

'A letter to a recently married couple'

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Shanah Tovah!

In place of a sermon this morning, I would like to read to you a letter that I wrote to a particular couple who recently got married. I actually never met this couple, but when I heard their story, there were a few things I wanted very much to communicate to them. I will confess to you, however, that I did not end up sending this letter - for reasons that may become clear. So here it is:

Dear Charlotte and Harry,

My family joins me in wishing you a Mazal Tov, and a lifetime of happiness together!

But especially, I am writing this letter to thank you. Even though the two of you are fictional characters, you seem to have done more this summer to spark discussion of Jewish identity issues than hundreds of rabbis in hundreds of synagogues across the country. In fact, the United Jewish Communities has just released a major population survey of the American Jewish community, focusing on issues relating to Jewish observance, and intermarriage, and conversion, but I believe that the ups and downs of your relationship actually got MORE press coverage than the survey did. So I wanted to express my gratitude to you, and to the writers on the HBO program "Sex and the City" on which you appear, for welcoming the whole country into the conversation. (Or at least for welcoming HBO subscribers, and people like me who borrowed the tapes from Alan Sepinwall.)

When I first heard about the two of you, and your relationship, I was concerned, and I shared my concern with the congregation over the summer. The first thing I heard, Harry, was that you informed Charlotte that, regardless of your feelings for her, you would be unable to marry her, because you would only marry someone Jewish. And Charlotte, you angrily noticed some irony to the fact that, as Harry was saying those words, he was eating a plate of pork tenderloin. But when you pointed this out, Harry, your reply was, "I'm not KOSHER! I'm Conservative!"

This was, of course, the comment that made Conservative rabbis around the country reach for their pens to write angry letters to HBO, and to write angry op-ed pieces in the Jewish newspapers: 'It's a canard! That's not what the Conservative movement stands for! We DO feel that keeping kosher is important!' Which, of course, is very true. But I was less bothered by that comment than I was with the big picture.

Harry, it seemed as if being Jewish was SO important to you that it would determine your choice of life partner, but that you felt that this was the one and only thing that you ought to do to affirm your Jewish identity. Charlotte, this made no sense to you -- and I submit that I have trouble understanding it as well.

Harry, your decision came in part because you made a promise to your mother before she died that you would perpetuate Judaism in your family. And this promise had all the more power and resonance - to you, and to Charlotte, and to the viewing audience - because your mother was a Holocaust survivor.

Harry, it was especially noble for you to put yourself on the line - in public, on television, no less - to espouse what is really a somewhat unpopular position in this society. There are some who call it racist, or tribalist, or ethnic chauvinism of the worst kind. And I agree with you: it is certainly not any of these things. It is, in fact, a particularly honorable decision to make. And yet, I was deeply troubled, for each of you, and for your relationship.

Harry and Charlotte, you know that the issue of intermarriage is one of the largest and most challenging issues in today's American Jewish community. It is, in fact, such a challenging and sensitive issue that I prefer to discuss it in detail in individual conversations, and in small group discussions, rather than in High Holiday sermons. (Or in long letters to fictional characters masquerading as High Holiday sermons.) But I will tell you this: If I were asking questions of someone to try to assess their level of Jewish identity, and

their likelihood of passing that Jewish identity on to the next generation, my first question would certainly NOT be, 'are you married to someone Jewish?' Rather, my first question would probably be, "What are some of the things you do on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis to affirm your Jewish identity and that of your family?" Because that seems like a FAR more relevant piece of data to acquire.

Harry, you know there are some who regard Jews primarily as an ethnic group, a tribe or nation. Certainly, many Jews in the United States share certain ethnic characteristics. There are others who regard Jews primarily as a religion. I would say, however, that you can't really understand Judaism unless you see that it has elements of both. It's a group of people sharing some common beliefs, as well as a common history - but most importantly, it's a group of people sharing common values and a common way of life. So a Jew who knows very little about Judaism, who in no way affirms a Jewish way of life, and who does almost nothing to affirm his or her Jewish identity in concrete terms has not stopped being a Jew. But chances are, his or her children will never have the opportunity to START being a Jew.

