

Shabbat Sukkot 5771 – Being Jewish in America

Shabbat Shalom, Moed tov.

One of the great challenges of being Jewish in America is figuring out the balance. We are constantly pulled into the rich mixture of cultures that is America – a rich pastiche of various ethnicities, cultures, religions and peoples. We should remember that the ambient national culture is Christian – Christmas is a Christian holy day, and it is a federal holiday, as is New Year's, in commemoration of Jesus' *bris*.

On Tuesday, I received the link to a humorous Youtube video about Jews arguing about the right kind of Reuben sandwich. They were in what looked like a *Kosher-style* deli in Los Angeles, and they were debating back and forth whether the authentic Reuben sandwich is made with sauerkraut or with coleslaw. Finally, a young woman who has been witnessing this “debate” points out to the assembled crowd that a Reuben is not even kosher since it mixes corned beef and cheese.

This video sums up exactly a huge part of our dilemma as Jews living in America. Our culture, practices, ideas and our foods have continued to grow, permeate, and impact on American society. But, are there limits to this? What are the dangers and what are the positives?

Let me begin with the influence on the positive side. It's clear that the Jewish people have had an incredible impact on the world and on America. Think about the ideals of Torah in western democratic tradition. The principles of our judicial system are all rooted in Jewish tradition.

And, of course, on a less significant scale, our foods have permeated the culture. Trace the movement of bagels, which were thought of as a Jewish ethnic food just a few decades ago, and are now something that seems almost as American as a Big Mac.

Our tradition has much to offer the world. Witness the interest in building sukkot. I sent out a link to www.Sukkahcity.com, an organization that is trying to promote the building and awareness of Sukkot. They were able to create a huge art and architecture exhibit this week in Union Square in the middle of Manhattan by having a design competition on building the most creative and artistic sukkah.

Visiting their website, which I encourage you to do, you will witness incredible ingenuity and creativity. People designed all kinds of sukkot. There was one made out of pieces of cardboard donated by homeless people who were using the cardboard as signs. Yet another was made out of a single string wrapped all around, forming the walls of the sukkah. And finally, my favorite, the glass walls with a huge eighteen-foot tree trunk placed on top. These artistic

sukkahs were truly extraordinary, blending architecture and unique esthetic sensibilities with the actual basic rules of building a sukkah.

The halakhah says that a sukkah has to be more than ten hand breadths high – at least three feet – and no more than twenty arm lengths to the tip of your middle finger, about thirty feet. The reason for this is that a sukkah shorter than three feet high is way too small, and no-one could actually live in it. The reason it can't be more than thirty feet high is that you would have to build very strong supports, which would make it no longer a temporary, impermanent structure, but something else entirely.

The sukkah also needs to have three walls, or at least two walls and part of a third, which opens up to a lot of creativity in the architecture department, since most rooms and living structures need four walls. The sides can be made out of any material, but the top has to be made out of natural material – things that grew in the ground, but are now severed. Thus, you can't make the roof out of branches and leaves that are still connected to a tree. But once they are disconnected from the tree, you can put the branches and leaves on the top of the sukkah.

Browsing through these many entrants and the designs of the twelve finalists, for which you can vote online, I was struck by the ingenuity, the creativity, and how much the ideas of Judaism are out there in the world. The sukkah has gone mainstream.

Now another Youtube video; did you see the other one I sent: “To Life – Vanessa’s Wedding?” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqZ4ZTTfKO8>)” As of Wednesday morning, this video had a million and half viewers, and it is wonderful. The groom, a professional actor, surprises his bride at their wedding by “spontaneously” singing “To Life - L’Hayyim” from Fiddler, which he had rehearsed with the rest of the wedding party in secret. They do a wonderful job; the extemporaneous joy is contagious.

Nothing unusual here, except, the bride and groom are not Jewish. The video works because they are so real, so emotional, and the actor who is getting married, Lin-Manuel Miranda, did a beautiful job.

Again I was struck by the power of Jewish culture. A classic song from Fiddler is now such a part of American culture that it's used by a non-Jew to surprise his non-Jewish bride. Even if you're not Jewish, it's part of America. The word L'Hayyim, a Hebrew word, is part of that experience, although, between you and me, they could use a little bit of extra work pronouncing the het!

Finally, in the same vein is an article that appeared last Friday in the “New York Times.” Apparently there are many apartment buildings in and around the New York area where Jews had mezuzahs on their doors outside of their homes,

and sometimes, as we are supposed to, on all of the rooms of our home except the bathroom. When they moved away, they left them.

Now the halakah, the law, is that you leave them only if the person moving in after you is Jewish and is going to leave them up because these contain small scrolls that need to be handled with extreme care and respect. We don't want them to be taken down and discarded. Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* need to be buried properly.

The article went on to talk about non-Jews who moved and left *mezuzot* up after Jews had moved out and left them behind. Some of the non-Jews left them up out of deference. One, who teaches kindergarten at the Calhoun School in Manhattan, said, "It's good Karma if I can mix my religious metaphors."

The most striking was an 87-year old retired secretary, a Catholic, who lives in Peter Cooper Village in Manhattan, which is actually where I grew up. She often wished that she had inherited a mezuzah like her non-Jewish neighbors. The tradition recalls her youth, she said, when her local priest appeared each Easter to write "God Bless This House" on her family's front door.

