

Jewish to the Core

Over a year ago, my friend Ammiel Hirsch, a prominent Reform rabbi, and I co-authored “One People, Two Worlds,” a debate-in-print about the issues that divide us. In the time that has gone by since its publication, the two worlds have not drawn any closer, but at least in my case, the book has engendered a heightened sensitivity to the people on the other side.

When we signed the contract, the book was not even half done; although we had done battle on a number of sensitive issues, there were many that had yet to be addressed. After the signing, my co-author and I went out for coffee, and he gave me a heads-up about what was coming. “You’re going to have problems with the authenticity of non-Orthodox Jews.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “I love all Jews. Regardless of what they believe or their level of observance, they are as Jewish as I am. As long as they have a Jewish mother, of course.”

“If you acknowledge their Jewishness only as a legal technicality,” he said, “you will alienate them. If your whole purpose in writing this book is to reach out to all Jews, you really don’t want to do that. Somehow, you have to validate their expressions of Jewishness as well.”

Ammi had backed me into a corner. He wanted me to admit that all attempts at serving the Almighty are equally acceptable expressions of our ancient tradition. But how could I? In the Orthodox view, some elements of the Jewish belief system define the very essence of Jewish life and are beyond compromise – the divine authorship of the Torah, revelation at Sinai, the divine selection of the Jewish people, the everlasting covenant between God and the Jewish people, the binding nature of Halachah.

Clearly, I could not in all honesty acknowledge Ammi’s beliefs as just another variation on a common theme. Yet if I didn’t do so, would the non-

Orthodox readers, for whom I was writing this book, angrily rebuff the hand I extended in friendship? Basically, Ammi was telling me that I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

What was I supposed to do? In my heart, I consider all Jews my beloved brothers and sisters. I have a deep affinity for them and bond with them easily despite the ideological chasms that often divide us, just as I bonded with my co-author who is at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from me. I know this is not the result of a legal technicality, but rather the kinship of authentic mutual Jewishness. But how could I articulate these thoughts and feelings in a meaningful way? How could I convince my non-observant brethren that I consider them authentically Jewish but not the ideologies to which they have pledged their allegiance?

I have to admit that I did not do myself proud.

I wrote that to be authentically Jewish is to seek truth, to be kind, considerate, charitable and hospitable, to have a sense of duty to the world, to feel deeply that all Jews are responsible for each other, to care about justice, to make a positive impact on the values of the world. Finally, to be Jewish is to have an explicitly articulated covenant with God, a contract binding both Him and us. Reform Jews express themselves Jewishly at every step of the way, except for the critical issue of the covenant.

Interacting with my readers over the last year, however, has left me wiser, even inspired. I have met and received emails from many hundreds of Jewish people from all walks of life. What I have encountered is far more than a generic yearning for justice and freedom. Some people have opened to me a little, others a lot, and in all of them, I have perceived an intense pride in their Jewishness and a deep yearning for connection with the Almighty, His teachings and the ancient traditions of our people.

Just today I received an email from a student at Brandeis who wrote, “I wanted you to know that many Reform Jews feel like I do, and while they may not have the ability or drive to change their religious lives, large numbers of them are actively seeking the Almighty and spirituality.”

What, I wondered, was driving all this eager searching?

And something else also puzzled me, something very profound. Why did these people care so much about declaring their Jewish identity? It is a dangerous thing to be visibly Jewish, especially today when our people are under attack all over the world. Is it worthwhile to risk your life and the lives of your small children to be identified with ancient ancestors who were liberal and progressive ahead of their times? I could understand it if you believe in the divine covenant, if you believe that the Jewish people have a divinely articulated mission to be a light unto the nations, if you believe that we are truly chosen in the deepest meaning of the word. Something so spectacular and so transcendent could justify the risk. But what of those who believe it is all just a beautiful myth?

And then it struck me.

Deep in their consciousness, all these Jews carry the memory of that magical moment when we encountered the Almighty and became a people. This moment is defined in the memory of traditional Jews as Revelation at Mount Sinai. Others don't have it clearly defined in their consciousness. Nonetheless, that moment was so intense and so powerful that it still commands attention, interest and commitment over three thousand years later; it is etched into their Jewish chromosomes. Somewhere along the line they connected with the chain of the Jewish national memory, be it from a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a friend. The knowledge is ablaze deep in their souls, crying out for expression.

This is what makes them authentic Jews. Their very desire to declare their Jewish identity to the hostile world bears witness to the ancient and eternal bond between the Almighty and His chosen people. This fervent desire, this core of pure Jewishness, makes it possible and perhaps even plausible that the two worlds may someday once again become one.