

Re'eh 5777 Sermon

A Jewish man tries to join a restricted country club, against his friend's advice. "You'll never get past the application form," he tells him. "As soon as you tell them your name is Morris Rosenblatt, that you're a schmatte man, and that you're a Jew, they'll throw the application in the trash." But Rosenblatt really wants to join the country club, so he takes his friend's advice and adjusts his answers accordingly during his application interview. The interviewer asks: "Your name, sir?" "Martin Rose." "And what kind of work do you do?" "I'm in the garment industry." "I see. Just one more question before we pass your application on to the committee: What is your religious affiliation?" "I'm a goy!"

For many Jewish immigrants to America, success and acceptance in this country meant giving something of themselves up. It could have been a name, an address in the wrong part of town, a type of work, an accent. And for too many, getting ahead in America meant giving up part or all of their Jewish identity. Some Jews were willing to make that trade-off, restricting their Jewish behaviors to home and synagogue; some even walked away from their Jewish identities entirely to enter larger business or social circles out of some combination of convenience, fear or apathy about Judaism. This is not a new story - we could all share personal tales about assimilation in our families - but it remains a pressing problem for the Jewish community as our presence in America begins to shrink, both in actual numbers and as a percentage of the American family.

The irony of our successful entry into American society - educationally, socially and economically - is that Jewish distinctiveness has harmed us in both its presence and its absence. Jews who have given up too much of themselves in order to gain entry to society have

abandoned the community. Jews who have remained ‘too Jewish’ have become the targets of continuing anti-semitism. When we try to be too much like others we lose ourselves in them, but when we try too little to do so we open ourselves up to charges of clannishness, parochialism or even dual allegiances.

I think of all this in the wake of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia last week, and with the content of parshat Re’eh firmly in mind. The white-nationalist and neo-Nazi demonstrators who took to the streets fully armed, spouting anti-semitic, anti-immigrant and anti-minority hate speech remind us that American bigotry and the threats of violence beneath that bigotry, never really went away, for all the progress we have made as a society. It simply went underground. It may be easier for Jews to enter country clubs now, or even have clubs of their own, but the traditional hatred toward Jews, and others, remains as virulent as ever, no matter how we have tried, or succeeded, in blending in.

How should we respond to these threats? What is the proper way of thinking, and behaving, as bigotry is openly displayed on American streets? Assimilation has not worked; even the least observant Jew remains a target for bigots. And closing ourselves off from the society at large is not an option for those of us who treasure the many blessings that living in an open society bestows. So those of us in the middle of the spectrum of American Jewish life, who live as American Jews/Jewish Americans, need to seriously consider how to be in America, who to be. By engaging in Jewish actions, we maintain our internal connection to our tradition, while proudly living out and teaching others the core values for which we stand.

Three primary behaviors that help keep us Jewish, to tie generation to generation, and to link the individual to community, and which refute the ideology of hatred we witnessed last

week, can all be found in this week's parshah. Each involves distinctly Jewish actions that concretize specifically Jewish values, and we should proudly observe them. One is kashrut: Taking on the dietary laws in order to limit our appetites, to be mindful of what and how we eat, to show concern for animals' welfare even as we turn them into sources of sustenance, we transform the otherwise mundane act of eating into a system of sacred obligation. We show those who mock us for kashrut that how we eat signifies our relationship to God and the natural world.

Elsewhere in the parsha we learn about the festival system, which reflects our sacred history and ideals. The themes of creation during Sukkot, redemption at Pesakh and revelation at Shavuot enable us to walk in the footsteps of the ancient Israelites as we traverse the calendar year. We celebrate those holidays in prayer, in feasting and in acts of tzedakah which lift others out of poverty and hunger. They show those who spend their time on acts of hatred that we spend ours in celebration, transmuted into acts of love on behalf of other people.

And again, the parsha teaches us fairness in how we treat one another, whether Jew or not, in business, as employers and when lending money. Our mitzvot shape our behavior not only on holidays or in prayer settings, but in the daily financial interactions that enable society to function fairly and smoothly, to the benefit of all. When we treat others in the marketplace as deserving of economic dignity we make real the will of the living God who demands righteousness of us, and we rebuke those who accuse us of profiting from others.

In these three ways - how we eat, how we mark time and how we do business - we engage in traditional Jewish practices both for our own sake, to live out the covenant of which we are signatories, as well as to show those who would deny us life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness what being a Jew means. We must fight their lies with our truth, their hatred with our

love, and their threats with the courage born of pride in who we are. We can neither shut ourselves off from the danger they represent by secluding ourselves in ghettos of our own making, nor delude ourselves into thinking that they will accept us if we just stop acting like Jews.

The writer Bernard Malamud once wrote that if you ever forget you are a Jew, a gentile will remind you. What the hateful who marched in Charlotte reminded us of last week is that since they will never accept Jews, minorities or immigrants as full equals in America, will never stop seeing us as separate and unequal, we will remember who we are and not apologize for it. Living distinctively Jewish lives, while fully embracing this country and its freedoms, we will show them that what makes this country great is its variety, its gumbo of colors, language, food, dress and religion. Because the country club to which we all belong is not merely a place to swim or play golf; it is America itself. Jews, minorities and immigrants are not going anywhere, because this is our country. Our name is Morris Rosenblatt, we are in the schmatta trade, and we are Americans.

Shabbat shalom.