

Knowing the Rules

I have a friend who's a very renowned Justice. He is an incredible thinker, brilliant beyond measure, and a remarkable writer. I like him a lot and I respect his serious commitment to Judaism and the future of our faith, particularly in the United States.

The good Justice, as with several other friends, sends me very interesting articles from *Algemeiner*, *Tablet* and other fine publications. They are all interesting articles, a good read to start my day off with and thought provoking. Among the authors who express concern about the future of Judaism, especially in America, there are many erudite and complex solutions suggested. New buzz words abound such as "Pan-Judaism." "American Zionism" is another recent innovation. There are more expressions to connote how American Jewry can be saved than I have words in my vocabulary.

I have a somewhat different viewpoint based upon my experience growing up in Great Neck, New York, but spending the bulk of my life and career in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. A brief history of the Williamsport Jewish community will demonstrate that there has been a robust Jewish community in this one-time lumbering capital of the world since the 1850's. By the time of the creation of Ohev Sholom in 1905, as an Orthodox Synagogue, in Williamsport there was already a well-known German Reform Congregation and a significant community of Jewish merchants and tradesmen.

When I arrived in Williamsport as a law clerk in the federal court system, the Jewish community had passed its nadir. No longer were there 40, 100 or 140 kids in the Hebrew School. The baby boom generation went off to colleges and became "professionals," never to return to their parents' dry good stores, recycling businesses, and community activities. There were some notable exceptions, of course, and those who did return in many cases worked hard to maintain some semblance of a Jewish community.

When I became President of the "conservadox" leaning congregation in this community, there were those who claimed it was modern orthodox and others who said it was really conservative. The Rabbis uniformly had orthodox ordination and the number of kids in the community numbered perhaps in the low 20s. My wife and I tried to start a community day school, but our elders, who had built a Jewish country club, were spending their money being accepted into the gentile community, and were not interested in a day school. Those of us that were raising children either did not have the money, at that time, or perhaps we really did lack the commitment that we bragged about. Who knows? Folks like us, expected to send our children to the big city Jewish communities by the time they reached high school.

One incredible event helped to change my attitude about how to sustain the future of Judaism in America. Her name was Evelyn Angel. She was elderly when I first met her. Never married, she lived at times with siblings also who were never married. To my fellow congregants, she looked like a bag lady. Wearing old clothes, she managed to make it Shabbat services every week. She loved the kids in particular. Many times, I would see her with her brother, Sam, walking to the McDonald's for a

meal. I couldn't help but stop and pick them up. They had a hard time getting into my little Datsun but, on many occasions, I dropped them off at the McDonald's.

Sam passed away and when Evelyn became even more aged, she approached me about a Will. She told me she had no relatives whatsoever and no place to give the money. She asked me for suggestions and right off the top of my head, I suggested putting it in a trust fund at the Synagogue, which I would be happy to manage, to support our Jewish children. She agreed instantly.

It was not many years later that I received a telephone call from Evelyn's doctor. He said that a decision had to be made as to whether to treat what he was sure was bowel cancer. She had no relatives and it was up to the two of us to make a decision what to do. I remember meeting with the doctor in his office late in the evening, discussing the fate of another human being, who I did not know very well, but who I had taken some responsibility for. She was in her 90s and we decided to let her go peacefully.

What a shock and surprise it was to the Congregation when it turned out that Evelyn had squirreled away in CDs and in cash throughout her house, including the mattress, what amounted to approximately \$1.3 million. The money was immediately invested and it made it possible for every child in this community who wanted to go to a Jewish summer camp to have that experience. Thanks to the work of a young Rabbi in the community at the time, Lebovitch trained and ordained, Shaul Rapoport, good camps were located and all of our children were sent off. There was a big debate as to whether children of well to do parents should receive this free benefit. There were some leaders in the community who vociferously opposed sending Jewish kids to the camps if the parents did not show up at Synagogue during the year, help make the Minyan or if they were otherwise disliked by the powers that be. Nevertheless, I fought tooth and nail every year to make sure that Jewish children in the Williamsport community and its environs went to Jewish summer camps for free regardless of their parents' income, how well their parents were liked, or how often they showed up at Synagogue.

The results, over 20 years, were remarkable. Some of those children wound up making Alayah, and most of them have maintained a contact with Judaism as strong or stronger than their parents had. Without question, it was the right thing to do to spend Evelyn Angel's money not building another edifice, buying beautiful Torahs or adorning ourselves with lots of pure silver artifacts. The money was well spent to provide a strong Jewish experience for Jewish youth.

This has led me to the conclusion that while Birthright and Jewish summer camps are extremely important, they will never substitute for a quality free Jewish education. We know that after school programs are a failure. We know that Chabad on campuses and throughout the community, over 4,000 of them, have made a strong impact. All of this is great, but as an old friend of mine said who is now retired in Florida, "You can't play any game, you can't even reject playing the game, if you do not know the rules." There are too many Jews growing up in this country who have not the slightest idea about the rules of Judaism.

The surveys conducted by Pew and others tell us all we need to know. The Jewish community is disappearing in the United States, and in many other places in the diaspora, as we become amalgamated into a miscellaneous soup of competing non-Jewish priorities.

The process of endowing Jewish programs has been discussed in the Jewish community in America, but has not taken off. It is still far too expensive to send Jewish children to quality day schools. As a community, we have been less than enthusiastic about fighting for government funds to aid private schools, and many Jews do not feel comfortable supporting "school choice."

As a community, regardless of religious affiliation, we have only one decision to make. Do we want to work through the continuity of Judaism? If the answer is "no," then there is no debate. If the answer is "yes," then there is only one answer and that answer is a quality Jewish education in a full-time school program. When I was young, there were programs where one could attend a private school until noon and then go to the Synagogue for lunch and an afternoon Jewish program. Unfortunately, that did not work well, although it sounded like a great idea, because it was difficult to integrate oneself into what were essentially two different schools and social groups in the same day. After school programs in general have been a complete failure and are mostly closed down in America, aside from some anemic Sunday School programs.

There are funds in the American Jewish community to substantially assist and endow full-time Jewish educational programs, but the question is whether, as people, we have the will.

In the interest of full disclosure, only one of my own children went to a secular community high school through graduation. She is now living a religious Jewish life in Israel, with her observant husband, and children. How did that happen in Williamsport, Pennsylvania? She was one of those kids who went to Camp Ramah every single summer that she could go. In addition, she was aided by a remarkable Moroccan-born Rabbi who lived in Williamsport and took on the responsibility of being the "pied piper" to all the Jewish children in this community. Our home was filled with Yiddish Keit every day and for every holiday. It was not easy, but it certainly made an impression on our daughter. Towards the end of college, she became involved with Chabad and its program Sanai Scholars. That led her to Mayanot, and eventually to serve in the IDF. The experience of one of our three kids does not undermine, but I believe, reinforces the need for every Jewish child to attend a quality Jewish summer camp and/or a day school education.

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