**“Tell Me Why It Matters”**

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A few weeks ago, I learned a very important lesson. Looking back, it seems so obvious but it wasn’t until the following happened that a light went on in my brain

First some background.

Much of the American Jewish community’s attention this summer has focused on an internal Jewish controversy surrounding prayer rights at the Western Wall. I will assume most are not familiar with this but a serious crisis has developed between American Jews and Israel.

Background: when you go to the Western Wall’s main prayer area, there is a separation wall between men and women in accordance with Orthodox tradition. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation maintains the site under the rules of an Orthodox synagogue; there is a presiding rabbi who makes sure that all prayers there conforms to Orthodox rules. So there is not just a mechitza to separate men and woman, but women are forbidden to pray aloud, men have to wear kippot, women cannot wear talitot or bring in a Torah into their section, nor can they gather to collectively pray.

America’s Reform and Conservative movements which comprise the largest numbers of Jews in the US have long called for an egalitarian section. Right now, there is an Ezrat Yisrael egalitarian section off to the side; it started in 2000 and was significantly upgraded in 2013 under the direction of Israel’s Diaspora Affairs Minister Naftali Bennet.

But when you see it, you realize it is not adequate in that it provides very limited access to the wall; for most, it is simply unacceptable. So after several years and under the direction of Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, Israel brokered an agreement for a new egalitarian prayer partition at the Western Wall. Because so many more Diaspora Jews are affiliated with non-Orthodox movements, this issue had been front and center to the Conservative and Reform movements and the creation of a new section was essential in declaring that their status is on an equal footing with the Orthodox. Prime Minister Netanyahu hailed the 4-year negotiations that led to the compromise as “a fair and creative solution” and women and non-Orthodox movements celebrated.

But the celebrations were premature.

Late this June, the Netanyahu government pulled the plan. His cabinet’s orthodox ministers and their parties threatened to pull out of the government if this went through and if you know how Israel’s parliamentary system works, that would have dissolved the government. The only way the Prime Minister and his coalition could survive is by dropping the plan completely.

And they did.

That enraged the largely Reform and Conservative American Jewish communities. Rightfully so. In the larger cities and throughout American Jewry, the reaction has been a mix of exasperation to threatening to stop supporting the Jewish state: “If Israel won’t recognize our identity and authenticity, they are saying we don’t matter.” The operative words by most of Jewish leadership in organizational Jewish life became “we will reevaluate our relationship with the Israeli government.” And it wasn’t just Reform and Conservative movements that spoke out, but all major Jewish American organizations. To their credit, several rabbis and leaders from the more moderate wings of American Orthodox Judaism spoke out. And I was particularly pleased to see AIPAC, which on principle stays away from the Israeli internal affairs went as a Board of Directors to express their profound displeasure with the Netanyahu government.

That was unprecedented.

Understand how significant this summer was for American Jewry. In poll after poll, lack of acceptance of Conservative and Reform Judaism is why Jewish support for Israel wanes among American Jews who are engaged in the U.S.-Israel relationship. Most think support for Israel among American Jews erodes because of West Bank settlement activity or the ongoing lack of progress in the Palestinian-Israeli situation; actually, those issues have little impact. The reality is that most who support Israel and are knowledgeable in the conflict understand that settlements activity and the peace process are complicated with a lot of moving pieces and players. I may not agree with an Israeli government’s inaction on negotiations or a settlement decision, but I know that geopolitics are complex. And when you go to Israel, you recognize that. Those issues do not move the needle negatively, not among American Jewish supporters of Israel.

But this failure to recognize the legitimacy and authenticity of the main branches of Judaism by a Jewish government is personal for many Jews in America deeply supportive of Israel. The unwillingness of Israel’s government to recognize the very authenticity of about 80-85% of American Jews, who are among Israel’s strongest supporters, reached a boiling point this summer.

