

“Believers, Behavers, Belongers”

This was an urban legend told to me when I was at Yeshiva University in the early 80's and though I tend to be rather cynical when it comes to these tall tales, this one I believe!

Yeshiva University, as I was told, was getting ready to celebrate its 100th year of existence; they were really hoping to make it a celebration that would be remembered forever. Under the incredible leadership of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, its president since 1976, Yeshiva University came out of looming bankruptcy and had raised its endowments as well as its academic rating. 1986 was going to be the year where Yeshiva University would proudly shine. It was now recognized as a well respected institution of higher education, ranked among the top 50 schools in the country, with a world renowned medical school (Albert Einstein College of Medicine), law school (Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law), and one of the finest orthodox rabbinical seminaries in the world (Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary). Yeshiva University was ready to tout itself as the successful integration of “Torah Umadda”, Torah and secular scholarship, an institution that can lay claim to the idea that they

offer the finest, contemporary academic education combined with the timeless teachings of Torah. They, and only they, were the synthesis of secular and religious knowledge, respected by both worlds. The legend goes that in the early 80's, the school leadership began looking at their records to highlight some of their most successful past students in every field, especially of course, the rabbinate. They began looking in earnest for their oldest living former yeshiva students, so they could make them one of the cornerstones of their 1986 celebration.

Suddenly, the plan was dropped.

It was restarted in 1984 when a rabbi they had discovered who was one of the earliest attendees of this respected Orthodox institution had passed away the year before.

Now, who was the rabbi that made them drop their plans earlier? Apparently, the urban legend goes, they discovered that one of their oldest students was one Mordecai Menachem Kaplan, rabbi, essayist and founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, considered by many to be the most controversial rabbi of the 20th century. Mordecai Kaplan, a Lithuanian born rabbi, was also the founder of the Young Israel movement, today one of

the most important Orthodox synagogue based Jewish organizations in the country. Kaplan, however, was later condemned as a heretic by Orthodox Judaism, put in “cherem” (excommunication) and his name has been carefully removed from official publications throughout Orthodox Judaism. The Union of Orthodox Rabbis formally assembled in 1945 to excommunicate him. The Young Israel movement does not speak of him nor mention his name in their history. Kaplan taught for over 50 years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative movement’s school, but even there was considered an outsider, often at odds with the faculty there. The rabbis at JTS once expressed complete disgust with one of Kaplan’s work, a new Hagaddah for the Passover Seder. Kaplan was never excommunicated by Conservative Judaism but was often publicly rebuked by some of the most prominent rabbis of the movement. And by the way, Kaplan was a staunch critic of Reform Judaism, probably, just so he could say he alienated everyone in the Jewish faith!

So was this the rabbi who made Yeshiva University drop its centennial plans? I don’t know, because no one talks about Kaplan or acknowledges him in the Orthodox world, but this was one legend that I could believe!

I like much of the stuff Rabbi Kaplan wrote. I don't know whether I agree with most of it and to be honest, I don't know if I, or if anyone, will ever be able to fully understand the mind of this man. His ideas were not always consistent (or better, they were always evolving) but his views on G-d, Torah and Israel, his thoughts about Jewish life and Judaism being an "an evolving religious civilization" are both fascinating and challenging. And I believe, despite everything, he understood the modern Jew today better than any theologian of our time. And that is why this man, whose name is expunged from traditional records (and perhaps, hundred year celebrations!), is the framework for my sermon on this most holy evening.

(Note: If I have at all whetted your appetite to study the words of this man, start with his classic "Judaism as a Civilization", continue with "The Meaning of G-d in Modern Jewish Religion", "The New Zionism" (Kaplan was an ardent Zionist) and finish your 11 book study with "If Not Now, When?" We have many of his works in our library, thanks to the intellectual credit of Rabbi Samuel Cooper, of blessed memory).

But tonight, ask yourself this question, which was one of Mordecai Kaplan's larger questions: *Why*

are you here? Why do Jews of all philosophical ideas and expressions, no matter how removed, come and reconnect this time of year? Rabbi Kaplan came up with a brilliant way to look at the Jewish people.

If you asked Kaplan why we are here tonight, he would say some of us are believers, some of us are behavers, and the overwhelming numbers of us are belongers. Some are here because we have faith and this is our faith. Some are here because we may not have faith but we like the religious practices of Judaism and cling to them. This is what we do and we aren't going to change. But for Kaplan, the primary form of kinship that binds us all as Jews is that we want to *belong*. Whatever we believe, and however we behave, the underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny is why most of us are here tonight.

I think he is absolutely right. Many of us are here simply because we crave a sense of belonging; we yearn to be a part of something.

I am a believer. If you ask me why I am here, it is because I believe in G-d. I believe in the Oneness and transcendent nature of G-d, Creator and Father of us all, and the way I develop my relationship with

Him is through Judaic practices, prayers and our holiest of works. I buy into our faith. And if you ask me what draws me this night, it is the theology behind this day and the “spiritual reach” I find so moving in my Jewish tradition.

However, it is fair to say that I am also a behavior. While much of what I practice is because I believe in these traditions, I also keep many of our rituals simply because I am a behavior. I practice our traditions because they anchor me. The practices of Judaism have become my spiritual “comfort food” and I don’t ever want to give up. It feels good to do what my people do.

