

Moving from Identity to Meaningful Practice
Rosh Hashanah 5770 2nd Day
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This is a short story told in the voice of a boy named Dan.

Once, when I was a little boy, I got lost in the May Company—in the handkerchief department. My mother told me to stay close to her while she shopped for presents. It was Hanukkah time, I remember, and it was raining outside. I let go of my mother’s skirt and went to the big front door. I stuck my nose against the door and watched the raindrops sliding down the glass. When I turned around, my mother was gone. And I was lost.

The salesladies were very nice—but I didn’t know any of them. The manager came over and he was nice, too—but I didn’t know him either. A whole crowd of people came around—they told me not to worry—but I didn’t know any of them either. They were all big people, big people I didn’t know, and I was very little. I was frightened and I began to cry.

Then the manager bent down and took my hand and he said, “Little boy, what is your name?”

For a second I kept on crying, and he said it again, “What is your name?”

“Dan Segal,” I said.

“My name is Dan Segal,” I said. And something wonderful happened. “My name is Dan Segal,” I told him, and I stopped crying. I didn’t feel a bit like crying

any more, I felt warm and good inside. I felt good because I knew my name, and I could tell it. I could say my name and everybody would know who I was. There was nothing more to worry about then; it would be easy to get me back to my mother; everything was all right.

I knew my name, so I wasn't frightened any more. I knew my name, so I wasn't lost any more. I was somebody—because I knew my name.

Once, when I was a little boy, I got lost in the May Company. But the other day I saw a boy get lost right in our classroom in public school. He knew his name all right—Jimmy Samuels. He even knew his address. But he was lost just the same, as lost as I was in the May Company. At first I didn't understand—well, I'd like to tell you about it.

We were studying about America, I guess. And Miss Statler, that's our teacher, went around the room asking the children, and they stood up and told about the countries their parents or grandparents or great-grandparents had come from, and what their people had done to help build up America and make it a good place to live in, and all interesting things about them. The boy next to me told some interesting things about Holland, and the girl on the other side knew some good things about Ireland, and she even sang an Irish lullaby for us. It was beautiful. And then Miss Statler called on Jimmy Samuels, and Jimmy just sat there.

Miss Statler looked at him; she said: “Jimmy, surely you know something interesting to tell; you’re Jewish, aren’t you?”

I looked at Jimmy and right away I knew he felt just the way I did that day at the May Company. I could just see it on his face. He got all red, and his eyes filled up, and he looked this way and that just like I did when I was scared and looking for my mother. I couldn’t understand why he looked so funny, and then Miss Statler went on and she called on me.

So I stood up and said a few things. I guess I started with how the word Jewish comes from Judah, and he was one of the sons of Jacob and that name sticks in all Jewish history. The kids were listening all right, and Miss Statler nodded to me, so I told a little more of the things I learned in the synagogue—some of the things the Jewish people had done, like getting rid of idols, and fighting to be free from the Egyptians and the Greeks and all the other bad people, and working for the Ten Commandments, and all the fine holidays, and how Sukkot was much like Thanksgiving, and our country was believing in the ideas of the Hebrew Bible, and I guess maybe something about great men in America who are Jews.

I probably talked too long but I learned quite a bit in synagogue—and then all of a sudden, when I sat down, I had a funny feeling. I felt just the way I did when I remembered my name in the May Company, and said it out clear and loud. I felt good inside, all warm and comfortable. I felt just as if I knew my name.

So now I wonder if maybe a person can get lost even if he knows his name and his address perfectly well—if there isn't more than one kind of a name that goes with a person. Seems as if there's a name your family calls you—like Jimmy or Dan.

And maybe there's another kind of name that you call yourself—inside—the kind of a name you get from learning something about yourself and your people, and who you are and where you came from and what's good and useful about you so you feel as good as the next person and understand that they are as good as you. My name is Jewish, that inside name—and I guess I'm lucky, I know that inside name, too.

It's the sort of a name Jimmy Samuels doesn't know, because he never comes to synagogue, and I guess maybe his parents don't care if he looks lost and his face gets red and he looks as if he's going to cry. I wish they would, though. Because you have no idea what a good feeling it is to know your name. To stand up and say it out loud and strong when somebody asks you.

You can't be frightened—when you know your name.

You can't get lost—when you know your name.

You're somebody—when you know your name.

A number of years ago, when I was in rabbinical school, I came across this short story, called, "What is Your Name?", by Harold Friedman, and I found it so

compelling and moving that I ended up using it as a teaching tool in a number of different contexts. The story, found in an anthology of short stories, is prefaced by the following introductory comment: “There is a word with a very special meaning. For you, for whom this book has been prepared. *For the deepest and most essential meaning of Jewish living.* The word is *identification.*”

For years I have thought Friedman was absolutely right on in his assessment of the importance of identification. If you know basics about who you are as a Jew, and you feel good about that, then why couldn't that be the “deepest and most essential meaning of Jewish living”?