Now what did I learn this summer about this and life in general? Well, I went to a rabbinic symposium on Israel, comprised of about 75% reform and conservative rabbis and 25% orthodox. This annual gathering of rabbis, unique in its intra-faith mission is usually centered around how we can better strengthen the relationship between Israel and the U.S. And yet speaker after speaker, talked openly about the “elephant in the room”: the lack of recognition and acceptance of most American Jews; speakers tried to present a unified front and offer explanations for the situation but were met with strong displeasure. In the Q and A, I heard some very blunt and difficult questions. There was a noticeable anger about this issue, again amongst these most committed, engaged, and strongest rabbinical supporters of Israel. They wanted an answer to “what will I tell my Reform congregants this High Holiday about Israel and a Jewish state’s lack of acceptance of us?” or “how can I get up and express support for Israel as a Conservative rabbi if Israelis won’t stand up for our identity and authenticity as Conservative Jews?”

Then came Haviv Rettig Gur.

Gur is a 36 years old Israeli journalist. Follow him on Twitter and Facebook and read his pieces in Times of Israel; Gur is one of the most in depth, thoughtful writer on Israeli politics. His understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the relationship between American Jews and Israelis is insightful and a joy to read.

He was the last speaker of the symposium. And he said (constructing this as best as I can from memory): I am not here to tell you about life in America but I can tell you about life in Israel. And the great majority of Israelis are secular. They consider themselves Israelis first, Jewish second. They could care less about the Western Wall (the Kotel) and the status of Conservative and Reform Judaism. They have zero interest. As far as they are concerned, they rarely go to the Kotel. The “Wall” for them is where religious Jews go. And religious debates and status of other religious Jews are just a big nothing of a fight among religious Jews; Israelis have no dog in this fight; that is between religious Jews. And frankly, Gur said, though most Israelis have no love for the “Haredim” (ultra-religious Jews) who cause the same problems for secular Israeli’s in other areas, this is not a big issue. Israelis don’t know much about religious Judaism outside of Orthodoxy; frankly, it is because Reform and Conservative Jews are not coming to Israel and not making Aliyah. Thus, they have a very small presence and little influence in Israeli life.

His first point: This bothers you? Come to Israel and change it from within.

And then he added: by the way, I say this as the son of Reform rabbi who made Aliyah and I am not a haredi.

And then he delivered this haymaker which knocked me on my tush: You want to change all this? Don’t sit in your ivory tower. Make your case directly to Israelis on the street. Tell Israelis why it matters to you. Tell me, as a secular Israeli, why this matters to you. To be honest, he said, I get it but you are not explaining why it matters to the very people who might be in your camp. You assume this whole “Wall” dispute is so obvious, but it is not; you are not talking to the people you need to convince, the movable Israeli middle. And then you wonder why it doesn’t matter much to the average Israeli? You are not speaking to Israelis you need to convince.

At this symposium, I found out that many in the Israeli government (in fact, even the key top members of the most right-wing elements) wanted the compromise. Most even feel closer to Reform and Conservative Jews and when in America attend Conservative services. Nevertheless, their key block of voters in Israel (the Haredim) don’t want it. And they vote.

Gur told us: since you only make you feeling known among your own circles in America and to Israelis leaders who you can’t vote for, you have no impact. You are not telling the overwhelming number of Israeli secular Jews who do vote why it matters; therefore, it is not a big issue for secular Israelis.

“Don’t assume we know, don’t get frustrated by a lack of support, and tell us your story.”

“Speak from the heart.”

“Tell us why it matters.”

Gur is right, you know.

And not just about the “Wall”.

We assume so much about others. We have great ideas for programs and events here at B’nai Jacob. And then we gather around with like-minded folks who agree with each other, talk among ourselves excitedly, and then get upset and frustrated when new people don’t attend a program or an event.

We do not tell the people why a program matters and why it is so important. We do, but only among ourselves, people we don’t need to convince.

We need to rethink that this year.

I just listened to Janet and all the wonderful programs we have had and will have this year. But folks, I know what will happen. We will have these great activities and invariably, the reuglars who attend everything will express to me disappointment: “where are the people this program was geared for?” “there should have been more people tonight”, “where is so and so who complained that we needed this?” “why are the (fill in the blank) not here?’

I don’t know.

Maybe because we need to do more than send a flyer.

