

Shabbat Shalom

Last week I was given an article from October's issue of Vanity Fair magazine. The article contained a list of what it calls "The New Establishment – The 100 Most Powerful, Most Influential People in American Society." Magazines making lists of the most popular, the most beautiful, the richest, etc. are quite common. This list however, is of the most influential and powerful people in America. What I found to be absolutely amazing about the article was the number of Jews on the list. Jews make up about 2.5 percent of the United States population. Doing the math, one might expect to find two or three Jews. If we are particularly successful, then maybe there would be 10 or 15 Jews out of the 100. But, in Vanity Fair's list of 100, there are fifty-one Jews! Fifty-one! In the list that includes Steve Jobs and Oprah and Bill Clinton and Warren Buffit, to name just a few, are 51 Jewish names.

The magazine also had a separate list of what it calls, "The Next Establishment," younger people they believe are destined to make the big list soon. Of the 26 names on that list, 15 of those names are Jewish. I am not sure if they are all Jewish, but 15 have names that we would expect to be Jewish. It doesn't stop there. The magazine has another list that is called "The Pit Stop Club," those who have made the new establishment list in the past, but didn't make it this year, but are certain to make it future years again. There were nine names on this list and of the nine names eight of them were Jewish. The only one who wasn't Jewish on that list, the one expected to make a comeback was Don Imus, who is not Jewish.

Now, I don't say this to present a type of Jewish triumphalism; Look how great we are! How smart we are! No, not at all; rather I am mentioning this because I think it is incredible and needs attention. This is a big country. There are lots and lots of very talented, highly educated, tremendously motivated people. Truth be told, Vanity Fair Magazine seems to have its finger on the pulse of the people in this country, the people who make it move, as it were. So this list tells us a lot about the place of Jews in this country and about the amazing people that we are and the amazing people that we have produced. This is not just reflected in the Vanity Fair's list. As we know, there are lists of Jews who have won Nobel Prizes and the Kyoto Awards and the awards that reflect the great achievements. Once again, in a world where less than ¼ of 1% are Jewish, the number of Jews who are singled out for achievement and contribution is absolutely astounding. It is about 20 – 25% of those awards.

I want to examine something this morning. As I said I don't want to hold us up in a self-congratulatory way. I think that we need to have humility. But perhaps it is important for us to gain an understanding of this. And so I submit two questions? What has produced this? And what will allow our contributions to continue? This is not about taking from the world, but it is about giving to the world. It is not just about giving to our own world, the Jewish world, but it is about contributing to all of humanity. Many Jews

feel a bit fearful when they see these statistics and these lists because they worry, perhaps the anti-Semites are right; Jews are trying to take over the world! But that's certainly not the case. Most Jews make these lists without a single Jewish concern and barely any Jewish identity. The vast majority of these people do not contribute or work out of a sense of their Jewishness. Rather something else in our culture, something that comes from our society that gives them skills and talents and intelligence.

What can it be? (I would like to ask you what you think and encourage you to have this conversation with each other.) My eyes were opened up by an article from the New York Times Magazine of September 9 by a writer by the name of Mark Edmundson. The article was about Sigmund Freud and it was entitled "Defender of the Faith." As we know, Sigmund Freud was not a great friend of religion or Judaism most of his life. But, in his eighties he began showing up at synagogue and rapping himself in Talit and reading from the Torah. He did so while he maintained his stance as an uncompromising atheist. Early in his life he referred to belief in God as a collective neurosis; people longing for a father that was not present. But in the later part of his life, he completed his book "Moses and Monotheism." Something new emerged. Freud started to recognize the poetry and promise of religion. In his book he offered a perspective on faith, an aspect of faith, unique to Judaism. He suggested that Judaism helped free humanity from bondage to the immediate world, the empirical world, by opening up fresh possibilities for human thought and human action. He suggested that faith in God facilitated a turn toward a life within helping to make a rich introspective life possible. His claim was that the Jewish people invented the concept of an abstract God. While the rest of the world was worshipping nature, or representations of power in man, or idols, the Jews were worshipping a God that you couldn't feel, touch or see. It forced abstraction in thought which ultimately gave the people the skills to abstract thought. Abstract thinking is necessary for the advancement of any kind of thought. Perhaps, it is there, from the beginning monotheism, a conceiving God that couldn't be seen, a God that didn't have a human depiction, a God that was not represented by a man that we began to abstract. The ability to abstract allows for advancement, allows for conceiving of what may be, what can be.

