whether they could afford to rent a certain apartment or whether they had enough quarters to feed the meter at a parking spot.” Smith and his researchers found an atmosphere of extreme moral individualism – of relativism and non-judgmentalism. They suggested that “the young people had not been given the resources - by schools, institutions and families - to cultivate their moral intuitions, to think more broadly about moral obligations, to check behaviors that may be degrading.”

In a June column of this year Brooks continued to study this issue by quoting from a book by Dan Ariely entitled *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*. Ariely suggests that nearly everybody cheats, but usually only a little. Ariely and his colleagues gave thousands of people twenty number problems. When they tackled the problems and handed in their answer sheet, people got an average of four correct responses. When they tackled the problems, shredded their answer sheets and self-reported the scores, they told the researchers they got six correct responses. They cheated a little, but not a lot. Brooks believes that the reason for that is because “we can cheat a little and still keep that ‘good person’ identity. Most people won’t cheat so much that it makes it harder to feel good about themselves.”

And then in August, Harvard University revealed what could be its largest cheating scandal in its history, saying that about 125 students might have worked in groups on a take-home final exam despite being explicitly required to work alone. When the final exams were graded in May, similarities were noticed in the answers given by some students, including two instances of the same typo in 13 exams. Assistant professor Matthew Platt brought the matter to the attention of the administration. After an initial review, Harvard’s administrative board concluded that almost half of them showed signs of possible collaboration. An extensive investigation is still underway and some of the students have decided to take a leave of absence rather than face a possible suspension. As one student involved in the recent scandal stated, “I was just someone who shared notes, and now I am implicated in this.”

And Harvard is not the only place where this has occurred. Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan towards the end of June had the same problem. It was alleged that the cheating may have involved more than 80 students communicating about exams via text messages. At the Air Force Academy on April 19-20 of this year in a fundamental skills exam, an on-line calculus test, given to 650 cadets, academy officials revealed that a number of cadets were cheating. It is a sad commentary on our society. The names of universities and prestigious high schools which should be places not only of great learning but of great moral rectitude have been sullied. No, not everyone, is responsible and to be blamed, but there is enough blame not only for the students, but for those who are their teachers, mentors and their parents. In fact, it may be society at-large that is to blame.

In an article of September 4 of this year Michelle Blake entitled *How We Teach Students To Cheat* wrote that she sent the story about the Harvard cheating scandal to her daughter, Katharine, a graduate of a top-tier law school. Katherine wrote back to her linking the Harvard fiasco to the recent flurry of news stories about deceptive political candidates and campaign ads. “It’s the same thing,” she wrote, “truth is a second class citizen in the glittering world of winning.”

If winning is everything, then how we get there is not important. If the ends can justify the means then a little bit of cheating isn't so bad. President Peres taught us, and continues to teach us, that to be Jewish means to live a life of ethical rectitude. Even when your friends around you seem to be getting away with it, it does not mean that this is the proper behavior to follow.

The Ten Commandments teach us about the establishment of a moral standard for society, any society. A business man who was notorious for ruthlessness, once announced to Mark Twain, "before I die, I need to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top." "I have a better idea," said Twain, "you could stay home in Boston and keep them."

That is one of our challenges in our society – to uphold the great moral truths of the Ten Commandments and to live by them. For Shimon Peres this is the first component of what it means to be a Jew.

The second attribute suggested by President Shimon Peres is that a Jew is always dissatisfied with the way things are. He should never be satisfied with the status quo. He is always looking to better himself, his society and his world.

All the way back to the beginning of the Israelite people this has been our tradition. Our forefather, Abraham, was called *Avram haIvri*, "The Hebrew." The Midrash in Bereshit Rabbah suggests that this is "because all the world was on one side (*ever echad*) and Abraham on the other." He was not afraid to take a stand which was unpopular in his generation. According to our tradition, he was the first monotheist in a world of polytheists. He was the first person to stand up to G-d and call out for justice in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. He was only the first of many Jews to play a counter-cultural role in human history. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the introduction to the Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor, which appeared just a few weeks ago, "to be a Jew is to swim against the current, challenging the ideals of the age whatever the ideal, whatever the age."