I find myself doing more and more of the traditional rituals not because I believe our Creator demands them of us, nor because I am afraid of divine punishment. If a little knowledge is dangerous, then years of study is even more so. With some degree of hubris, I can honestly say that I know how some of our rituals came about, and they did not come from Mt. Sinai and are not divine in my eyes any longer.

But I still do them and love to perform them. I do them because I am a behavior. I feel a need to do certain rituals because it is what our ancestors have

done for as long as we have records and even if the reasons behind them are no longer valid, I like to behave like a Jew. Rituals feels good and they are good for my soul. Indeed, they are my “spiritual comfort food” and I have no interest in giving them up.

I remember sitting at mass one time with someone who performed the traditional genuflecting and religious acts of Catholicism with great feeling. And I told him that as a traditional practicing Jew, I appreciated the way he faithfully practiced and performed his traditions. He smiled and told me that he doesn't necessarily “buy it all”, but he does love the long-established practices of Catholicism. He loves the feeling of being in church and “behaving” as a good Catholic. Does he accept it all? No, he confessed. But spiritually, he gains so much from “doing the Catholic”.The memories and comfort he finds in keeping and performing the rituals that his parents and grandparents did have meaning and a life of their own.

Amen, brother! And I like to “do the Jew” for the same reason. I find incredible comfort in the rituals of our ancestors.

But, you know, despite what I have said so far, I am here because I am a believer. That was

Kaplan's contention. We are not a religion, we are not a culture, we are belongers. We are here to be a part of something larger than ourselves. We don't want to live life alone. We want to be with people who can laugh with us, cry with us and share our happiness. We want to be in the companionship of others when we are hurt. We want to be called upon when someone needs us. We want to feel that we are not alone.

And we want to be with people connected by something larger, joined by a collective dream and gathered by a similar history. Kaplan said that Jews don't have to agree, that we don't have to think the same, we don't even have to believe the same or even practice the same, but we are united by the sense that we are a larger family. For him, there was something that touches our souls when we come together. We are not here to be programmed how to think and act, but united by a common spiritual adventure.

And though I am a believer and a behaviorer, I am a believer at heart.

And so are you.

With all due respect, that is why despite my love and interest in politics, you will not hear much from this pulpit in the way of politics because I think Kaplan is right. The longer I serve as rabbi, the more I sense that people who enter these doors don't come to be lectured about how they should vote, or what they should think about a given policy. There is a place for that; not up in here. People come more and more to synagogues and temples to come to feel part of a larger spiritual adventure and they don't want to feel like they are left out. People come to "belong", to open a prayer book and for however long they stay, feel part of something – a sense of belonging. We are not here for *group think* but *group therapy*, the chance to be among brethren, share each other's companionship and be under one roof with a sense of unity.

I have to say, I was wrong a couple of years ago. I stood here during the high holidays a couple of years ago and predicted the demise of our daily minyanim (prayer services). We were losing too many regulars and there were not enough new people joining who believed in the religious obligations or wanted to practice the daily rituals of Judaism to make our twice daily quorum of ten. I didn't think we had enough believers or behavers. And I was right.

But a funny thing has happened along the way. I discovered that despite our community's size, we still have enough *belongers*, people who want to belong. We still have enough people in Charleston who have an incredible desire to belong to the daily minyan.

And people are coming.

They are not coming because the "Spirit of G-d" moves them or the power of the ritual of the tefillin (the phylacteries) draws them in. Be serious! They like the camaraderie, the sitting down for breakfast together, schmoozing as Jews over French toast, oatmeal and biscuits, singing together, all with a sense that they belong and are needed. If it wasn't for Steve Max and his amazing breakfasts, we would be in serious trouble. But if it wasn't for this "*sense of belonging*", we wouldn't have a chance.

When Kaplan wrote his views about Jews, I said he had a lot of critics. They didn't like what he said about "belonging". They said belonging by itself is empty, a mere emotional attachment that makes no demands. I don't agree. I think belonging is the most basic of all human urges and it transcends every code, every idea, and every emotion.

And belonging does make demands. Belonging tugs at your heart.

I will never forget how this Jewish community came together when asked by the United Jewish Community to help two families of the former Soviet Union move to and settle in Charleston , West Virginia . We knew nothing about these families, their ancestry, their traditions or their interests, but the minute we heard they belong to our people, we embraced them as part of our community. Belonging. That intuitive sense that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in contemporary times.

That is why I am not afraid that the Jewish people will ever vanish, not by tyrant, nor by assimilation. Tyranny will never destroy us because, here is the “believer” in me, there is something divine about our extraordinary people. Like a magical tome, the last page can never be ripped from our book. We are the ‘People of the Book’ and the last page will never be written about us; G-d will see to that.

And assimilation will not conquer us either. Because while believers and behavior ebb and flow, there will always be belongers to this community of

behavers, believers *and* belongers. Whether they be those who hear the story of the Exodus and believe or stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai and say count me in or Jews who have been lost along the way and finally find their way back, this will always be their place of belonging.

Tonight, may the doors of this community and Jewish communities all over the world welcome the “belongers” and welcome them home.

AMEN