

**The greatest threat to the Jewish people is of our own doing:
assimilation, intermarriage and the future of Judaism in America.**

During the summer, we read from a Torah portion called Balak which tells how the King of Moab, a mortal enemy of the Israelites employs a sorcerer named Balaam to curse the Israelites condemning them to utter destruction. Instead Balaam can only bless them as he must speak the words God puts in his mouth. Interestingly, though, Parashat Balak does not end with the destruction of the Israelites by their enemies.

Rather we are told that a plague broke out against the Israelites killing 24,000 as a result of their own immorality and their disloyalty to their God as it states “while Israel dwelt in shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, who invited them to sacrifice to their gods” (numbers 25:1).

Sometimes self-destructiveness can be more damaging to the Jewish people than the dangers from without.

Last High Holy Days I spoke about the real threats of antisemitism in our country emanating from both the right and the left. I spoke about antisemitism dressed up as anti-zionism and the spike of attacks on Jews all over the US. Upon reflection, I gave the wrong sermon. Yes, indeed antisemitism is real and it is on the rise especially on college campuses and we must never let down our guard in exposing and combatting this vile disease.

But truth be told, there is a far worse enemy stalking our people in America, and it is US. For sure I have given this sermon in one form or another over the last 40 years, but instead of our odds of surviving as a distinct minority in America increasing the odds are increasingly not in our favor.

I was re-awakened to this impending threat after reading Alan Dershowitz's new book entitled The Vanishing American Jew. In his introduction to the book Dershowitz writes:

American Jewish life is in danger of disappearing, just as most American Jews have achieved everything we ever wanted: acceptance, influence, affluence, equality. As the result of skyrocketing rates of intermarriage and assimilation, as well as “the lowest birth rate of any religious or ethnic community in the United States,” the era of enormous Jewish influence on American life may soon be coming to an end. Although Jews make up just over 2 percent of the population of the United States – approximately 5.5 million out of 262 million – many Americans mistakenly believe that we constitute a full 20 percent of the American people, because of our disproportionate visibility, influence, and accomplishments. But our numbers may soon be reduced to the point where our impact on American life will necessarily become marginalized. One Harvard study predicts that if current demographic trends continue, the American Jewish community is likely to number less than 1 million and conceivable as few as 10,000 by the time the United States celebrates its tri-centennial in 2076. Other projections suggest that early in the next century, American Jewish life as we know

it will be a shadow of its current, vibrant self – consisting of isolated pockets of ultra-Orthodox Hasidim.

The hard truth is that what has worked in the past to help us survive as a people no longer works.

Remembrance of the Holocaust, support for Israel, the real or perceived threat of anti-semitism and feeling a shared destiny with Jews around the world, once upon a time were the threads that held us together. As we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, these threads have frayed.

While there are indeed real threats to Israel's security, most American Jews do not feel that protecting and supporting Israel defines their Jewish identity. That worked for our parents and grandparent's generation when Israel was in her infancy; not so much today. Refusing to give Hitler a posthumous victory by reinvigorating our commitment to our Judaism was once a clarion call to maintain our Jewish identity. Today for most American Jews, the Holocaust is a relic of history, to

surely be remembered, but not as a reason to uphold our commitment to preserving our survival as a people. Additionally, antisemitism, while on the rise, is still for most American Jews thankfully the exception and not the rule, and therefore plays virtually no role in perpetuating Judaism.

In fact, all of the above, support for an always embattled Israel, remembrance of the Holocaust and the experience of antisemitism, are part of what is called the “Tsuris theory” of Jewish survival.

In other words, we survive because outside malevolent forces such as these hold us together. As we can plainly see this no longer provides a compelling reason to affirm our Jewish identity, especially for those under 50 years of age.

In the absence of something more intrinsic, and not based upon how others view or treat us, we have fallen prey to the twin realities of assimilation and intermarriage.

Please note, I purposely used the word realities of assimilation and intermarriage, not the perils or dangers of.

Instead of complaining about assimilation or denouncing those who intermarry, we must learn to accept them as realities to which we must respond and creatively re-imagine.

