

Rosh Hashanah 2 5776

I would like to talk a bit about identity, specifically Jewish identity.

One of my teachers described Judaism as a smorgasbord. There are a lot of options to choose from, yet there are some things which are not on the table at all. So what does it mean for us if Judaism is considered as a smorgasbord?

Each of us takes a plate from the smorgasbord. The food on our plate is related to the food on everybody else's plate, but very few plates are identical.

I don't imagine anyone has a problem with that, when it is actually a buffet. When it is religion, for some reason, people have greater negative reactions if they find that their family or friend's plate does not contain exactly the same items, in exactly the same proportion.

Should the buffet plates be filled with the same items in the same proportion, or should they be filled according to the individual's desires and allergies? Which of these ways is more Jewish, if there is such a thing?

Let's start with what we know from the past. Not the recent past, or even the intermediate past, but the ancient past, comparatively the beginning (at least from where we are). Let's start with the covenants – with the many Britot that were made in the TaNaKH. The first time God does the

covenanting thing, there was a rainbow attached to it. God promised no more floods, and all we had to do was keep on breathing, increasing the number of people present on the planet and spreading throughout the world. There was almost a presumption that things were going to be different between the groups of people who went wandering – and this presumption was proven by the Tower of Babel, where after we had tried to remain unified, God forced us to become different.

The verdict of the flood covenant – buffet plates should be different.

Moving right along in the story, Abraham receives a promise, which is later formalized in the story surrounding the original Brit Milah. The promise is simple – land and progeny. No promises that life will be easy, peaceful, fair, or even healthy. Just that this piece of land is connected to the people who are connected to Abraham. Now, you might think that at least the land would be the same thing, so it might be a sign that having the same plate would be good. However, very few statements concerning the extent of the land agree with each other. There is a general agreement about the approximate center – somewhere between the final sea and the huge river (not the Egyptian one – everyone agrees on that), and between the wilderness and the Lebanon. It leaves a lot of territory within which the Land will eventually exist. According to Moses (and poetically used in this

way by the later Prophets) the Land is almost a person. When people are kind, the Land allows them to stay. When they act poorly (having ignored what God told them about being nice to each other) the Land will discourage them from being able to stay. If it could vote, the Land's vote seems to me to be for different plates, as long as the plates contain kindness, compassion and concern for each other.

I have told this next Midrash in several other contexts, so you might have heard it before.

The Rabbis wonder what actually happened at Sinai. God spoke – yet nobody remembered exactly how much was God, and how much was Moses. I don't remember either, and I was there. We all were. Yet time leads to a bit of forgetfulness, so nobody is certain any more. We weren't certain even 2 thousand years ago.

Some Rabbis were certain that we all heard exactly the portion that is written before the text tells us that the people asked Moses to listen to the rest. So for that group, we heard all of the 10 Big, Important Statements, word for word and sometimes in stereo.

Other Rabbis wonder whether anybody's attention span is that long. Many congregants seem to have trouble paying attention through the 10 Big, Important Statements the couple of times each year that we review it,

so how much less could we focus for that long when God is speaking. It must be that God simply indicated enough of a statement, say the first one, to indicate who was speaking, and the rest was left to Moses to hear and transmit.

A few among the group wonder if there is a connection between the greatness of God and how much we heard. Could we really pay attention when we heard the sights and saw the sound waves? Even a small statement would be too much. All that would be needed is the simple word “anochi” – It is I!

There was one sage who kept his own counsel during all these deliberations, and refused to come in on one side or another. Finally, they asked him – so what do you think they heard? He answered – Remember that they heard what they saw, and saw what they heard. All that they heard/saw was the first letter. They heard the silence, and saw it everywhere. The letter of silence they saw on each other’s faces, knowing from then on that God is a part of all of us, and God cares enough to communicate.

Our covenant of Torah, despite being twisted into one interpretation or another, votes for a multiplicity of plates. It is true that the text states not to add or take away from it –and we should never lessen our realization of

the divine in each of us, and we should never add a straitjacket to the teaching.

When we were in the wilderness, having heard Moses describe the rules, we kept promising that we would do what was asked. After all, if we got it wrong, how would anybody know? Then Moses provided something in writing. After that innovation, we promised to do these things and then focus on them. Now we could figure out whether we got it right or wrong.

That was the theory, anyway.

While we are done with reviewing how the relevant covenants might vote on this issue, Judaism is more than just the TaNaKH. After all, the text we received isn't complete. We don't know everything about most of the people in it, to begin with. Even if that is understandable, how is it possible that important things like keeping Shabbat were not completely clarified? People had to complete the details – whether based on an Oral Tradition that Moses transmitted, or based on retrofitting what the people were doing into textual sources.

So I invite you to come along with me on a thought experiment journey.

What if the Roman oppression had not happened exactly the same way, so there was no need for Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi to collect and

organize all the teacher's notes which eventually became the Mishnah? With the Mishnah not written down, there would be no need for a written Gemara, so the Talmud would not have existed, and probably the legal codes (like the Shulchan Aruch) would also not have been written, since the development of the legal codes presumes that the Talmud is in writing. Torah study itself would probably have continued the way it has, beginning with Rashi writing answers for his daughters, and continuing through the present time.

It is kind of hard to imagine this. First of all, it is hard to imagine Jewish life today without having the Talmud as a backdrop to either accept or dismiss. Secondly, the whole concept of oral lessons is slowly fading away, so how do we imagine a group of teachers whose material has not been melded together?

What do we have today that is simply oral?

Other than face to face conversations, the main thing I can think of is bed time rituals. You might read a book as part of them, but eventually the book is put down, so the page turning doesn't wake up the child, and the storytelling begins. Everyone has their own rituals, their own stories, and as long as there is nothing hazardous about the rituals, they are all correct.

That is what Judaism would be like.

You would judge a teacher by the quality of their students, not by whether you agreed with their opinions. After all, you might not know all of their opinions. There would remain those who remembered, and those who did something with the materials, and those who innovated, and the point would always be – how did they live? Did they retain the kindness and compassion God wanted us to exhibit?

That is the point I would like to leave you with today. The point is – are we kind and compassionate in all our interactions with others or do we let our hair down, as it were, when we are on Facebook and the like? This season, let us try to have positive answers when we ask ourselves - how do we live?