

Someone recently told me that she was sitting with her spouse on the morning of her thirtieth anniversary. Her partner was busy on the iPad, answering emails, reading the news and checking market trends. After 15 minutes of nothing being said, she finally had enough and said, "Look, all I want to know is: do you still love me?" Barely looking up, her spouse responded in a matter-of-fact tone, "Honey, 30 years ago under the *huppah* I said that I did ... and, if anything changes, you'll be the first to know."

"And that's," she told me, "when the fight began!"

We all know that a relationship can't rely on just saying, "I love you" one time. Connection demands ongoing effort, commitment and support. That's true of our personal relationships – and it's just as true for us in our commitment to one another as Jews.

I was reminded of that in, of all places, Russia.

The first time I visited that vast land was November 1987. The sun rose at 9 am; by 3 it was dusk. The sky was slate; the streets gray. Snow already was on the ground. I was there to visit *refuseniks*, Jews jailed for wanting to move to Israel, Jews who lost their jobs because they dared to teach Hebrew. It was the waning days of the USSR, and Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (or "restructuring") was beginning to take root. Still Communist, but less totalitarian, the country looked strong from the outside, but what I saw presaged the fall of that empire a few years later. There were few lights as electricity was in short supply. Food was scarce, and when anyone heard about food being available people queued up not even knowing what they were in line for.

One joke from that era reflects the mood. "Where are you going?", one Muscovite asks another. The second answers, "To Leningrad to buy bread." "Leningrad?! I heard that only Moscow has bread." "That's true, but the end of the line is in Leningrad."

The Soviets may not have been as systematic as the Nazis in exterminating Jews, but they were relentless in their attempt to destroy the spiritual essence of Jewish life. The Jews I visited in '87 were heroic – but also remarkably rare.

Most of the millions of Jews of the FSU knew nothing about being Jewish. To be a Jew was a liability, and hiding one's identity created a two generations of modern *conversos* ("hidden Jews"). The near eradication of Jewish spiritual identity in the Soviet Union left the generation of young Jews I met there not unlike I imagine Isaac, bound by decisions of parents, offered in this case to the false god of assimilation.

When I returned this summer to St. Petersburg (the city known as Leningrad 25 years earlier) I expected to see a pale remnant of a once vibrant community. After all, in the years since my last visit one million Jews emigrated from Russia to Israel. One million more came to North America. The estimates of the Jews who remain vary from 300,000 to 800,000. I was there with 15 Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbis on a mission sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York. At first, I was reluctant to take the journey. What were Jews still doing in Russia, I thought. Why should our communal funds be used to support a community there? But could not the same be said of us here in America? Indeed, there are some who believe that our Diaspora, as vibrant as it is, is just a way station to Jewish oblivion. I came to understand that my judgment of the Jews of Russia was unjust, for their choice to live in their land was as fraught with challenge for Jewish continuity – and rich with possibilities - as mine and yours is to live here.

What I found there was a surprise, for what I saw was a miraculous resurrection of Jewish life in a place where it was all but obliterated. More than that, I learned in Russia some truths about the need for Jewish commitment that we might learn from if we want to remain a vibrant, relevant and dynamic Jewish community here in the United States.

On the banks of the Neva River, which flows through the middle of St. Petersburg, is one of the greatest art museums in the world, the Hermitage. In one of the galleries there is a painting by Rembrandt of the "Sacrifice of Isaac." The painting, done when the Dutch artist was only 29, and the same year his first-born son died in infancy, depicts the moment when the angel stops Abraham from offering his son. Abraham completely covers Isaac's

eyes. Why? Is he trying to protect his child? Or is the father so filled with shame that he cannot bear to have his son see him? Unlike other paintings of this Biblical scene, which show Abraham gripping the knife tightly, Rembrandt depicts Abraham's hand abnormally large and open. The knife is falling away – a hint to a violent destruction of life averted. While traditional commentators focus on Abraham's faithful willingness to offer his son, Rembrandt – bereft of his own beloved child – may understand better than most that it is not when he takes up the knife that is the surest sign of faith as when he *drops* it.¹

The modern Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, similarly argues that the crucial moment in this story is not when Abraham accedes to God's demand that he offer his son. Rather it was "Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order, in *forbidding* him to perform a human sacrifice, [that] was the highest moment in the drama."²

Abraham walked up the mountain believing in one God. What, though, did that one God demand? He began his journey hearing a God who is capricious and unforgiving; at the top he heard the voice of a God who expects compassion and righteousness. Perhaps that is why we read this story at the beginning of the Jewish year, for in many ways this is the creation moment of Jewish faith. At Moriah Abraham learned – and modeled for all who followed him - that monotheism alone is insufficient. The moment the knife dropped faith entered the realm of morality – and humanity was forever changed.