We Jews have succeeded in America better than any other time in Jewish history. The American experiment with democracy has been a God-send to the Jews. As Dershowitz points out in his book “Jewish election to the US Congress, which has 10 Jewish Senators and more than 2 dozen Jewish representatives tells the tale of our acceptance into the political mainstream. And though we have still not had a Jew at the top of either party’s ticket, it is still fair to say that in today’s America, a Jew can aspire to any office, any job, and any social status.

A Jew today can live in any neighborhood, even those that were formerly “restricted”.

Of American's Nobel Prize winners in science and economics, nearly 40 percent have been Jews. Of America's 200 most influential intellectuals, half are full Jews, and 76 percent have at least one Jewish parent. Jews attend Ivy League colleges at ten times their presence in the general population. It is no wonder that so many non-Jews believe that we constitute so much higher a percentage of the American population than we actually do. Jews today are equal in virtually every way that matters. What could not have been said even at the end of the 1980s can be said today: American Jews are part of the American mainstream; we are truly victims no more.

Indeed, we have benefited by living in an open society beyond our wildest dreams, and yet as we have become accepted, we have also assimilated, no longer Jewish Americans, but rather American Jews. As we meld into the mainstream of American society, our identity with our Jewish heritage has taken a back seat or has vanished completely.

Among liberal Jews especially, we must admit that the practice of Judaism has become a leisure time activity at best, a vestige of a by gone era for many.

When not that long ago a Jew of marriageable age would prioritize marrying another Jew as at least an added bonus, today the vast majority of young Jews don't even consider the idea. The concept of Jewish in-marriage is seen as antiquated, tribal and restrictive.

Intermarriage over the last 40 years has soared from about 40% to well over 70%. Choosing not to live behind ghetto walls has allowed us to climb the ladder of economic and social success, but has also exacted a price. The percentage of people who identify as Jewish in America has decreased over the past 40 years from 3.5% of the US population to barely 2% today. As one writer once sardonically put it, our gentile neighbors are loving us to death.

I could go on and on about our unparalleled integration into American society and the challenges that poses to our survival as an identifiable

minority in the US, but instead I'll leave that for Dershowitz and others to demonstrate.

Rather let us turn our attention to the future and especially the future of CKT.

As Dershowitz concludes in his introduction "I believe we need a new Jewish state, a new Jewish State of Mind if we are to define and ensure the Jewish future, not only for our sake, but for the sake of all humankind."

So what does that new Jewish State of Mind look like? What are the ways that we will attract Jews and even non-Jewish seekers to connect or re-connect with their Jewish heritage? It seems to me that the attraction must be personally meaningful; spiritually compelling and most of all relevant to their lives. We live in a world that has an awful lot that competes for our time and attention. What can a vibrant living Judaism offer to American Jews in the 21st Century?

First, I believe the wisdom of our inherited transition needs to be translated into the language of our everyday lives. Through Jewish education both formal and informal, existential questions need to be addressed. Why is there evil in the world? What happens after we die and how do we make the most of the life we are dealt? Is there a God and if so how do I know? Where do I find the wear withal to go on living after tragedy strikes close to home? How can the wisdom of Judaism repair broken relationships and heal us? These are the eternal questions that demand meaningful, coherent and contemporary responses. By connecting with the life force of our heritage through classes, experiential learning, and by choosing to attend services on a regular basis whether that be every week or once a month, you can begin to experience the power of Torah and the spiritual nourishment found in uplifting, moving and meaningful prayer.

The first element necessary for re-jew-vination is that learning and prayer, Torah and T'Filah, speak to us in ways that compel us to listen.

A second element has to do with allowing our sacred texts to offer moral clarity on the troubling issues of our day, including reproductive rights, gay marriage, immigration reform, war and peace, climate change, preserving democracy, the death penalty and so much more. There is so much that Judaism offers by way of moral guidance on thorny issues like these as well as the imperative to pray with our feet by hearkening to the call of conscience. Our people, especially our children and grandchildren, want to be part of a religion that not only reflects their values but advocates for them in the streets and in the halls of government.

