

In the mid-1980s I traveled to the Soviet Union to visit refuseniks, Jews who sought to immigrate to Israel, but who the Soviet Union refused to allow to leave. Life was hard for them. Many were imprisoned for the "crime" of teaching Hebrew. Some, accused of treason, were executed. Most lost their jobs. When I visited the refuseniks I brought along a massive duffel bag laden with Hebrew books, Jewish calendars, maps of Israel, *mezzuzot* and kosher salamis that would be sold on the black market to support their families. Before I left I was anxious. Only a few months earlier some visitors from the States had been roughed up and had to spend the night in a Moscow jail. What would I encounter?

My fears, however, paled compared to the struggles of the people I met. One of them was Igor Chernoshwartz - 22 years old, half a head taller than me, with deep set eyes and a dark beard. He looked ten years older. One evening in what was then Leningrad we stood speaking in the cold night air, afraid to come too close to the hotel where some peering eye might see us. We talked about our families, what brought us to Jewish life and the Russian winter to come. The Great Neva River, lined with eighteenth century buildings, flowed by. Ice floes already dotted the water after the cold snap of the previous few days. Across from us, majestically illuminated against the Leningrad night, floated the battle cruiser "Aurora", whose cannon shot signaled the beginning of the Russian Revolution.

"Where is your family from?" Igor asked.

"On my mom's side from Germany; on my dad's from Vilna."

"Vilna," Igor smiled with a sadness tinged with anger, "My family, too." He paused, then asked, "so what made your grandparents so much smarter than mine?"

We are here - all of us - because of the good fortune of having been smart enough ourselves or, in most cases, lucky enough to have had prescient parents or grandparents that brought them to the shores of this land. It was almost exactly 100 years ago that my grandfather, Abraham Chepalevitch, entered the United States at Ellis Island. He, like so many others, came because the place his ancestors called "home" no longer wanted him. The oppression of Tzarist Russia pushed him and his family to take a leap of faith, to seek a better fortune in a new land across the water.

A 1909 postcard now on display at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York shows well-dressed Jews on one side of the ocean beckoning with open arms to immigrants on the other side. Above them hovers an American eagle, its banner proclaiming a promise of protection under divine wings. It is an image eerily reminiscent of the words of Deuteronomy, where God promises to shelter our People, as an eagle covers her young in her protective pinions. The postcard represents the hopes of millions who saw in America refuge and opportunity.

Igor Chernoshwartz was right. My grandparents were wise. America had been kind to them - and to their descendents, as it has brought blessing to the millions of Jews who have linked their fate to this nation. As we begin this New Year we can cherish the fulfillment of hopes that so many had in America. The commemoration dates itself from the landing in New Amsterdam (today's New York City) on September 12, 1654 of 23 Jews from Recife, Brazil. That date was, on the Hebrew calendar, this day - Rosh Hashanah. And so, exactly 30 years ago, fleeing persecution and seeking refuge, this first boatload was the vanguard of so many who would follow.

Throughout the coming year in our congregation we will have speakers and classes that will focus on this anniversary. To focus our thoughts, it behooves us to ask: What has America given us? And, in addition: what is it that we Jews can give back to America, enriching the land that has brought us such blessing?

What has America given us?

We Jews have lived in many nations - at times with relative comfort - but in all our long wanderings in the Diaspora, never have we enjoyed the bounteous opportunity, freedom and justice that we have found here.

During the Presidential primaries wasn't it amazing to watch candidate after candidate make the point of having some Jewish lineage or connection? Joe Lieberman was widely known to be a committed Jew from his bid in 2000 on the ticket with Al Gore. Then, John Kerry, who regularly had been referred to in articles as being Irish-Catholic, announced last February that his immigrant grandfather was a Czech Jew named Kohn, who later changed his name to Kerry. He added that his paternal grandmother was also of Jewish descent. Although Howard Dean is an ex-Catholic who now identifies his faith as Congregationalist, he spoke openly of his wife as a "devout Jew" and their children are being raised as Jews. Then, General Wesley K. Clark began to boast of coming from sturdy rabbinical stock. It seemed during the primaries as if you did not need to be Jewish to be running as a Democrat for president, but it didn't hurt.

