

The end of minorities

RABBI DENISE HANDLARSKI

If the story of the last 50 years of Judaism has been about Jews assimilating to foster acceptance, I believe the next 50 years will be the age of dissimilating to foster assurance.

We worked very hard in the Diaspora to become a recognized and respected minority. But the story of the future is a story where everyone is a “minority.” We still live in a world full of white privilege, but in Canada, the United States and even parts of Europe, Caucasians no longer comprise the largest demographic group. And because of the high rates of intermarriage (amongst Jews and amongst all peoples), discrete and distinct categories of race and culture are blurring. This is great for the Jews!

We have always been a particular ethnic group striving to make it in a universalist national and international framework. But, in the near future, the universal will in fact be the particular. Without a “majority” there are no “minorities,” and thus we all have a greater chance of standing with equal footing. I believe in this world of racial and cul-

tural mixing, Judaism will be strengthened. We will have finally let go of two major anxieties: first, whether intermarriage will end Judaism, and second, whether cultural/secular Judaism can stand as a legitimate form of Judaism. Both are happening and will continue to happen.

In 50 years, it will be a given that “Jewish” does not mean two Jewish parents, matrilineal descent, or any of the other benchmarks we currently consider standard. Society as a whole will loosen the ways in which identifications get named and constructed, and so will we. Judaism will adapt, as it always has, and those who call themselves Jews will be free to creatively and joyously celebrate and live in their Judaism, as opposed to worrying about how their choices may affect the Jews and Judaism of the future.

In essence, we will not have to work so hard to convince others that we are like “everyone else.” No one will be like anyone else; “everyone else” will be too diverse. And so we can decide who we are. Will more Jews identify ethnically/culturally versus religiously? Definitely.

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Will most Jews celebrate their Judaism outside of a synagogue context? Almost certainly. Will most Jews feel liberated from the obligations of the past and those of the future? I sure hope so.

Here's what we've been doing for 50 years that isn't working: we've told our young people that you must be, pray and marry Jewish. That it is our debt to the past, the victims of the pogroms and the Holocaust, and the parents and grandparents who sacrificed to make it in Israel and in the Diaspora.

But the why of Judaism can't be the past. Nor can it be the future: if you don't be, pray, marry Jewish, then Judaism will die out. The reality is, many Jews have no interest in praying and marrying Jewish. And the idea of "being" Jewish, without evidence of the benefits of such an identity, is considered passé. Judaism as a culture is, crucially and essentially, beautiful, meaningful and fun. But we don't focus on that. Instead, we worry about our debt to the past, the obligation to the future, but turn away from the here and now.

Guess what? The next 50 years are going to be about the here and now. There are several reasons for this. First, the weight of our historical debt is lightening. As we move further from the period of the Holocaust, we see the generational impact of its trauma lessening. No, we must never forget. But we must allow ourselves the gift of celebrating

our survival and, in some sense, moving on. If there is one thing we hear again and again from our youngsters, it is "enough with the oy; bring in the joy." The Holocaust can't be and isn't a reason to be Jewish. We need to assert and articulate better reasons.

Secondly, the generations coming up today are focused on the present as never before. They are the first who will not enjoy their parents' wealth, security and stability. So they make up their own careers, communities, chosen families. They must focus on the present in ways that previous generations never did. There is no such thing as working one's way up the corporate ladder. There is no sure investment into one's financial future. There is creatively tackling how to make a living and a life. It means focusing on the present. We have never heard more about mindfulness and living in the present moment. It's a product of our economic and environmental insecurity. There is no going back.

Thirdly, digital Judaism will overtake brick and mortar Judaism – it has already started. One can learn Torah on Snapchat. One can connect with "community" globally, in real time. One can stream services. One can construct a Jewish identity and do plenty of Jewish learning all online. This, like all of the other trends, means that Judaism will proliferate as people find ways of "connecting" that weren't avail-

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able before. It also means Judaism will dissimilate, as there will be no need to look, speak, act like the dominant culture. The dominant culture is digital culture and it is without an identity of its own.

Lastly, and most urgently, Jews will be united with all other cultures in tackling our greatest challenge: climate change. Jews are in a great position to be global leaders on this issue. In our increasingly globalized world in which any national economic and political framework affects the whole world, not least environmentally, Jews know how to manoeuvre. We are the original cosmopolitan subjects, nomads who have learned to live and adapt amongst diverse lands and peoples.

And now is the time we need to be leaders. Our Jewish tradition teaches tikkun olam, repairing the world. This kabbalistic concept is about to be actualized as we need to literally repair our world in order to assure its survival. There is no Jewish continuity without planetary continuity.

It is my hope and my intention that Judaism in 2066 will be focused on two key facets: joy and justice. This should be central to how we identify and what we exemplify. May it be so. ■

Rabbi Denise Handlarski is spiritual leader of Oraynu Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Toronto.



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