The third element that will lead to a re-Jew-vination of Judaism in America has to do with the creation of relationships of meaning and worth. Jews, like all people, crave to be known, recognized and valued. Jews especially, even in a so called post tribal age, crave to be connected to their peeps. Even the most assimilated and secular among us want to know where to find our peeps and most want to know that

there is a Jewish presence of some kind in the town in which they live.

Still the most often requested question I receive from people looking to move to our area is “so where do the Jews mostly live?”

A synagogue that values its supporters, connects them to other Jews socially through business interests and creates an atmosphere of welcome and inclusion where everyone knows your name, is a synagogue worth supporting. Creating and sustaining a true K’Hillah K’doshah, a Holy community that cares for one another, is the third element necessary for a new Jewish State of Mind.

Finally, I believe cultivating bonds between us as American Jews with the State of Israel is essential to a re-Jew-vination of Judaism in the US. Besides the fact that more than ½ of world Jewry lives in Israel, (btw, a monumental accomplishment considering Israel didn’t even exist as an independent country 75 years ago), the connection with the ancient homeland of our people is deep and abiding. Ahad Ha-am, one of the ideologues of modern Zionism dreamed of a Jewish homeland not just

as a place of safe haven and self-determination for a beleaguered people, but imagined Israel to be the cultural center for world Jewry, a place that would radiate the best that the Jewish people has to offer. Music, art, theater, cinema, scientific discoveries, research and development, start-up companies, medical break throughs that boggle the imagination, archeological finds rooting our people in our land as far back as 3,000 years ago, gold medal athletes, top notch international cuisine, a rich and varied religious spectrum from secular Yeshivahs to Christian Monasteries, Muslim holy places and every imaginable variation of Jewish identity, and so much more, draw hundreds of thousands of Jews to Israel each year. All of this and did I mention Tel Aviv, the city that never sleeps, or Jerusalem that oozes spirituality from every rock and crevice, or the lush hills of the Galilee, the splendor of the desert, or the teeming blue waters of the Mediterranean, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan river, the Dead Sea and the Sea of Reeds in Eilat. Connecting with the land and people of Israel is another pillar to uphold a vibrant living Judaism.

The fourth essential element which can help deepen our appreciation and practice of our Jewish heritage is clearly our historic connection to Ezzatz Yisrael.

In sum, in re-imagining a new Jewish state of mind, to re-Jew-vinate Judaism in America, requires a commitment to Torah and T'filah, learning and prayerful experiences that speak to us and lifts us up spiritually, personal alignment with the values that we hold sacred and a clarion call to see them fulfilled in a just and compassionate society, the creation of centers of gathering where we hang out and care for one another and enjoy the companionship of fellow Jews and forging a meaningful bond with our fellow Jews in Israel.

My dear friends, if Judaism is to flourish and evolve, if a synagogue such as ours is to be the flagship which sets the course for the next decade and beyond, then it is YOU AND I who will determine the future of Judaism in America.

If what I have laid out speaks to you then I urge you to commit this Rosh Hashanah to living a more Jewishly connected life. I invite you to make a new year's resolution to draw nearer to the life-enhancing rhythm of Jewish life by proactively committing to participate in the re-Jew-vination project here at CKT.

When you leave on your way out you will receive this from me, personally inviting you to make a commitment to Jewish life, your Jewish life. Individually and as a family, think about the ways you can choose to help Jewish life flourish here at CKT. *

There is so much to choose from, so many entryways to add meaning and vitality to your life. Please on this most consequential of days, decide what of consequence really matters in your life and how you will help ensure the future of the Jewish people.

The story is told of a fish who only wanted to find the ocean. So the fish went to the wisest fish she could find. The fish complained that she could not find the ocean because of all the water around her. The wise

fish, responded, indeed little fish you are in the ocean, but sadly you are unaware that you are surrounded by everything you are looking for.

As human beings, as Jews, everything meaningful you are looking for is all around you.

“For we are gifts and we are blessings

We are history in song

We are words and we are stories

We are pictures of the past

We are carriers of wisdom, not the first and not the last” (Josh Nelson)

May the living waters of our Jewish heritage nourish our souls and let us proclaim triumphantly L’dor V’dor, we will protect this chain and let us say