There are many other reasons. I want to speak about a few of them and then I want to bring us back to Avraham, Abraham, the first Jew. Because that is where we are this Shabbat.

We are the people of the book. Our religion is not carried in faith. On the contrary, Jews believe different things! Our religion is not carried through worship. Jews worship in different ways. But our religion is carried through study and through learning. The learning is not singularly focused, but rather it is very diverse. The very first thing I used to teach to conversion candidates is that "Judaism has no dogma and no unified theology. And that forces you to learn...to learn a lot." We know rabbinic scholars specialize in all different areas of human thought and endeavor. Our tradition is a pluralistic tradition with different paths and different ways of looking at the self and its relationship to the world. There are different ways to understand the world of nature, behavior, and ethics. And that learning encourages critical reasoning and critical thought. The human

tendency maybe to look for single answers and simple answers, but the prime work that carried the Jewish people for the last 2,000 years is the Talmud. In its very essence it rejects the idea of one way to think, one opinion, and one answer. And more than that we know there are two Talmuds!

Learning was central...learning was so significant that we recall 2,000 years of compulsory education. That is, every male Jewish child began to learn at the age of three. We learn that they began to study Torah, to memorize Torah at the age of three, and at five Mishnah. What an incredible discipline! We were differentiated from other cultures and other societies just in literacy, but in this very fact that every child learned. For 1,800 years in the more advanced civilizations only children of the privileged, the wealthy, royalty learned. Not so with the Jewish people, everybody learned. Abraham Heschel in "The Earth is the Lords" tells the story of the Christian scholar from Berlin who went to Warsaw to give a lecture. After the lecture he went out to the street to find a wagon to take him to the train station. He found that none of the wagon drivers could be found. Jews were the wagon drivers in Warsaw at that time. No one could be found because they were all studying. Everybody had a "Chavurah," everybody was engaged in learning. That learning created a culture that was so rich in intellectual prowess for thousands of years. However, when we lived in Ghettos, the intellect was all focused on rabbinic learning, the Talmud and Jewish texts. It did not begin to emerge into the world until the beginning of the Enlightenment in eighteenth century. And then a culture containing eighteen hundred years of disciplined study emerged! I always say give a Jew a little freedom...and see what can be achieved. Freedom is a mixed bag for the Jewish people, because on one hand our freedom, so greatly valued allows us to do what we want to do, to live freely and practice and on the other hand our freedom has lead to assimilation and the loss of Jews. However, the products of our freedom is realized when we are allowed to be a part of the larger culture, part of the university world, part of the political world, and the worlds of art and research and development and medicine and science. Our contribution is incredible. Because learning is a part of the way we breathe.

There is a theory which says the following: In the places of great Jewish learning in Eastern Europe young men who showed great promise, great intelligence, genius, were given the daughters of the wealthiest men to marry because those families could support the scholar, and the university having the greatest number of children. There was no greater mitzvah then to have lots of children and there was hardly a greater sense of prestige then for a man to have his daughter married off to a brilliant rabbi. So, genetically, there was a tendency for the breeding of very intelligent children. At the same time in Eastern Europe the brightest young Catholic boys were encouraged to go into the priesthood and there they lived lives of celibacy. These results obviously would be very, very different.

I believe there is more. I believe there are other reasons. Part of this success has to do with the focus on the value of community as opposed to the self-centeredness of western culture. Individual learning, studying by oneself, didn't occur. Learning took place in Chevrusah. It took place in pairs; it took place with three and four at a time. It took place in the Beit Midrash with other people and there was always an exchange of ideas

and whatever direction one went into in one's learning, the learning and the ideas were reflected through other people. So, there was a competition to continue to learn and inspire even greater thought. The learning went down the proper paths, as it were, and has not allowed us to go to areas that would be self-centered, self-focused or without critical analysis. The Chevrushah model encourages honesty. That also was very, very important. The community valued the learner. Prestige and power was given to the wisest, and most knowledgeable.