In our Haftorah of this morning, the Prophet Isaiah reminds the people of his generation that they must strive for higher ideals. They must not be satisfied with their conduct. G-d says to them through Isaiah: "Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and do not ignore your own flesh."

Isaiah was teaching his people that it is not adequate to bring sacrifices to G-d and believe that this would effectuate atonement. They must also live by high standards, in this case, the establishment of a just, ethical and moral society. The prophets continuously challenged the Israelite people never to be satisfied with their conduct. They could always do better. Rabbi David Hoffman, in a commentary on this past week's Torah portion writes: "From Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Isaiah to Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the 20 century,

Judaism has never been about acceptance. The greatest teaching that Judaism offers the world is that the way things are is not the way things have to be. The course of our lives and the condition of the world are not inevitable realities.” He states that “this perhaps, is the core religious commitment of a Jew: to live with an awareness of this sacred tension between the reality of our world and lives and the dream of what they should be.”

Isidore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, “my mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask a different question, ‘Izzy’, she always used to say, ‘Did you ask a good question today?’ That made the difference,” according to Rabi. “Asking good questions made me a scientist.”

We are a religion of questions. We are never satisfied with what is, we always work for what may be possible. We can feel very comfortable with the quote attributed to George Bernard Shaw and used by Robert F. Kennedy, “Some men see things as they are and say why – I dream things that never were and say why not?” This has been the Jewish way from the very beginning of time. We recognize that both individuals and societies can be better. Throughout the course of Yom Kippur we recite both the short and the long confessional. We examine our conduct and use the words as a psychotherapeutical tool for personal growth. The confessional becomes a moral compass for character improvement. We can do better. We can strive for more, we can dream of being better people.

A new book has been recently published which I hope will find a place on your bookshelves. It is entitled *The Observant Life – The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism For Contemporary Jews*. Edited by Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, its purpose, according to the introduction, is to “infuse life with timeless values, allow us to remain loyal to the covenant that binds the Jewish people and the G-d of Israel, and embrace the law while retaining an abiding sense of fidelity to one’s own moral path in life.”

It is not usual that I quote myself, but this time I will, as I have written a chapter in the book on the topic of *Civic Morality*. I attempt in the chapter to write about living as a Jew in society both as a member of a minority in the Diaspora and a majority in the State of Israel. One of the topics I cover is what occurs when there are conflicts between civil law and Halakhah. We have the concept of *dina d’malkhuta dina* – the law of the land is the law. However, there are times when Jewish law and civil legislation collide. When religious dictates require that an individual follow personal religious laws that oppose civil statutes, decisions can become quite complex. I write that “Judaism considers the welfare of the community to be an important value for each individual. Thus, being a citizen of a country entails obligations, responsibilities, and adherence to the rule of law. When these laws are in opposition to halakhah, rabbinic authorities must decide which law to follow.”

Differences of opinion on significant issues should be welcomed. Debate is healthy and there will always be controversy concerning issues that relate to citizenship and morality. “The strength of any society,” I write, “rests in no small part on its willingness to engage in passionate

debate about the principles that guide it forward and the rules it establishes as the norms of accepted or desired behavior.”

A society must strive for high ideals, and if it does not meet those ideals then we as Jews have a right to demand that it does. There may be conflicts, there may be debates, but as long as it is *leShem Shamayim* – for the purpose of heaven – then it is worthwhile. As we engage in the election cycle of 2012, let us keep these thoughts in mind. Debate in our society is not only acceptable, but worthwhile. Differences of opinion are appropriate, but all must strive for a higher morality and a sense of civic responsibility. In the words of my teacher, Dr. David Hartman, in his new book *From Defender to Critic*, it is important “to preserve the tension between an individual’s inner voice and the voice of the past.” This is the Jewish way. As President Shimon Peres stated, it is our task never to be satisfied with the status quo, but to strive for what is possible and should be.