One of her Jewish neighbors recently hung a mezuzah on her own doorway. "Every time I come home and remember, I kiss it and touch it, and then I bless myself, saying 'in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.'"

As you might imagine, this started to rub me the wrong way. There is great power in sharing our religious traditions, but there is also the danger of the blurring of the distinctions by simply adopting differing traditions. Many Christians now observe a Passover Seder, which I think is lovely. After all, Jesus, the important figure in Christianity, was Jewish and observed the Passover Seder, which may have been the Last Supper. Whether or not that's the case, there's a clear connection for Christians to observe this classic Jewish rite. And while Christians can take on Jewish traditions, there is a problem in how they get combined with and assimilated into something else.

We are in a very tricky place religiously. Given the amount of mixing between Christianity and Judaism that takes place in our own schools, towns, neighborhoods, and in our own families that often include Jews and Christians, it's easy to see how these might get assimilated together into some new amalgam.

There are many Jews, including some Jewish organizations, who have spoken about how wonderful this would be.

Let me state something very clearly this morning. I am a big believer in interfaith dialogue, in outreach toward interfaith families, in all kinds of sharing. I

grew up with non-Jews attending my seder. Often these people were interested in Judaism or in converting to Judaism. There is nothing wrong with inviting non-Jews to our homes to experience the sukkah, to participate in our customs.

The danger exists now in a time when the lines are getting blurred even more. There is a danger that we could get carried away, creating a Judaism that is no longer really intrinsically Jewish. If that happens, my friends, then Judaism will simply become like the bagel – a cute pastime, the song “L’Hayyim,” something to sing, but something devoid of any real content or real power.

We have stood apart as a people for thousands of years, not because we did not share with the outside world. No. In fact, it is the opposite. We are told to be *or goyim* - a light unto the nations. We are told to share our Torah, our western legal tradition, our democratic ideals, our Jewish values and ethics. And we have. We do not stand apart in terms of sharing.

But we must stand apart in terms of what it means to be a Jew. At the end of the day, Judaism must remain true to itself; our people must make an extra level of commitment to Jewish values and standards. That’s why our traditions, like our birth rituals, Brit Milah, circumcision for a son, and Brit Bat, a covenantal naming ceremony for daughters, are vital. That’s why we bring children to the mikvah, if their birth mother is not Jewish at their time of birth.

We don’t live in separate communities like the Ultra-Orthodox of New Square. We mix with non-Jews in schools, neighborhoods, supermarkets and business places. Our students go off to college where they’ll meet Jews and non-Jews.

But if we want the next generations to be Jewish, we need to know that our standards of Jewish practice are in place. Even as we continue to find credible ways of outreach toward interfaith families, we can only do so fully and formally for families who have made the commitment to raise their children solely as Jews.

There are many different scenarios in the world today, and I love the fact that we can bring our sukkot out into the world. But in the final analysis, this is our mitzvah, our commandment. While everyone else can enjoy it and while they can add to our own creativity; for Jews, this is what we are commanded to do. We are the keepers of this faith and this tradition. It is up to us to ensure that these standards continue to exist.

Sukkot is the perfect time to take all of these ideas and bring them together. *Masekhet Avodah Zarah*, the tractate or book of the Talmud, deals with idolatry. It opens with all the nations of the world asking God to grant them a mitzvah to prove themselves worthy of redemption. What is the mitzvah that God grants, that God chooses? It is the sukkah. The sukkah is seen by our tradition

as a place that embraces the Jewish people, but is a place that is open to the outside world. Thus it is appropriate that we invite non-Jews to see our sukkot.

The Haftarah, the prophetic readings for the festival of Sukkot, speak about a future time, the Messianic Age, which, according to some, is preceded by a time of violence, and then moves towards universal peace.

The Haftarah from the first day of Sukkot is from Zekhariah. It talks about all the nations who come to Jerusalem to make a pilgrimage year by year to bow down to God on Sukkot. Thus, Sukkot is viewed as a universal holiday by the rabbis. A time when we are all supposed to share this mitzvah, this great beautiful space, with our neighbors, with those who aren't Jewish, but with three important distinctions. First, it is still a mitzvah for Jews to eat and to live in the sukkah as much as possible during Sukkot. Second, we also are given other mitzvot, like the lulav and etrog that are not usually shared in the same manner. And last, maybe most beautifully, we're given the festival Shmini Atzeret, which we will observe this coming Wednesday into Thursday. Rabbis see this festival as a special extra day for the Jewish people to remain alone with God and Jerusalem. Even if Sukkot is the universal holiday, Shmini Atzeret would remain a more particularly Jewish day.

We live in a very interesting cultural milieu in America today. With all kinds of sharing, it is still important to maintain our own Jewish identity and even distinctiveness as we participate in this vibrant culture.

That, my friends, is like walking a tightrope. We must continually balance ourselves, hopefully not swaying too much to either side – not to isolate ourselves too much nor to lose all of our distinctiveness.

I wish us much success in these endeavors and, in the words of our Siddur, "May the One who covers us in the sukkah of peace, upon us and upon all of God's people Israel and over Jerusalem, continue to bless us.

Shabbat Shalom and Moed Tov.