We would like to believe that child sacrifice is behind us. But there are those whose political or religious extremism leads to a willingness to offer their children as a price for their ideology. And are we not tempted to cut off Jewish continuity from our children here in this gilded land? When a parent says, "my child has soccer or dance or SAT studies, Jewish studies can wait," is that not a casting aside of a future for a false god of success, fame or

¹ Rembrandt's "Sacrifice of Isaac" - <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/274.html>

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, p. 77

wealth? It is important to be well rounded, to be engaged in the world, to exercise the mind and the body, to enjoy life's pleasures and pursue a worthy career or calling. But if we offer all this to our children, and not give them the moral grounding that is the essence of Jewish faith, we rob them of a legacy that gives life meaning, direction and purpose.

In Russia I saw how an inheritance could be taken, but also how – with just a bit of commitment and effort – it can be restored.

In a town only 30 minutes from St. Petersburg, I met 96-year old Sara Rachel Ginsburg. [This is her picture] Born before the Communist Revolution, she escaped her town only a couple hours before the Nazis entered. Sara is one of the hundreds of Jews supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which receives financial backing from our gifts to the UJA-Federation here. At a local market we bought her \$15 of groceries, enough to supplement the food she got from her meager pension. She lives in a tiny room, barely 8' by 20'. A year ago she fell and walks only with difficulty. One would imagine such a person would be bitter. Buffeted by a century of strife and conflict, however, Sara Rachel remains a woman of indomitable spirit. Four of us entered her small home, and she laughed. "I haven't had this many men close by in a long time." Her eyes were bright as she spoke about her parents, her family murdered by the Nazis, the life she devoted to teaching children, though she never had herself. Sara Ginsburg maintained the barest of connections to our people. Her recollections of holidays are snippets of memories. It is remarkable that any link to Jewish life remained. But it did. Her survival was a sign of a Russian Jewry that, despite all the vicissitudes of the past century, still endured.

Sara Ginsburg's endurance reminded me of a story told of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. In 1948 she went to Russia as the Israeli Ambassador. She decided to attend services, but was not sure if anyone else would be there. After all, there had been no legal Jewish education in Russia since 1917. Perhaps they were gone as Jews. When she got to the synagogue, however, more than 100,000 Jews came out to greet her. They lined up in order to see

her, to touch her, to wave to her, to welcome her. She wrote in her autobiography, afterwards, that she was so moved she could hardly speak. All she could say as she made her way through the crowd was one sentence: "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for coming, thank you for being here, thank you for remaining Jews."

I have no illusions about the tyranny of Putin, and no one knows what the future after him brings, but in the past 20 years there has been a freedom offered of which the young Jews of that land are taking advantage. Synagogues have been restored. Jewish community centers have opened. And, most amazingly, there is an array of Jewish summer camps.

It was the at a Jewish summer camp that young Jews reminded me that endurance is not enough. It is to live. All the counselors and leaders were under 30. They have no memory of the Soviet Union, no baggage of shame or fear of anti-Semitism. But this is a generation bereft of history, recreating Jewish life from almost nothing. Some of the campers did not even know they were Jewish until just before they got they were. Yet, the day we visited the campers were learning an Israeli pop hit: כל הילדים קופצים רוקדים – in Hebrew. Trust me, it is not the most meaningful of songs. The power of the moment was not in the words. It was seeing dozens of young Russian Jews singing in Hebrew, arms around one another's shoulders, some wearing *kippot*, others not, laughing and taking joy in being Jewish. I was already moved, and then one of the rabbis remarked, "This is the very same song our kids learned at Eisner, our Reform movement camp, just a few days ago!" Young Jews here, young Jews there, young Jews in Israel – all together lifting their hands in a joyous embrace of life. I know of no greater sign of Jewish continuity, hope and life.

Given our history, it is understandable that we Jews are culturally conditioned to see the negative, to fear the worst and be sensitive to manifestations of anti-Jewish hate. It would be foolish to stand before you and say there are not worrying signs in the world. After thousands of years, Jewish life has effectively ended in Arab world. Anti-Semitism is troublingly on

the rise in Western Europe and in the Islamic world. On university campuses here in North America Israel-bashing is a growing concern.

