



Jewish for Today
Parshat Ki Tissa
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Sometimes I feel like a spiritual hustler (and I don't mean I daven quickly). I meet young people in bars and cafes and ask them questions about their Judaism. Questions like, "what do you love about being Jewish?" and "do you feel it is important to live a Jewish life?" and "What's your favorite Jewish activity?" Whatever their answers, I try to think of a program we have that speaks to who they are and what they are looking for. Whatever they say, I want to give them a reason to come to, or to come back to Temple Emanuel.

But sometimes their answers catch me off-guard. On Wednesday, I was meeting with a yisodnik in her thirties. When I asked her these questions, she said, "I feel strongly Jewish, but I'm barely Jewish. I mean I don't go to services all that often and don't really keep kosher, let's be real—I don't keep kosher, but I do feel strongly about it, you know? When I think about it, I think about my ancestors who have worked so hard to be Jewish, I mean they struggled and fought just to preserve Judaism for me, and I would be doing them a disservice if I didn't remain loyal to it."

Her story is one that I hear often. It's a story which both fills me with a deep sense of hope and a deep sense of despair. On the one hand, here is a young adult who understands our history, who wants to honor our ancestors by living a Jewish life. That is beautiful. L'dor vador. Generation to generation.

But, on the other hand, when that is all young people say, when their only reason for being Jewish is history or preservation, I worry. I worry that young people don't personally

experience the ways Judaism can infuse their life with meaning; I worry that obligation isn't enough to sustain a vibrant Jewish practice. So many young adults are living Jewish lives for other people in other times. We are so committed to safeguarding what we received that we've forgotten why Judaism exists in the first place—as a way for us to connect with God, with ourselves, and with our larger Jewish community.

This focus on past and future over present, creates a strange dynamic. In every other dimension of our lives, we learn to be decisive and innovative. When people ask us what we like to eat, we don't hesitate to tell them about our weird food habits, our favorite spices, allergies and the foods we just don't digest well. When people ask about our favorite movies we don't hold back. But somehow, when people ask about our Judaism, we have internalized the idea that our preferences are a demerit. That if we are honest about what we don't like or what doesn't work for us, we will be disappointing either our ancestors or depriving our descendants of their due.

This came up recently in a class I was teaching for our Yisod community. We were discussing how we balance tradition with innovation. One participant was visibly distressed. Though he readily admitted that his own practice was not halakhic, he felt extremely uncomfortable about the idea of individuals making choices outside of halakha. He kept raising the same questions: “What will happen if we make changes? How do you know when you've gone too far? How do you know what's right?” He says, “it's not as if I come to services or follow these laws, but it somehow feels important for the Judaism I grew up with to be the same Judaism that my kids grow up with.”

I share these concerns. What will happen if we take things too far? What happens if we get so invested in pursuing our own spiritual bliss that we lose sight of tradition and our children can't find their way back? That's serious.

But I'm also concerned about what happens when we hand down traditions for tradition's sake. What happens when we just go through the motions without feeling an emotional connection?

A few months ago, I got a call from a young couple in our Yisod community. A family member had given them a beautiful mezuzah, and they wanted help affixing it to their door. I suggested they might want to gather friends to help them dedicate this new sacred space.

When I arrived, the party was in full swing. People were eating and drinking and laughing. I chatted with everyone and then I went to see the couple. "Are you ready?" I asked. They looked sheepish. "Can we wait a little bit more? Let's just give people a little more time..." We went through this a few times before I realized the problem. "Can we talk about how we will hang your mezuzah?"

I spoke with the couple about how hanging their mezuzah wasn't just reciting Hebrew blessings or measuring the doorpost. I talked with them about how mezuzot are magic beacons of blessing and protection on our homes. We discussed how to create a ritual that honored tradition and worked for them.

Something shifted for them. They called their friends. We took the carefully rolled scroll out of the mezuzah and passed it, one to another. When each person received the scroll, they told the couple what they love about them, about their hopes for their future and their home. Once everyone had blessed the couple and their home, we placed that scroll in the mezuzah, said the bracha and fixed it to the wall.

Nothing in this ritual runs contrary to Jewish tradition. We followed all the rules. But, we honored tradition in a way that honored this couple and their lived experience.

This is our challenge today. We have been raised to see Judaism as a museum—something to be perfectly maintained, historically accurate, and open for visiting hours, but closed to creative interpretation. We have been taught to swallow our needs and wants and to go through the motions of what tradition asks of us. But what we need most is a practice that speaks to us now, that invites us into this moment. As the psalmist says, zeh hayom asah Adonai nagilah vnismecha bo. Today is the day that God created, we will rejoice and celebrate in it!

What would happen if we tapped Judaism for answers to today's most pressing questions?

You're stressed? Feeling overwhelmed with what you have to do at work and at home and worried about what the future has in store for you? Zeh hayom—this is the day for you to try out the magic of brachot, of living in sacred Jewish time and appreciating the blessings you have in your life.

You're feeling lonely? Feeling distant from the people around you, struggling to make friends and build your community? Zeh hayom—this is the day for you to try out a morning minyan where you can connect with God, and with friendly people in your community—and stay for breakfast too!

You're addicted to your screen? Does apple tell you at the end of the week that your screen time is off the charts? Do you find that your day disappears into Facebook and email and snap chat and Instagram and pinterest and dating apps? Zeh hayom—this is the day for you to try out the magic of Shabbos. This is the day for you to unplug.

For too long, we've been living for the ghost of Jewish past and the specter of Jewish futures. Zeh hayom—it's time for us to live Jewishly for today.