

STEREOPHONIC JUDAISM
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778 (2017)
Temple Emanu-El, Marblehead, MA

Earlier this month I was riding the escalator at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington, DC, descending to the meeting room floors for the opening session of the National Rabbinic Symposium sponsored by AIPAC, to discuss with several hundred rabbis from across the denominational spectrum pressing matters and current events in Israel and the Middle East. There were, in fact, two other conferences being hosted at the Grand Hyatt that week, so as I got ready to step off the escalator, I saw that the rabbinic meetings were off to the left. To the right, however, were signs welcoming the 50th Anniversary Convention of the Association of American Zoo Keepers. Hmm... I thought, noticing the really cool “SWAG” at the Zoo Keepers’ registration table... that could be fun! For a moment, I was mildly tempted to make that turn to the right instead of left, and to join in discussions about lions and tigers and bears, rather than Iran, Syria and Hamas...

I continued, however, diligently and with happy anticipation, to join with my rabbinic colleagues and the featured speakers and attend to the business of the day. Later, I thought of the Golden Anniversary, or in Jewish terms, the “Jubilee” year for those Zoo Keepers of America, realizing that their organization had its beginning in 1967. That was the same year as the Six-Day War, the Summer of Love, and the release of the Beatles’ greatest album, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”. It was also the year of the first successful heart transplant, of devastating race riots in Detroit, Cleveland and Newark, the explosion of Apollo 1 spacecraft on the launching pad at Cape Kennedy, and the invention of the first pocket calculator by Texas Instruments.ⁱ

Tomorrow morning, we will honor with an Aliyah to the Torah a special group of our members who, 50 years ago – 1967, first joined Temple Emanu-El, and who continue to participate and contribute in so many ways. And I will also speak about the significance of the 50-year anniversary of the Six-Day War – a week that changed Israel and world Jewry forever. But tonight, I want to turn our attention to “Sgt. Pepper”, an album that topped the Billboard charts for months, and is ranked #1 on Rolling Stone magazine’s listing of the 500 greatest rock albums of all time.

When “Sgt. Pepper” was first released, Time magazine declared it “a historic departure in the progress of music – any music,” while the London Times called the release “a decisive moment in the history of Western civilization. But here on our shores, the New York Times rock and roll critic, Richard Goldstein, absolutely panned the album. He hated the record, calling it “busy, hip and cluttered”. He blasted the Beatles for “a surprising shoddiness in composition”, and declared the album, ultimately, “fraudulent.”ⁱⁱ

Years later, Goldstein admitted that when he listened to the album to write his review, one of his stereo speakers was broken! He had listened, reacted, and written his critique on the basis of his record player that was missing the left speaker. He’d only gotten one side of the recording, and so he had missed out on the complexities, the subtleties, the creative shapes and colors – not to mention the dynamic of the recordings. Vocals were missing, having been placed on the left side; bass or lead guitar lines were absent at key junctures. Not surprising then that, all told, it came across to him across as an absolute mess. When Goldstein finally had the chance to listen to the album as it was meant to be heard, he admitted that his experience was completely changed due to his broken stereo.

I think that’s how it can be with our experience of Judaism as well, because as my colleague, Jeffrey Salkin points out, Judaism is a stereo tradition! “We have a twin set of speakers,” he writes, “If you are hearing out of only one speaker, you will have a truncated, distorted version of Judaism.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Salkin’s insight inspired me to pursue this message tonight, entering these Days of re-engaging our spiritual lives as Jews, how our faith and tradition should be experienced in the balance between any number of opposite concepts. To answer almost any question that begins with the phrase, “What does Judaism believe about...?” we should find ourselves not focused upon a single idea of creed or teaching, but moving along a spectrum of opinions, ideas, and possibilities. On this eve of the New Year, we might learn from Abraham Joshua Heschel, who taught that Judaism must be understood like in a magnet with opposite polarities, and that in the tension between one idea and its mirror opposite, we find the truths at the heart of our faith.

And here’s one way to spot a distorted or fundamentalist presentation of Jewish thought: if an idea is presented as absolute, static, unmoving or simplistic, it is like hearing the music with only one speaker, one earbud, one side of our Beats.

What are some examples of these opposites in tension? We might begin with, on the left speaker, This World, and on the right, The World to Come. Yes – we are a life-affirming faith, as the Torah tells us to “Choose life”. But at the same time, we hold a trust that this life is not the be-all and end-all of reality; that there is an eternity in which we and our lives are contained, and that the essence of who we are as human beings is not eradicated when we die. Jewish belief regarding the afterlife moves along a continuum, spreading between our concern for this world, and our hope for the next, and we can likewise find ourselves, sometimes confident in the possibilities of eternity, and at other times, resolved that this world, this life, is all we can know and count on.

As another example, on our left speaker is Tradition, and on our right, especially as liberal Jews, we hear the imperative for Change. Yes - there is a depth and enduring quality in the practices inherited from our distant past, which is why the song from “Fiddler on the Roof” declares “Tradition, Tradition!” But a Judaism that would remain stagnant, petrified, unable or refusing to adapt to changing circumstances, newly discovered truths, or the evolving needs of the human condition, will certainly fail to inspire and is destined to ultimately vanish.