Charlotte and Harry, when I think about the American Jewish community today and its various challenges, I sometimes think back to a Hasidic story about a king who appoints a messenger to travel to the outer reaches of the kingdom to make an important announcement on behalf of the king. The King gives the messenger a piece of paper containing the text of the announcement, and gives him travel directions from MapQuest, and sends him on his way.

It is an unusually arduous journey. The messenger has to wade through a river up to his knees, he has to climb over hills and hedges, a few times he is attacked by robbers along the way but he manages to defend himself, until finally, with scars and scratches all over, he arrives at his destination. He announces that he is a messenger, bearing a message from the king. They gather all the people together, and the messenger reaches into his pocket to get the piece of paper with the announcement.

Hmm - I must have put it in my other pocket.

Maybe it's in my bag. No - I can't find it. Maybe if I think really hard, I can remember what the message said. No, I can't remember a word of it. What will I do? Did I really travel all this way, just to deliver this message, and now everyone is quiet, waiting for me to speak, and I have nothing to say? Am I a messenger without a message?!

And then the messenger gets a great idea. 'Wait a minute! Perhaps the very fact of my PRESENCE here IS the message. Perhaps the message is: Look at everything that I had to overcome to be here today, speaking to you. It's a testament to my strength. It's a testament to my devotion to the King. My perseverance may even be an example, worthy of emulation! Because I HAVE SURVIVED!'

Finally, the messenger was able to return to the king and tell him the whole story. The king wasn't so angry - but he also wasn't so pleased. He said to the messenger, "Your survival is admirable. It's a testament to your strength, your perseverance, and your numerous other outstanding qualities, just as you said. But it's not the same thing as -- having the message that you were instructed to transmit."

Charlotte and Harry, these days people are often trying to boil down the ESSENCE of what it means to be Jewish. I find that a large number of American Jews confuse the ESSENCE of Judaism with the SURVIVAL of the Jewish people.

No question - the survival of the Jewish people, after so many centuries of persecution, and attempts at annihilation, is one of the most inspiring stories of human history. But by itself, it's not the MESSAGE of the Jewish people. Ultimately, it's just the story of how the messenger got to be where the messenger got to be.

More than 30 years ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the prophetic voices of American Judaism, got fed up with the Jewish community's pre-occupation with 'surviving' and obsessing over population studies like the one issued last week, and its seeming indifference to the more weighty issues of Jewish identity. He wrote, "There are two words I should like to strike from our vocabulary: 'surveys' and 'survival'. Our community is in spiritual distress, and our organizations are too concerned with digits. Our disease is loss of character and commitment, and the cure cannot be derived from charts and diagrams. The significance of Judaism does not lie in its being conducive to mere survival, but rather in its being a source

of spiritual wealth and source of meaning relevant to all peoples. Survival, mere continuation of being, is a condition [humanity] has in common with animals. Characteristic of humanity is concern for **what to do with** survival. **To be or not to be** – [that] is not the question. **How** to be and **how** not to be – [that] is the question.”

In a somewhat more provocative vein, the Israeli journalist Zeev Chafets expressed much the same idea when he wrote, “If the American Jewish community had a national anthem, perhaps it would be - We’re here because we’re here, because we’re here, because we’re here....”

So, Harry and Charlotte, you are wondering: if the survival of the Jewish people is not the message, then what IS the message?