Or a newsletter.

Or a post on Facebook.

Or talk among ourselves.

Maybe we need to engage people who we want, one on one, on why these activities matters to us, to our community, to our shul.

And why it should matter to them.

Gur is right. We assume an issue we believe in is so obvious, a class so good, a program so essential, a service so important, a Kiddush so wonderful and assume everyone will be there. Just send a newsletter. Just send a flyer. And then people don’t show up and we talk among ourselves, we wag our fingers at others with righteous indignation for not being there, and we go back to our echo chamber.

“Tell people why it matters.”

Or as I want to put it today:

“Be like Ferne.”

Ferne Nearman, of blessed memory and the wife of Bob, started most of our adult education classes. She and Bob, like the Nearman family had always been two of our pillars, attending services and being a part of Jewish life in our community. Years ago, Ferne was at services and tearing up. I went up to her to ask why she was crying and she told me that the doctor that day shared the grim news that she was losing her sight. Ferne said to me that she would soon be unable to attend or participate at the synagogue because she won’t be able to read anymore.

I told Ferne: just because you can’t see doesn’t mean you can’t participate or study. I told her about several rabbis in the Talmud who were blind and how she could listen to the words of Torah and Talmud and can comment just like the rabbis of old.

Because of her, I decided to began our regular weekly Torah and Talmud classes that have been a part of our shul for years.

All because of Ferne.

Here is why I bring up Ferne.

Ferne so loved those classes, she was a missionary for the classes. Literally. She introduced person after person to our classes, inviting everyone she met. She saw someone in one group and told them about classes and that they should join us. She brought guests with her regularly. It made no difference if they were Jewish or non-Jewish; Ferne told people what she learned last week, what was going to be studied next week, why she loved it and why they would love it. She was a crusader, talking about the Talmud and the Torah all the time and why a person should come and join.

Classes were full.

Our classes are not as big anymore. But it is not just because people have passed away. It is because you need a Ferne, a person who carries the banner and tells others why it matters. Any successful program needs people who are willing to tell a friend why it matters, why they should come, and give people a way in.

“Tell us why it matters”

If you believe in something, if you want to “move the needle”, don’t talk among yourselves, don’t just send a flyer, and don’t brood when folks don’t show up. Pick up the phone, reach out to a friend and say: hey, I am going to synagogue tomorrow. You want to join me and go out for dinner after?

You tell people something matters to you. And why it should matter to them.

You do it one person at a time.

It is called “retail politics’’.

Tell one person at a time who are willing to listen that something matters to you and it should matter to them.

We are terrible with “retail politics” and telling people why it matters. I know lots of reasons why folks aren’t active in synagogues and temples; in fact, most organizations are struggling right now. But ask the ones that are filled with people and they will tell you how they are different: they have folks who are not negative and just wait by the door in vain; they have positive folks, excited to bring others through the door. The organization matters to them and they convince people, one by one, why it should matter to them. And they take people by the hand and bring them in.

That doesn’t happen by letters or emails or Facebook posts.

It is how I got involved in AIPAC (people came all the way from DC and Atlanta and told me why AIPAC matters to them, why it matters to Israel, and why it should matter to me. And in the most positive, uplifting way possible). It is often how people join shuls (someone engages them and brings them in) and it is how Haviv Rettig Gur says it will change things in Israel: American Jews investing time and energy and speaking directly to Israelis, positively telling them why it matters and why it should matter to them.

Every year, I am in shul and we feel inspired and committed. But then a few weeks later, we get frustrated with a lack of engagement. And I will complain about it from the pulpit to those already active and here.

That won’t do anything.

But picking up the phone, taking someone for coffee or lunch and telling them about an activity and telling them why it matters and why it should matter to them could bring a new person in this year.

We have so many incredible programs and activities here in the synagogue and the community. But it is not enough to share them from the pulpit or in an email or in a Facebook post or a tweet.

We have to tell people why it matters to us and why it should matter to them. That will bring more people to our community this year.

May we all learn to tell our stories, our hopes, and our dreams this year to people who may want to be part of them this year.

Amen