Why? Because now it's becoming clear that “positive Jewish identity” isn't cultivating Jewish living.

Consider this: at a Washington Board of Rabbis study day back in May, the scholar-in-residence, Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, presented some powerful and telling statistics. According to a recent study, **93%** of American Jews say that they are conceptually proud to be Jewish. **93%!!!** That's a whopping number, and a number that has been increasing steadily since 1950. More than 9 out of 10 Jews identify positively with our tradition. And yet, despite that fact, **Jewish practice is declining.** As some of you may recall me mentioning back on a Shabbat in May, there are only six practices in the American Jewish community that are observed in some fashion or another by 65% or more of Jews. Of these six, three are holiday practices and

three are lifecycle practices. The most observed practice is some form of a Passover seder, as defined by those surveyed, at well over 80%. The two other ritual practices that top 65% are Hanukkah and some type of High Holiday experience, which could be participating in one or more formal services, could be hearing the sound of the shofar, and could even be limited to the individual act of attending a “break fast” without the fasting beforehand. Aside from those three ritual practices, all others drop below 30% observance. The other three Jewish practices that are observed by 2/3 or more of American Jews are: bar/bat mitzvah, weddings, and funerals or some kind of death practice, like sitting shiva for one or more days.

Take a moment to process this—9 out of 10 Jews “feel good” about being Jewish and yet there are a grand total of 6 practices that 2/3 of Jews embrace and the rest of our practices are observed by less than 1 in 3 Jews! What is missing here—why is there such a disconnect between a positive Jewish ethnic/cultural affiliation and Jewish practice?

To help answer that question, we have to first come to a better understanding of who we are as American Jews. Some interesting statistics towards that end: in general, we have BA’s—93% of American Jews go to college vs. 47% of Americans go to college; 23% of American Jews have graduate degrees; 20-25% of all hardcover books in the U.S. are bought by Jews—i.e. we are literate; many of us are involved in therapeutic experiences; we are globalized; we are between 40-

50% intermarried (depending on what numbers you are using); the average income of American Jews--\$70,000; average income in the U.S.--\$38-\$43,000.

So, on balance, we might conclude that we are educated, literate, self-aware, globalized, value wealth, and are ethnic or post-tribal. Nevertheless, something is missing in our lives.

This is not a new phenomenon in Jewish history. For a perfect example, go back in time about 850 years to the time of Maimonides (also known by his Hebrew acronym, RAMBAM—Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), the great philosopher, physician, and jurist. One of his master works was called “Moreh Nevuchim”—the Guide for the Perplexed. In the introduction to his Guide, Rambam writes a letter to a particular “perplexed man” of his day, and in that introductory letter, he makes it clear that this man whom he is addressing is knowledgeable in math, science, philosophy, medicine, poetry, etc.—in other words, this guy has a serious and advanced liberal arts education. What’s more, it also becomes clear in this letter that the seeker here knows some things about our tradition—perhaps on a basic level a la the little boy Dan Segal in the story—in fact, he knows *just enough* Torah to feel empty and perplexed. In other words, just like us, while he is bright, learned, and engaged in the ways of the world, he recognizes that, when it comes to Jewish learning and tradition, there is still much out there that he hasn’t accessed, maybe doesn’t know how to access, and this leaves him feeling uncertain—perplexed—about how to proceed. Yet, despite that, he has a

teshukah—a passionate longing or desire—to find something more in life, to fill in some kind of emptiness, which is the animating energy that prompts him to reach out to Rambam in the first place for guidance.

Fast forward to our generation and the crux of the issue. If “being” Jewish or having a positive identification with Judaism isn’t enough to motivate Jewish practice, then how do we as liberal American Jews, the modern-day perplexed, move ourselves to “DOING” more Jewish? I don’t think we will find God to be the answer here, and by that I mean that I suspect that a poll of liberal Jews in America would reveal that most of us are not observing mitzvot, either ritual or ethical, because we truly believe that God commanded us to act this way, and thus by following those practices we are submitting to God’s will. That we are sufficiently numbed to God’s presence or doubtful of God’s intent to mediate to us through the Torah and our oral tradition a set of laws and values that would improve the quality of our lives and the quality of the world around us is an issue worthy of concern and further reflection. For the present moment let’s just take it as a given that if I proclaimed today that we should all fulfill more mitzvot simply because God wants us to and intends them for our benefit, that it would not have any significant practical impact on the choices we would make going forward.