The question is difficult to answer in full, because the message has NUMEROUS parts to it. But the question is easy to answer in part, because it’s easy to provide examples.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Shabbat** - the belief that time is sacred, that rest is built into the fabric of the universe, that just as important as working and producing is pausing to reflect and to savor.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Tzelem Elohim** - that all human beings are reflections of God and mirror images of each other, and thus dehumanization, racism and ethnic prejudice have no place in God’s world.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Teshuvah** - that God sets high standards for us but does not expect perfection, and grants us the opportunity to learn and grow from our mistakes.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Hodayah** - that we can see that the world is full of miracles if we will only learn how to open our eyes and our hearts.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Gemulit Hasadim** - that what God desires most from us as human beings, **even more than our faith**, is that we treat each other with respect and with love.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Mitzvah** - that doing the right and generous thing is usually not merely an option, but a responsibility, incumbent upon us when we’re in the mood and when we’re NOT in the mood.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Avadim Hayyinu** - we were slaves in Egypt, and it didn’t make us bitter and resentful - rather it made us yearn for and work for freedom for all peoples.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Talmud Torah** - that we can find God by exercising our minds and our intellects.

Part of the message of Judaism is **Tikkun Olam** – that the world is broken but not beyond repair, and that repairing the world is a job assigned not just to God, but to humanity as well.

And part of the message of Judaism is **Adonai Echad** - God is One, and Unity pervades the universe and everything within it.

I could go on and on - but there’s an even ten parts of the message, which make a good start.

Charlotte, I know that YOU are familiar with all these concepts, and the various teachings and rituals that reinforce them, as you studied in an extensive introduction to Judaism program in preparation for your conversion. But Harry.... if you would like a refresher course on some of Judaism’s greatest ideas, come take the PATH out to Hoboken, where our next Intro to Judaism class begins on October 22!

One of my teachers likes to use a slightly different metaphor - he likes to refer to all these Jewish ideas, practices and values as KEYS. He says, there are numerous tasks that must be necessary for the perfection and of the world - for the redemption of the world. We could imagine it as analogous to a door with a series of locks on it, each lock requiring a different key. My teacher says: “We don’t know what all the keys are -- but considering the central role that the Jewish people has played up until now in world history-- in steering the world towards ethics, and holiness, and concern for others -- I have to imagine that the Jewish people is carrying some of those keys. Certainly not all of them -- but some of them. Perhaps many nations, many religions, are carrying some of the keys. So we have to make sure that at the time we finally come to the door, we’re strong enough to present our keys.”

And the problem with assimilation is that it causes minorities -- like the Jewish people, and other minorities -- to lose what is most distinctive about us. It causes us to lose the values, the practices, the obsessions which have the potential to be our unique contribution to the world.

Now, yes, part of the message - an important part of the message- of the Jewish people is that of perseverance, of stubborn insistence on survival. But that's a part - not the totality. And you have to be careful about how you present it to the next generation. What happens when you tell a 13-year-old - "I want you to be Jewish, because ... um ... because the Jews have been around for a long time." Probably not a dramatically positive response. And even worse, if you say, "I want you to be Jewish, because Jews have been persecuted, maligned, hated and despised, from ancient times down to the present day, and yet we have managed to survive." (With that kind of intro, lots of very smart 13-year-olds will be racing out the door. Why should I choose to be persecuted, maligned, hated and despised?)

If people are to make the choice to be actively Jewish today, it will not be MERELY because they are loathe to be the last link in a long chain. It will also be because they see in Judaism a means to a powerful and deep spiritual and ethical commitment, and a way to connect with community, with heritage, and with the Source of All Being.

Well, Charlotte and Harry, let me thank you again for inviting us all to discuss this issue with you. My prayer for you for this new year is the same as my prayer for everyone in my community: May you experience good health, happiness and love in the coming year, and may you see Jewish identity and Jewish experiences not as a burden, but as a gift; not as an imposition, but as an opportunity for holiness and personal growth; not as a mere detail of identity, but as an opening to a beautiful dimension of existence and awareness.

Shanah Tovah,

Rabbi Rob Scheinberg

PS: I've taken the liberty to enclose our most recent synagogue bulletin and activity brochure. This congregation would be a very exciting place to take the next step in your Jewish journey!