We have yet to hear President Bush claim descent from the Vilna Gaon, but in this election anything is possible! Close to the President, however, are a number of Jewish neo-conservative advisors - Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Elliot Abrams - indicating that Jews are clearly comfortable on both sides of the political fence (to the consternation of some of you and the great happiness of others - though that debate is for another time). The point I wish to make now is how remarkable it is that being Jewish is no longer a liability, but having some Jewish connection may actually be seen as advantageous.

Emblematic of the openness of this country to Judaism is something that, strangely enough, comes out of the world of popular music - namely, the embrace of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) by the popular singer, Madonna. A woman whose very name epitomizes Christian faith is now so comfortable with Judaism (though she has not become Jewish) that she wears a *Magen David*, attends synagogue, is spending Rosh Hashanah in Israel, refuses to give a concert on Shabbat and has taken the Hebrew name Esther. Strange it may be, but I'm not laughing. Madonna ... um, I mean Esther's ... fascination with Kabbalah is a reflection of just how Jews and Judaism have become such a part of the American mainstream.

It was not all that long ago that such an open embrace of Jewish life was uncomfortable for many Jews. A few decades ago, Henry Kissinger was talking to then Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. In trying to explain how American he was - and how desperately he wanted to avoid the charge of being seen as in Israel's pocket - Kissinger said, "Golda, you know I am an American first, Secretary of State second, and a Jew third." Golda, ever ready with her sharp repartee, responded, "That's OK, Henry, since we Jews read from right to left."

Meir understood that the avoidance of full expression of our identity as Jews hints to the fact that we remain fettered to the notion that we are outsiders. Like many Israelis she believed that in no land of the Diaspora could Jews escape this "*Galut* (or "exile") mentality." Kissinger's attitude seemed to underscore the Zionist contention - in lands where Jews are not sovereign, we might have the good fortune of rising to high power, but we will never be fully comfortable to be Jews.

There, of course, are still plenty of corners in America where Jews are not well known and sometimes not exactly appreciated. And some Jews are still wary of being "too Jewish." But when Presidential candidates are almost tripping over themselves to show their Jewish connection, when someone like Madonna can be attracted to some aspect of Jewish life - with most Americans accepting her love of Judaism as a legitimate (albeit a bit wacky) means of self-expression - we have to admit that the America of today is a nation of opportunity unlike anyone we have known heretofore.

Our elemental fears, however, bred into us by generations of hate, have not disappeared. Next month the Philip Roth will release his latest book *The Plot Against America*. In it, he imagines what might have happened if, in the election of 1940, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was defeated by aviation pioneer and confirmed isolationist (and anti-Semite) Charles Lindbergh. In Roth's alternative historical musing, upon taking office Lindbergh promptly cozies up to Hitler, keeps the U.S. out of World War II, then goes on to pass laws that lead to the relocation of Jews

in rural towns. Roth's novel promises to be a somber and devastating meditation on the ethereality of freedom.

While Roth plays to our most fundamental worries as the eternal minority, the reality is that that his suppositions about "what if" could not be further from the truth. There have been times when anti-Jewish feelings were strong in the United States. My uncle, for whom I was named, was born in 1920. When he was named, my grandmother decided not to give him the name of the man for whom he was named - Isaac - as it was "too Jewish", a liability in an America where the place of Jews remained insecure. But the latent forces of hate did not take root. True, anti-Semitic incidents do occur, but the hatred that brought fear to our ancestors in so many other lands - government-sponsored sanctions or limitations on our ability to work or live as we wish - these have been foreign to these shores. We ought to be deeply disturbed by the rise of anti-Semitism around the world - in particular Islamic anti-Jewish rhetoric and action - but in the United States we are living in a remarkably peaceful time.

Dr. Jonathan Sarna, an eminent historian of American Jewish life, notes that perhaps the most promising of our history here is that it has been "the great exception to the melancholy story of Jewish history, that of persecution and expulsion." Can this good fortune change? If a study of Jewish history has taught us anything, it has taught us how ephemeral is the freedom we enjoy and, therefore, how important our vigilance against injustice. But as we mark our 350 years on these shores, let us rejoice in the blessings of living in a land that has not only welcomed us, but given us liberty and justice.

What can we Jews teach America?