One or two generations after we have experienced freedom, it is no wonder that our contributions are so extraordinary. Learning was never meant to be self-serving and only focused internally, but rather the purpose of learning was to gain greater knowledge and to improve the world that we live in. It all began somewhere. I posit, it began here. It began with the word. It began with learning Torah and the Bible. We were the first to allow ALL access to "The Book." As opposed to other cultures it was not just to ordained clergy. Even today there are Islamic villages where illiteracy is protected. Why? Because literacy creates challenge to fundamentalism.

Now what? Will this special position continue for Jews like ourselves who no longer live in the world of the Yeshiva where learning is absolutely central? I would say that we have to take a hard look at that and be as honest as possible.

There is an article in the same edition of Vanity Fair entitled "Talk of the Town." It tells the story of an intense rivalry between two of the most powerful men on Wall Street, Henry Kravis and Steven Schwartzman. Both as you may have guessed are Jews, both at the very top of the private equity world, which is where the financial action is these days. Both control tens of billions of dollars of assets. The thing that struck me about the story is that both of them appear to be fools in a certain way. They are each trying to top the other, they are each trying to destroy the other, and they are each trying to outdo each other, not to mention the abominable way that each treats their employees. Each acts in ways that are not in keeping with the teachings and values of Judaism. That's sad, but that's not what "got to me." What got to me was the following. It is how much the two of them do, how much they give to all kinds of good causes, libraries, museums, hospitals and universities and on and on, all are mentioned by name in the article. You read and see how much energy each one puts into their charitable work, how much each one donates to charitable causes. Doing so, for their own social status and the status of their wives and their families. They're involved in causes that bring them great clout. It may be that a generation removed from the learning and what comes from great learning, is a generation of Jews who are committed to tzedakkah, to charity. But their personal lives seem to be lacking and their inter-personal skills certainly seem to be awry. What became very clear to me is that neither one of the traders is involved or give to Jewish causes, at least not in any significant way. They don't support Jewish education, they don't support Jewish schools, they don't support synagogues and that tells you a lot about Jewish life today. For they are not alone. In fact survey after survey shows that the wealthiest Jews in this country don't give to Jewish causes, they give to museums, they give to hospitals, they give to universities, Centers for the Arts, but they are not giving to Jewish causes.

The question is why they have lost their allegiance to their own people and why are they looking elsewhere to devote their resources and their energies. (That may be a question for next week's sermon.) What we see from the Vanity 100 list, from Nobel Prize winners, etc. is that a part of the greater society and a part of a larger world. In Israel, the advances in medical, technology, pharmaceuticals, the hi-tech industry, communications, and defense systems is absolutely mind boggling. In that little country leadership in all of those areas is being developed. Much of it is not staying there, but it is being developed. I believe we should celebrate our achievements. We have to celebrate our advancements. And we have to understand where they come from. The challenge is to retain it. To do so, we have to know its source.

Let's get back to the source as it is described in today's Torah reading. Avraham is told by God to *Lech Lecha MaArtzecha* to go out from his land. The rabbis tell us that the repetition of *Lech Lecha*, the same word repeated twice is because he first has to do it for his own good. He has to go to a place where he is comfortable. A place where the values of the culture reflect his own values. A good place to raise his family. But it goes further, because there he has to go with family and there he has to develop family and develop a tribe and develop a nation, a nation of people that will be just, a nation of people that will be charitable, a nation of people that will be mindful. "There he will be blessed." He will be blessed with numerous descendents and his people will be a blessing to the world. All who bless his people will be blessed. To a great degree, I believe, we are seeing that promise played out in the world today. Given our freedom, we have absolutely excelled, but our excellence will not continue if we don't support the basic mission. The basic mission contained in the brit with God and the covenant with God is a covenant of faith rooted in the development of community that is committed to learning in order to create a better world, and in order to make the human condition better. That can only take place as our understanding deepens and increases.

Shabbat Shalom and May your learning be sweet and may we all support the place where this message comes from in order to help future generations contribute to this world.