

HOW JEWISH ARE YOU?

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Recently I went to see a new musical, an original production with hopes for Broadway. What its chances for Broadway might be, I can't judge. But what impressed me about it was one song. The title stuck in my mind and indeed can give us all something to think about.

The song was titled "You Can't Be a Little Bit Jewish."

At first it reminded me of what happened in our house a long time ago, when one of my children asked me: "Daddy, are we more Jewish than Howard's family?" Howard was the boy across the street. I said No. We're Jewish and Howard's family is Jewish too, no different. Why do you ask? "Well, we go to services on Shabos. They don't." At that age, how could I explain that the different behavior didn't make us more Jewish? More observant, maybe, but not more Jewish. It's not like being an 85% Jew or a 93% Jew, or any other degree of Jewish identity. That's not how it works.

There are various theories on the subject, of course. Degrees of Jewish identity are sometimes described as a ladder – kind of a modern-day Jacob's ladder. If you are a Reform or Conservative Jew, you picture yourself as standing on a certain step, a rung of the ladder. People on a higher step are more observant than you are -- Hasidim or Haredim or even Modern Orthodox -- but they are crazy. People on a lower step, like Secular Humanists or Reconstructionists, are not really Jewish.

Of course these images are mistaken. Indeed the song in the musical brought out that fact by articulating how the hostile world looks at us. It makes no distinctions when identifying Jews. To Nazi Germany, anyone with a Jewish grandparent was defined as Jewish and therefore to be murdered. To Czarist Russia, any Jew who did not convert to the Russian Church had no rights. To the Muslim world today, a Jew is at best a *dhimmi* – an underclass – and if that Jew lives in Israel he must be killed. None of those enemies asked whether their Jews observed Torah commandments.

What about Jewish tradition? How do we define ourselves? Can you or I be very Jewish? Not so Jewish? A little bit Jewish?

Halacha – traditional Jewish law – defines a Jew as someone born of a Jewish mother, or someone not so born who voluntarily joins the

Jewish faith and people through religious conversion, which involves some serious learning, a sincere commitment and a trip to the Mikvah. For a man it also involves a certain amount of physical pain.

Challenges to this definition stimulate an ongoing discussion both in Israel and the Diaspora about “Who is a Jew?” Patrilineal descent – accepting the offspring of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother – is one bone of contention. The nature of the conversion ceremony is another. Absent from this definition is the personal behavior of the individual, whether religious, social or otherwise. Certainly Judaism lays down moral imperatives, but fulfilling them or ignoring them does not change an individual’s Jewish identity.

In a campaign year such as we are in now, self-appointed authorities will sprout from the woodwork to tell you how Jewish it is to vote their way. On one side we have passionate partisans from Dennis Prager to Jackie Mason insisting that it’s a Mitzvah to vote Republican. And for the Democrats we hear the voices of Michael Lerner, Barbra Streisand, Etc., Etc., reading their political opponents out of the Jewish people.

Being associated with a world religion, this year and every year, rival doctrines compete for our souls. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel will again refuse to recognize any wedding performed by a non-Orthodox rabbi. And the Israeli left will again move to marginalize religious Jews. These divisions inevitably spill over to the Diaspora, particularly to the United States, starting in New York. The Satmar Rebbe will contend that the Lubavitcher Hasidim are less than Jewish, and condemn Reform Jews as outside the pale. And “progressive” Jewish organizations disdain any cooperation with Orthodox counterparts.

No effort to strip off any part of our Jewish identity can succeed. Whether we want to be recognized or not, we are all equally identified. What our enemies tried to do with this information over the years, we know. What we ourselves, and our brothers and sisters, managed to do with it, is another story.

Faced with hostility in the world around us, do we try to disappear? Changed names and bobbed noses? That was the pattern of assimilation two generations ago.

That sort of behavior is less common now. In its place we see activists for various causes attempting to use Judaism to validate their positions. I had an interesting breakfast once with a Peace Now partisan who was expounding on how the prophets of the Hebrew Bible inspired his political position – while he busily ate bacon. Did his violation of the dietary laws make him less Jewish? Did his misguided politics? No, of course not.

Neither conduct nor opinion can affect our identity. An American citizen who sells state secrets to a foreign enemy is still an American citizen. And must be tried as such. Just as our rabbis long ago ruled that *yisroel af al pi she-kho-to yisroel hu* – “a Jew, even though he sinned, is a Jew.” Not a little bit Jewish; just Jewish.

Under that principle, a Jew is always reclaimable. Outreach efforts like those of every movement from Chabad and Aish haTorah to Reform draw their strength and legitimacy from that consideration. Even without the influence of such organized programs, we see people of this generation reaffirming their heritage in many ways. Reporter Mike Wallace of CBS has a son named David. You might not know him as David Wallace, but more likely as author David Wallechinsky – his original family name restored.

The message in all these experiences is simple: being what and who we are, we can expand our lives by activating our identity. How do we do that? We explore our heritage and implement it in our own personalities. Let it inform our attitudes toward our work, our family relationships, how we use our time and where we give our support. Every sizable Jewish community offers opportunities to do this exploration. Adult survey courses, in-depth programs, social and religious institutions, welcome all who are interested -- or just plain curious. Try them out. Every hour of the day offers opportunities. I know that when I stand in my house – or at a local *bais midrash* – to recite the daily prayers, I look at the words in the *siddur* and find there a reflection of whatever is happening in my life and in the world. *Turn it and turn it again*, says the Mishna, *for everything is in it*.

Our folklore speaks of *dos pintele yid* – the Jewish essence that lives in each of us. It has a message for us. Let’s listen.