The Constitution's First Amendment establishes that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." By separating religious fervor from political control, the Framers accomplished two great things: first, allowing religion to flourish in this land without political restraint; and second, freeing America from the religious coerciveness that has tyrannized so generations of Jews (and other religious minorities).

The First Amendment does not, however, place restrictions on religion to make its voice heard in the political sphere. The Framers were men of faith. As people of faith, we, too, are obligated to give voice to the moral values advocated by our traditions. While we Jews have become entrenched in the American mainstream, there are aspects of Jewish life that we should continue to embrace and honor. Our experience as Jews and our faith teach us three great moral values too easily jettisoned in modern America: gratitude, compassion and generosity. Over these Judaism can accept no compromise. As we begin a new year, reflecting on an election all

understand as perhaps the most important in over a generation, we would do well to be reminded of these virtues.

Gratitude

Though Jews say a prayer before eating, there is no command in the Torah that we do so. The Biblical injunction is for a blessing following a meal: "eat, be satisfied, and bless Adonai for the rich land that God has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10)." So why do we say a blessing before? Rabbinic tradition established it as a way to prevent us from stealing. Stealing? Yes, for when we partake of the bounty of the earth we should recognize that what we eat comes from the One who creates all things.

The blessing after a meal ties gratitude to a warning that our prosperity and success can come with a heavy price - self-pride and arrogance. The book of Deuteronomy, after commanding us to say a blessing, admonishes us to:

Be careful that you not forget the Eternal your God ... when you have eaten your fill and built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart may then grow haughty, and you may forget Eternal your God, the One who brought you out of the slave house that was Egypt. It was God who led you through the great, terrifying desert ... in the desert God fed you *manna* ... [When you later have prosperity, be careful that you not] say to yourself, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it the Eternal who give you to the power to get wealth ... (Deuteronomy 8:11-18)

Over the past few years, we have seen the excess and abuse of a society too absorbed with profit at all cost. WorldCom. Enron. Adelphia. Tyco. This is America's litany of shame; of a business ethic devoid of principle. Jewish tradition offers a challenge to the rampant consumerism and wholesale primacy of the bottom line that seems to be the hallmark of our age. Judaism, while clearly open to the capitalist spirit, expects moral virtue in business just as in every other endeavor of life. In place of a free market it advocates what might be called a "fair market." Thus, Jewish law establishes a just price and not what the market will bear, it demands full disclosure in contrast to *caveat emptor* ("let the buyer beware") and it has a 3000 year old tradition of just treatment of buyer by seller and vice versa.

What you and I own is often as much a result of good fortune as anything else. And even if what we possess is the result of hard work, Judaism urges us to consider that the abilities we have that have allowed us to succeed are themselves a gift of God. To recognize this moves us from gratitude and humility to another quality America needs: compassion.

Compassion

On Rosh Hashanah - as on each day - we beseech God, whom we call *Av ha'rachmim*, the "compassionate Parent" to bless us with this trait. Indeed, our most distinctive feature as Jews, the Talmud states, is that we are distinguished by this quality, calling us *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim* "compassionate children of compassionate ancestors" (Betzah 32b). The Chofetz Chaim, a sage of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, writes:

The existence of the entire world depends on [our capacity to imitate God's compassion] ... Whoever follows in this path will bear the Divine image on his person; while whoever refrains from exercising this virtue and questions himself, 'why should I do good to others?' removes himself completely from God, the Blessed One. (*Loving Kindness* by the Chofetz Chaim, chapter 2)

We are to have compassion not only for Jews, but for all who are in need. The one commandment in Torah that appears more than any other (36 times, in fact) is that we "not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 23:9) The Biblical imperative to "love the stranger" (Leviticus 19:34) is a reminder that our recollection of suffering as slaves is not meant to harden our hearts, but to open us to have deeper empathy for those who are downtrodden and without protection.

When we arrived on these shores we were not always greeted with open arms. Indeed, when the Jewish refugees arrived in New Amsterdam the governor, Peter Stuyvesant, tried to expel the "blasphemers of the name of Christ." Luckily, Stuyvesant's bosses at the Dutch West India Company thought otherwise. But there would be many other times when we would be questioned. In 1908 New York Police commissioner, Theodore Bingham said the "Jews are firebugs, burglars, pick pockets and robbers. The most expert of all street thieves are the Hebrew boys under sixteen."