A broad view of Jewish history, however, allows us to see the amazing potential of our age. Our ancestors could only dream of a sovereign Jewish State. We see an Israel that is not just surviving, but thriving as a dominant, "start up" nation. 100 years ago most Jews lived in lands of tyranny and oppression. Today, there is not a single large Jewish community in the world facing widespread, politically sanctioned repression. A recent article in *The Economist* notes "Israelis, for all their problems, are the 14th happiest people in the world, happier than the British or the French, according to a recent global happiness report commissioned by the UN. In the Diaspora Jewish life has never been so free, so prosperous, so unthreatened."³ Here in North America we Jews are the richest, most educated cohort in history. We have a political power unimaginable to all who came before. What, though, will we – what will you - do with the gift of being born at such a time and in such a place as this?

Our future is rich with possibility, but it is up to us to fulfill it. Abraham understood on the mountain that where he had been was no determinant for where he would be. His future – and that of *his* child – depended on how he acted in that moment. Abraham's legacy is that it is we are not defined by our suffering, but how we overcome it. It is not what we sacrifice, but what we live for. His birthright is that faith in God is not enough; our God is one who demands moral virtue, living with justice, compassion and respect for life.

The chance to disappear as a people or become part of our people's great task has never been starker. The future is in your hands. So ... how will you build the Jewish future? What will you do to ensure the hope?

In this election year you and I are also being asked to vote to ensure the American future. You don't need – and may not care - about a rabbi's opinion on how to vote (though that has certainly not stopped plenty of you

³ *The Economist*, July 28, 2012

sending me missives about which candidate is better for Israel or more clearly embodies Jewish values!). But here is what I can say as a rabbi. We live in an era where we have more power to affect our fate than any generation of Jews in history. The Jews of Israel and the United States, who together are the vast majority of Jews on the planet, have the liberty and power to affect our fate in ways our ancestors felt would only happen in the messianic age.⁴ You may say, "The choices are bad. I think I just won't vote." My friends, Judaism is not a faith for saints, but those of flesh and blood. Jewish law deals not with what might be, but what is, though ever with an eye towards a world that ought to be. The movement to save Soviet Jewry demonstrated that we Jews have power. We changed the course of Jewish history. The redemption of Russia's Jews should not have happened, but it did. Why? Because world Jewry stood up.

We have never been a people of the majority. It is not through vast numbers that we survived, maintained a message of hope and changed the world. It is through the endurance of faith and connection ... one person at a time. Consider this story about such a "one." At the end of April this year a young boy named Jacob Wertheimer became Bar Mitzvah at Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. In the congregation his grandfather was beaming. Who was this grandfather? Muhammad Ali (yes, *that* Ali – the famous boxer, "The Greatest"). You see, Ali's daughter, Kahliah, was born a Muslim, but married a Jewish man, and together they decided to raise their son as a Jew.⁵ It is easy to be disheartened by all the news of religious intolerance and violence, to bemoan the lack of Jewish commitment or focus on the alienation of so many Jews from our community. But Jacob Wertheimer in Philadelphia, like every Bar or Bat Mitzvah willing to affirm a bond to Jewish life, like every parent who brings their child (born of a Jewish mother or father) into the covenant, like the Russian Jewish kids boisterously

⁴ In the messianic time the Jewish people will "be free [to involve themselves] in Torah and its wisdom [without any pressures or disturbances]." *Rambam, Laws of Kings and Wars 12:4-5*

⁵ <http://www.thesweetscience.com/news/articles/14679-muhammad-alis-grandson-is-bar-mitzvahed>

singing Hebrew, like every one of you who – in ways grand and simple – keep the covenant alive, show that the people of Israel lives.

We are, collectively, more powerful than we can imagine. Two generations ago the Jewish people resurrected itself in the Land of Israel; Elijah's dry bones coming to life. A generation ago we refused to accept the tyranny of an empire that sought to enslave our brothers and sisters ... and the doors of freedom opened like the sea.

In this generation there are plenty of temptations to keep you away, plenty of other places you could be right now. There are plenty of other gods you could be with. So, thank you for being here, thank you for remaining Jews.

But don't think showing up once or twice a year to say, "I love you", is all that the world, our people, or God needs from you. A real relationship needs ongoing involvement. "I will not die," the Psalm proclaims, "I *will not die*, but live, and proclaim what God has done."⁶ We should, by all reasonable understanding, not be here as a people. But we are. We are because in every generation there are those who drop the knife or pick up the book or sing the hopeful song or take up arms to ensure that the people of Israel lives. Others have ever done so – and do so now.

How about you? What will be your part in this enduring, hopeful story? How do you want to be remembered? It is not death that God seeks, but life. So ... live. We are here. We are together. *Am Yisrael chai*, the people of Israel lives. What will you do to ensure the hope?⁷

⁶ Psalm 118:17

⁷ For further study see "Rembrandt's The Sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's Suspended Knife, and the Face of the Other" in *Other Others*, Steven Shankman (SUNY Press, 2011)