

CCAR Conference Reflections
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I've just returned from time away, the first part of which was spent at the annual convention of the CCAR (the Central Conference of American Rabbis) in Long Beach with 500 or so of my Reform colleagues. The theme for the conference was "Rabbis Leading The Shift: Jewish Possibility in a Rapidly Changing World" and throughout the four days during which we gathered we heard from a number of speakers and presenters about the changes we are seeing and the shifts we are feeling within the American Jewish community. And those changes and shifts are significant, at times seismic. In fact, by the end of the conference, more than a few of us found ourselves wondering and commiserating whether or not anything is organized Jewish life remains the same!

(Parenthetically, on my flight home, I happened upon a magazine article that said, "Firehouses across the country are replacing the iconic brass pole that firefighters slide down when an alarm sounds." Apparently, "because of insurance liability for sprained ankles and damaged knees and backs", "many firehouses are installing plastic slides like those found in playgrounds." After four days of lectures on change, change, change, I had to wonder: Really? Is *nothing* sacred?)

Of course, we know – change is the only constant. And a movement that takes its very name from the idea of change, Reform, must continue to face change so that we can embrace, steer, and, yes, even fight it as necessary. Of those I heard during the conference, Rabbi Sidney Schwartz – social entrepreneur, activist, and author most recently of *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future* – probably summarized the changes emerging among American Jews most comprehensively. And so I'd like to share some of his observations and findings with you tonight.

Schwartz identifies three main factors that are each contributing to what seems to be a weakening of Jewish identity and affiliation in America. First, he sees that **Israel** – which used to be a unifying force in American Jewish life – no longer plays that role.

There has been growing attention paid to what it means for us to become further and further removed from Holocaust survivors who can inspire others with their stories in a way no other can, because their stories are those of firsthand experiences. In the same way, Schwartz notes: "I have firsthand memories of several glorious chapters in Israel's history, including its victory in the 1967 Six-Day War and its dramatic rescue of Jewish hostages at the airport in Entebbe."

But Israel has become, he says, “a badly tarnished brand... [especially in] the mainstream American media.”

After the Six-Day War, Israel was no longer the struggling democracy in a hostile Arab neighborhood trying to make the desert bloom. The miracle of *kibbutz galuyot*, the way a young and struggling nation spared no effort or expense to gather in oppressed Jews from the four corners of the world during its first decade of statehood, was now something for the history books. Instead, Israel was portrayed as the preeminent military power in the Middle East. ... If sympathy for a people decimated by the Holocaust helped create the international will to establish a Jewish homeland in the State of Israel, then international sympathy in the post-1967 period was firmly on the side of the Palestinians. ... In the course of forty years Israel went from being a darling of the Western world and the impetus for a revival of Jewish pride and identity to something very morally complex.

And recent studies and statistics play this out:

One 2010 study compared attachment to Israel by age cohort. Asked if the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy, 80% of Jews over 65 said “yes,” while only 48% of Jews under 35 said “yes”. 40% of the older cohort considered themselves “very emotionally attached to Israel,” while only 22% of the younger cohort did. [And] in a third question, 83% of the older cohort was “comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state,” while only 53% of the younger cohort was.

So declining attachment to Israel is the first shift in Jewish identity recognized by Schwartz. The second is the impact of overarching **trends in American culture and society**, in general. Here Schwartz cites the studies and work of the keynote speaker at last year’s CCAR Conference, sociologist Robert Putman, who documented what he calls, “the rise of the ‘nones’” [N-O-N-E, nones], in his most recent book *American Grace*.

In the 1950s, in response to the question “What is your religious preference?” 95 to 97 percent of Americans named a specific denomination (e.g., Baptist, Methodist) or a religious tradition (e.g., Christian, Jewish). This data means that only 3 to 5 percent of Americans checked the box that said “none” when asked about their religious affiliation. But by the year 2000 that number sky-rocketed to 25 percent. [One in four Americans now claim to have no religion.] Not surprisingly, the highest incidence of “nones” was among the young.

When this declining loyalty to religious affiliation is combined with the downturn in the American economy; the deterioration of America’s historic dominance and the respect we have historically enjoyed globally; the erosion of socialization due to advancing technology; and the

impact of technology on political culture, whereby people are increasingly “being exposed only to opinions with which they agree” – Schwartz sees a deep spiritual malaise spreading throughout American society.

So, thus far, not the most uplifting of pictures, right? Fortunately, I found Schwartz’s third observation about younger generations of American Jews to ring as true as the others, but to also begin to point the path to a new type of engagement that could see current and future generations not only embracing their Jewish identity, but proudly and actively doing so. First, his observation:

The “new American Jew”, as Schwartz calls members of the younger generation, “do not respond emotionally to appeals based on the Holocaust or the State of Israel,” he says. “They do not derive their sense of place from their Jewish connections; [and] while aware of historical anti-Semitism and ongoing anti-Israel animus in the world, they do not share the persecution phobias of earlier Jewish generations.” There is a “growing polarization in the Jewish world in terms of **the difference between tribal and covenantal identity**,” he says.