And the final component, according to the President, is to be a soldier for peace. Peace is our greatest hope, it is central to our being. Each of our prayers ends with a prayer for peace. One of G-d’s names is Shalom. Each morning, in our early morning prayers, we state: “May we be disciples of Aaron the *kohen*, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving our fellow creatures and drawing them near to the Torah.” We are not only to love peace, we are to pursue it, to bring it closer to reality, to be, in Peres words, soldiers for peace. As Isaiah in our Haftorah this morning states: “Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near.”

In Daniel Gordis’ new book, *The Promise of Israel*, from which I quoted on Rosh Hashana, Gordis suggests that “Israel is a country with a purpose and a message. For the Jews, survival alone has never been a purpose.” He states that “Israel’s aim is to be the platform from which the Jewish people continue to make its countercultural claim. It is a claim about human differentness, the importance of diversity, and the vitality that is possible when a people live with its culture and its traditions at the center of its public square.”

Gordis knows, and we know, that this can only be the case when there is peace. The neighborhood in which the State of Israel dwells is a dangerous one and one in which we do not know what to expect almost on a daily basis. Iran and its threat of nuclear weapons; Syria being torn apart by civil war; Egypt now being led by the Muslim Brotherhood; Turkey with its own view of Arab supremacy; Hezbollah and Hamas with rockets trained on Israel’s population centers, all bring a sense of danger to the Jewish state. With the continued development of the so-called Arab spring which has become much more frigid than the thaw after the winter, we are concerned about the prospect for peace in Israel. And, concerned we should be. However, we cannot be immobilized. We must continue to work for peace. We must travel there and support Israel politically, financially, and in any way possible. We have always been dreamers for peace, even after we were exiled to the land of Babylonia, and we are still dreamers for peace. We must be strong and we must protect our land, our country and our people, but we must also strive for peace.

Rabbi Marc Angel has written that “the return home has been difficult. Israel has had to fight wars, withstand terrorism, overcome economic boycotts, endure political isolation, and combat hateful propaganda. Yet, this tiny and ancient nation, against all reasonable odds, has

reestablished its sovereignty in its historical homeland; it has created a vibrant, dynamic, idealistic society, dedicated to the ideals of freedom and democracy. With its memory spanning the millennia, it has created a modern, progressive state.”

This is what Israel is and could be. It is our task to strive for peace, to work for it, even as we must ensure that Israel is strong to protect itself against its neighbors. As Shimon Peres told us we must be soldiers for peace, never giving up hope that the dream of *Shalom* will indeed come to our people.

President Peres has challenged all of us. Can we live up to the responsibilities of his definition of who is a Jew – to be moral, never to be satisfied with the way things are, and to be a soldier for peace?

Rabbi Sacks in 2007 for the period of the High Holidays wrote a pamphlet entitled *Ten Days, Ten Ways: Paths to the Divine Presence*. He defined for us what it takes to be a Jew and some of his remarks echo those of the President of the State of Israel. Sacks writes: “I am a Jew because our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose, that reality is not a ceaseless war of the elements, to be worshipped as gods, nor history a battle in which might is right and power is to be appeased. The Judaic tradition shaped the moral civilization of the West, teaching for the first time that human life is sacred, that the individual may never be sacrificed for the mass, and that rich and poor, great and small, are all equal before G-d.

I am proud to belong to the people Israel, whose name means ‘one who wrestles with G-d and with man and prevails.’ For though we have loved humanity, we have never stopped wrestling with it, challenging the idols of every age. And though we have loved G-d with an everlasting love, we have never stopped wrestling with Him nor He with us.

I am proud to be part of an age in which my people, ravaged by the worst crime ever to be committed against a people, responded by reviving a land, recovering their sovereignty, rescuing threatened Jews throughout the world, rebuilding Jerusalem, and proving themselves to be as courageous in the pursuit of peace as in defending themselves in war.”

On this Yom Kippur day 5773, let us take President Peres’ message to heart and let us be proud of who we are, but never satisfied with who we are. Let us work for morality in our community, harmony in our society and peace in the Israel and throughout the world.