By the same token, it is becoming more readily apparent that the momentum of “survival Judaism”—feeling compelled to do Jewish things because our grandparents did them, because our parents did them, and because all of us want

Judaism and the Jewish people to “survive”—is also not a force which will continue to be effective over the long haul, especially since we can see that actual Jewish practice has been declining over the last half century or so. If Jewish LIVING isn’t meaningful and useful to our lives, then why should we feel so strongly about perpetuating Judaism just because it’s something our parents or grandparents did? Maybe it meant something to them, and maybe they were just doing it because that’s what they grew up with. We don’t want to “break the chain of transmission or continuity”. But if we’re going to pass on a tradition, even a two or three thousand year old tradition, wouldn’t it make sense to pass it on not just because we don’t want to disappoint our ancestors by dropping the ball, but *davka*, necessarily, BECAUSE we recognize that it’s meaningful, makes us better people, and makes our world a better place, and that’s *precisely* why so many people have gone to great lengths to live and preserve our tradition over these last three millennia?

Which brings us to a possible answer to our challenge. The answer starts and ends with that same word *teshukah*, desire, felt by Rambam’s audience. We need to look inside ourselves and find in our core a desire, a yearning for something more than what we’re already living. And then we have to identify what that “something more” is. For that to occur, our practices and traditions must be seen more than ever before as useful and valuable in and of themselves. If putting up a mezuzah or keeping kosher were intended solely for the purpose of

affirming Jewish identity, then we probably wouldn't need those practices since 93% of us are proud to identify as Jews. But what if we instead emphasize how looking at a mezuzah, and/or kissing it, upon entering our home reminds us how sacred our home is and forces us to more carefully consider the significance of *shalom bayit*, (peace in the house) and our actions within those doors? And what if the focus of keeping kosher shifts to teaching us about important values like *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* (kindness to animals), *Heksher Tzedek* (our Conservative Movement's developing certification for "righteous" kashrut, indicating adherence to both ritual and ethical laws in the production of the food), discipline in diet, and "we are what we eat"? And what if we acknowledge that Shabbat, holidays, and tefillah, prayer, provide us with breaks, both ROUTINE and SPECIAL, from our regular schedule to reflect, to be grateful, to study, to talk to God, to be joyous, and to be together? If we can reach the point where we see how our mitzvot fill a need for us—whether it be social, personal, psychological, ethical, or spiritual--then we can use them to fulfill our desire to grow and live a more meaningful life.

Rabbi Kula told my colleagues and me a story about an animated conversation he had with one of the most well-known Jewish philanthropists in the world, who has donated many millions of dollars to such worthwhile endeavors as Taglit-Birthright Israel, which has gotten thousands and thousands of young Jews to Israel in the last decade or so. In this conversation, Rabbi Kula asked this philanthropist, with whom he is in regular contact, "Do you light Shabbat

candles?”, to which the philanthropist replied “yes”, and then Rabbi Kula went on to say, “BUT do you FEEL anything when you light candles—is there any spiritual element, a moment of meaning during or immediately after this experience?”

Rabbi Kula told us that the philanthropist’s response was—“what do you mean?”—as if the question itself didn’t make sense—implying that it was the act of lighting that mattered more than how, or even whether, it resonated with him.

Friends, the reality is that practice isn’t going to be enough to continue to perpetuate practice in the long run without some sort of *kavannah*, some sort of intention, purpose or meaning that makes it WORTH doing, let alone worth passing on to our children and the generations that follow. It is time for us to methodically go through our practices one at a time and find new or re-understood meaning in them—what Rambam and others called *Ta’amei Mitzvot*, reasons for performing mitzvot. As individuals, we need energy and *teshukah*—the desire to fill in the gaps in our lives and push ourselves to grow—to get us over the hump of our “perplexedness” about what’s out there in our tradition, when we know enough to know that there’s more out there of value to learn and do, but we’re not sure where or how to start. And, as communities, like our shul community here at BSO, we need to continue to look for meaning in all of our ritual and ethical practices and—through the educational opportunities, programs, and services we offer young and old alike—try to help each other access that meaning rather than merely chalking those practices up to tradition. I would like to challenge each of us here

in the coming year to examine—or-re-examine—at least three Jewish practices or mitzvot to see how incorporating them into our routines, or modifying how we presently approach them, might make a difference in adding a greater sense of fulfillment and depth in our lives. On a most basic level, the ancient sage Rav told us all we need to know to get started—or re-started—on this quest: *ha-mitzvot einam netunim ela l'tzaref bahem et ha-beriyot*—the mitzvot are given to us for the purpose of refining all of the created ones—humans, animals, etc. The deepest meaning of Jewish living is not just about positive identification. It's not just about heeding God's commands for their own sake. It's not just about “survival Judaism”. For Judaism to be worth perpetuating in the first place, and for Jewish practice to experience a rebirth—the deepest meaning of Jewish living has to be about *enriching* our lives and *refining* our world and the way it works. Today on Rosh Hashanah we start fresh with unlimited potential—what kind of rebirth will we, and Jewish life, experience this year? Each of us can, and must, come up with part of the answer to that vital question.

L'Shana Tovah.