[On the one hand,] tribal Jews see their identity in political and ethnic terms. They are very concerned about threats to Jewish survival, both from enemies of Israel and the Jewish people and from the rampant assimilation within the Jewish community. They do not apologize for investing their time and resources in advancing group self-interest, and they have created an array of Jewish organizations to support their work.

On the other hand, covenantal Jews, as Schwartz calls them, “see their identity less as a matter of group solidarity than as a spiritual legacy.”

If covenantal Jews feel an affinity to Judaism it is because of the ethics and values that Judaism has brought into the world, such as justice (*tzedek*), compassion (*chesed*), human dignity (*tzelem Elohim*), and the protection of those who are most vulnerable (*ahavat ger*). Most covenantal Jews could not name these values in Hebrew or identify the source of these concepts in Judaism’s sacred texts, but they are aware that these are ideas that Judaism brought into the world via the Bible and they are very proud of it. ... Covenantal Jews feel pride when Jews in various fields of endeavor make contributions to the world, yet they resist the Jewish community’s emphasis on group survival as the highest priority. Motivated by what they see as the higher mandate of Judaism, their loyalties are decidedly more global and universal. Covenantal Jews would not respond well to the classic Jewish teaching that requires supporting Jews before supporting non-Jews. Nor are they sympathetic to appeals that might come from parents or Jewish authority figures that they should marry other Jews. All such claims that privilege Jews over other human beings strike covenantal Jews as ethically objectionable.

For the past 10 years, I have been using a questionnaire called “Who is a Good Jew?” with my Confirmation classes. The survey asks the students to determine whether each of 33 different criteria is “Essential”, “Desirable”, “Makes no Difference”, or “Essential Not to Do” in order to be considered a “Good Jew”. Of course, there are absolutely no empirically right or wrong answers and so the dialogue that emerges is generally fantastic. And by using the same survey for a decade, I’ve been able to see some of this shift that Schwartz identifies with my own eyes. For instance, consider the criteria “lives in a Jewish neighborhood”, “has mostly Jewish friends”, and “marries a Jew.” For years, there would be a predictable debate between whether these were desirable to do or make no difference. Few students, if any, would ever rate them as essential. But, lately, it is the rare student who ranks them as even desirable. The conversation instead has been whether these things make no difference or are in fact essential not to do as they seem to give priority to Jews over others. The trends in philanthropy – that see more Jewish dollars going to universities, hospitals and cultural institutions than the institutions of the organized *Jewish* community – may play out these proclivities, as well.

Yet, if we understand these changes – if we accept what’s happening, educate ourselves more deeply about what we’re seeing and feeling – Schwartz contends there *are* ways to reach these younger generations and strengthen their Jewish identities and bonds to other Jews. Don’t mistake lack of interest in institutional religion with the search for spirituality, he cautions. The good news, he says, is that younger Jews have values that are very deeply and closely aligned with Jewish values. Our challenge now is to tell our ancient story in a way that amplifies the call to covenant without the tribal trappings.

Here, ever so briefly, are a few of his propositions:

- 1) As we have done for time eternal, offer multiple avenues to explore *chochmah*, the wisdom of Jewish sacred texts – but do so “in the context of the world’s religions and in the language of contemporary culture”. Younger Jews don’t want “Jewish-lite”. They want serious Jewish learning programs that feel authentic and present Jewish wisdom in the context of a “global wisdom tradition” – how Judaism is similar to and different from other faiths and cultures in the world.
- 2) “At a time when our political culture seems so dysfunctional and the social and environmental threats to the planet grow exponentially every year, the Jewish community needs to provide ever more ways to advance *tzedek* [justice] in the world.”
Congregation-based community organizing, such as we are involved in through the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, is not only helping people to make meaningful differences toward eradicating injustice in their communities, but also igniting Jewish identity and spirituality in the process.

- 3) “At a time when technology has made meaningful social intercourse much harder to come by, the Jewish community must offer places where people can find support in times of need, communal celebration in times of joy, and friendships to make life fulfilling.” Here Schwartz talks of “intentional spiritual communities”; fellow author and educator Ron Wolfson espouses “relational Judaism”, where the relationships we build with one another are the true capital by which to evaluate the strength and vibrancy of our communities. There are implications for governance and structure, business models and brick-and-mortar synagogues. But suffice it to say, we need to be willing to take some risks and think outside the box (and our buildings) when it comes to reaching out to, and connecting with, those we seek and who seek us.

So maybe you feel a bit like I did as I left Long Beach and tried to process all I had heard over four days – including these thoughts from Rabbi Sidney Schwartz, as well as many others. A bit discouraged, moderately overwhelmed, pretty deeply reflective and yet somehow also hopeful and encouraged. There are indeed many changes and shifts taking place in the world of American Judaism – but there are therefore many chances for conversation and dialogue, reflection and imagination. At the beginning of Rabbi Schwartz book, he cites the following passage: “Fortunate is the generation in which the elders listen to the youth.” That quotation comes from the Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 25b, which just goes to show – some things *never* change.

Shabbat Shalom.