From our left speaker comes the call to universalism – our concern and recognition of God’s love for all humanity. As the Prophets, Isaiah and Micah proclaim,

“In the days to come,
 The Mountain of the Lord's House
 Shall stand firm above the mountains
 And tower above the hills;
 And all the nations
 Shall gaze on it with joy.
 And the many peoples shall go and say:
 "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord...”^{iv}

But as they beat their swords and spears into farming implements, we hear from the right speaker the importance of concern for our own people’s welfare, comfort, and security. Being Jewish is, after all, more about peoplehood than religion, and as the Talmud teaches, *Kol yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh* – “All Jews are responsible for one another.”^v

Particularism, our concern for our fellow Jews, squarely the opposite polarity of Universalism is what led to the freedom for Soviet Jews, the emancipation and emigration of the

Ethiopian Jewish community, the absorption of refugees from Arab lands by the newly-founded Jewish state of Israel, and our unflagging attention whenever danger threatens our fellow Jews wherever they may live. As our Reform leadership has declared, “A universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive; a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us... Judaism calls us simultaneously to universal and particular obligations.”^{vi}

Rationalism on one side of the spectrum versus mysticism on the other – both are authentically Jewish approaches to religious knowledge. Was there an historical figure who better exemplified this polarity than the brilliant and much revered 16th-Century sage, Joseph Karo? Head of the community council in Tzefat, he researched and responded to many hundreds of Jewish, legal inquiries from communities worldwide. Karo is best known in Jewish history for his monumental and historic distillation of some 2,000 years of Jewish legal decisions, resulting in the publication of his Shulchan Aruch, which is still to our day the handy go-to and authoritative reference for Orthodox, Jewish practice. But this same Joseph Karo also wrote in more secretive writings of a spirit-guide, a heavenly mentor he called his “maggid”, with whom he would engage in nocturnal conversations, including automatic writing and kabbalistic practices which would be carried on by his star pupil, Moses Cordovero, one of the great mystics of the era.

I remember studying the mystical writings of Joseph Karo in a doctoral class with an esteemed, Orthodox colleague. He insisted that the Karo of the Shulchan Aruch, the legalist, had to have been a different Joseph Karo than the one who spoke of his nighttime spirit guide. I think that, with all due respect, my study partner was experiencing Karo with his left speaker busted.

Even the Hebrew calendar reflects this movement between polarities. Tonight, begins the month of Tishrei, the seventh month of the year. It is a time when we focus on spiritual renewal; of atonement, and awakening by the sound of the Shofar to repair and restore our connection to God, community and faith. Six months from now, or if you prefer, half a year ago, we observed in the month of Nissan a physical New Year – as the springtime rose up against the winter, my crocuses rose up against the snow, and the people of Israel rose up against Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt. So, too, do we move between the realms of the physical and the spiritual, between the

dimension of our body and that of our soul. Both need to be cared for and attended to in order to achieve wholeness, *shelaymut*, and *refuah*, healing.

In a healthy religious practice, we balance our efforts between the opposites of Tikkun Olam, the urgency to repair the world, and Tikkun Hamidot, the primary challenge of refining our own, personal, internal and moral virtues.

We move between the mitzvah of building our historic homeland in Israel, and understanding that Jewish life in the Diaspora also must play a role in the destiny of our people.

Our worship, especially as we've evolved here at Temple Emanu-El, moves between the moods of reverence to enthusiasm, from decorum to passion. Sometimes we need to be quiet, and other times we should just rock-out!

We experience the spiritually healthy struggle moving back and forth, upwards or down - from times of clarity to moments of doubt, from feeling God's nearness, to feeling as if the very Face of God is hidden from our heart and soul.

Such is life, in the words of Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, "...erupting with an irrepressible mixture of joy and sorrow, achievement and defeat, vitality and illness, connection and isolation. To focus only on part of that mix would be to produce a caricature of the fullness of life, and God is not found in caricature."

It has been taught in Hasidic lore that Rabbi Simcha Bunim would always carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*^{vii}—"for my sake the world was created." On the other he wrote: *V'anokhi afar v'efer*^{viii}—"I am only dust and ashes." He would take out each slip of paper as necessary.^{ix}

It is true -- our origins are the dust of the earth, as is our end. But at the same time, we have been awakened from the mud to perceive the magnificence of the entire universe, and for us, as the Torah reveals, has all been created! Sometimes, when we become full of ourselves, our power, our ego or pride, it's good to reach into the pocket reminding us of our humble and transitory nature. "I am nothing but dust and ashes." And at other times, perhaps in moments of despair or existential anguish, we need to be reminded that we, as human beings, emerge as a miracle, a reason for all that exists in God's universe. "For my sake was the world created." What a shame to have only one pocket into which to reach; like a single speaker ringing out from a broken stereo!

In the year ahead, let us choose to embrace the dance between the polarities: between rationalism and mysticism; Israel and the diaspora, Repair of the World and the Healing of our own qualities; concern for our Jewish brethren, while caring for all peoples of the earth; from the love of life, to the hope for what awaits us in dimensions we have yet to traverse.

I would paraphrase the Hasidic master by saying that to be an authentic Jew, one needs to have, not two pockets, but two speakers, both earbuds. We are, of course, not only inheritors of an Oral Tradition, but also an aural tradition, an acoustic faith, a dynamic faith, that began more than three thousand years ago with the words: “Shema Yisrael – Listen, O Israel!”

In stereo.

ⁱ I was reminded by several members of my Boston-area congregation that 1867 was also the year of the “Impossible Dream” Red Sox. I regret the omission.

ⁱⁱ Geoff Edgers, “Meet the critic who panned ‘Sgt. Pepper’ then discovered his speaker was busted. He’s still not sorry”, The Washington Post, May 11, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, “How is Sgt. Pepper Like The Torah?”, Religion News Service, June 1, 2017.

^{iv} Isaiah 2:2f.

^v Talmud Shevuot 39a.

^{vi} Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Reform Judaism: A Centennial Perspective”, adopted in San Francisco, 1976.

^{vii} Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5.

^{viii} Genesis 18:27.

^{ix} Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim. The Later Masters, Schocken Books, New York, 1948, pp. 249-250.