Our sacred texts and experience in this land teach us, therefore, the same thing - remember the immigrant, for you were immigrants on Ellis Island.

In the war on terror we have been told that civil liberties may have to be put aside. But we know that liberty is a precious and easily lost commodity. Let us, then, as Jews, serve warning on those who - in the name of security - too easily dismiss compassion and justice. The details are for political debate, but the virtue must remain enshrined.

Generosity

A faith that teaches gratitude and compassion cannot help but lead us to being generous. Throughout history Jews created organizations that emphasized our mutual responsibility. The demand to be generous is reflected in the Hebrew word for giving - *tzedakah*. Related to the

word *tzedek* - "righteousness" - generosity is an obligation, not an option. "Charity" we give when we feel charitable. We give *tzedakah*, in contrast, because it is the right thing to do, creating a more sacred society. Charity is focused on the giver and his or her feelings. *Tzedakah* teaches that our primary focus should be on those in need - and making things right for them.

In 1654 Peter Stuyvesant acquiesced to the pressure to allow Jews to settle, but only providing that "the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation." The Jewish community since that time has established a myriad of organizations to ensure that no one went hungry, that the incapacitated, sick, old and unemployed were protected. In time, many of these different groups combined under the umbrella of the United Jewish Appeal (an organization deeply worthy of our support) and which, along with synagogues, made real our faith's compassionate demand that we care for those at risk. We can argue whether governments ought to provide assurance of well-being or whether that guarantee should come from the voluntarism of the private sector. But thinking that people should pull themselves up by their own boot straps or that each person ought to take care of him or herself, should be an anathema to us as Jewish Americans.

Generosity, of course, is more than just giving money. In fact, making a donation is easy compared with developing a generous and open spirit. To commit oneself to being generous in here is not, however, enough. The real test will be how you act when you get in your car to leave. This may seem a trivial thing, but I don't think so. In our cars we are anonymous, our true self revealed. So ask yourself: What kind of person am I in my car? And if I have my children or grandchildren with me, what lessons would they learn from my driving?

If I butt into a line of traffic while everyone else is waiting, is my claim that everyone should be treated fairly just a sham? If I push ahead, not allowing someone coming out from shopping, do I embody a sense of generosity or am I teaching my kids to be self-serving? When I hurry to turn even after the light turns red, do I not reject the command to "choose life"?

In place of being concerned only for ourselves, Judaism urges us to live with a generous and giving spirit, to be *mentschlich*. The pain of those in Darfur, then, is an American Jewish concern. Justice for migrant workers is an American Jewish concern. And adequate health care for all in this land is an American Jewish concern.

Instead of trying to tackle everything, allow me to suggest one way to create a deeper sense of compassion within - perform a random act of kindness. About ten years ago, a professor at a small California college asked his students, as part of an assignment, to do exactly this. The idea began to spread. Someone put up a sign on the interstate: "Perform a random act of

kindness today." Slowly, reports began to come in. One woman paid a toll for the six cars behind her. People stopped to help others stopped on the side with flat tires. One man was caught in traffic, his cell phone battery dead. So, he typed a sign on his laptop computer and printed it on his car fax: "Late for anniversary dinner. Call my wife and tell her I love her" with the phone number. He came home an hour later to find that 70 people had called, one sent a bouquet of flowers and another sent a voucher for dinner for two at a fine local restaurant.

The most powerful response to random acts of violence is to open our hearts, with generosity of spirit and perform random acts of kindness. We cannot rely on charitable institutions or even a benevolent government to create a decent society. That depends on us, on the caring we show to others - not those we know and care about, but strangers in the street.

I conclude with a reflection by Sam Levenson, the great Jewish humorist, who once wrote: "My folks were immigrants and they fell under the spell of the American legend that the streets of America were paved with gold. When my father came here, though, he found out three things: First, he saw that the streets were not paved with gold. The second thing he noticed was that the streets were not even paved. And last, but not least, he discovered that he was the one who was expected to do the paving."

Levenson understood that there is - and always has been - a dream of America as it ought to be. There is - and always has been - the reality of America as it is. And finally, that the America that, at its best, has given us so much as Jews, is a nation whose excesses need to be tempered by humility, compassion and generosity to make life more decent and livable for everyone. May we be worthy of the double blessing of our heritage and citizenship as we mark this special year.