

Easy to be a Jew – Hard to be Jewish
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Rabbi Robert A. Silvers

There's an old Yiddish expression I learned from Rabbi Jack Riemer: "Shver tzu zein a Yid" – "It's hard to be a Jew." And Jack's insight, that I share with you here, has helped me to understand that while that may have been true throughout much of our history, for us who live in America at the beginning of the 21st Century, you'd have to now update that phrase to: "It's easy to be a Jew; it's being **Jewish** that's hard."

Thanks to Woody Allen, being a Jew means being white, nerdy, and short. It may be true (just look at me!) - but so what. It's of little significance. 99% of us are born Jews; we never chose it, and we don't have to do a thing about it or to affirm it. In Reform Judaism, if your mother or father was a Jew – you're a Jew... even if you didn't have a *Bris*, even if you didn't have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The U.S. government doesn't ask you any questions about it on a census form. They don't print "Jew" on your birth certificate, your passport, or your driver's license.

Being a Jew is not about religion, it's about ethnic identity. My guess is that if we had to choose a doctor – all other things being equal –

we'd probably pick the guy named Schwartz over the guys named Ravindranath, Mohamed, Chang, or Santucci. Is that prejudice, or just ethnic solidarity? For a few Jews the label leads to self-hatred, but for most of us, there's a sense of pride. Can you imagine: We're less than .2% of the world's population, yet we make up 22% of all Nobel Prize winners and 36% of all American Nobel Prize winners. We also have three justices currently serving on the Supreme Court and a possible fourth that has been nominated! But as the old commercial used to say – “You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's Rye.” Some Jews hate Gefilte Fish; some non-Jews love a hot pastrami sandwich and kosher dill pickle.

Being a **Jew** is easy; Being **Jewish** is hard. It's not “who your mother or father was, - it's “how you live your life.” Being Jewish is more correctly “**Doing Jewish.**” It's a series of choices that encompass every activity of your day, every day of your life.

It covers the milestones of the Life Cycle – A *bris*, or baby naming for an infant; a Bar or Bat Mitzvah for an adolescent; a wedding for two people in love, and a particular way to bury the dead and grieve – each of these coming with their own set of customs and rituals.

And then there's the Calendar. In addition to our American holidays, we've got more than a dozen Jewish ones: Rosh Hashanah and Yom

Kippur; Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret-Simchat Torah; Passover and Shavuot, Chanukah, Tu B'Shvat, and Purim; Yom HaShoah, Yom Ha Atzma'ut, and Tisha B'av. On some we pray, on some we play; on some we remember, and on some we repent; on some we eat and on some we fast.

Then of course, there's God. To be Jewish is to establish a relationship with God - and that's no easy thing. Sometimes, when we call God, He's nowhere to be found. Other times, God's there looking over our shoulder when we wish He'd just go away.

Before we were "the Jewish people", we were "the Children of Israel" – *Yisrael* being a name that means "to wrestle with God." Like Jacob, we too walk away wounded from that struggle, but we also walk away stronger. In fact, the word "Jewish" comes from the name Judah, *Yehuda* in Hebrew, it means "to praise." To be Jewish, likewise, means to engage in prayer – to praise, to petition, and to thank God. We pray, not just when we're in the proverbial foxhole, and not just once a year in the Fall, but each and every day, and several times a day... That's not easy!

According to the Talmud, you can tell if someone is Jewish because Jewish people are *Rachmanin b'nai Rachmanim* – merciful ones descended from merciful ones. To be Jewish means we give

Tzedakah. It means we do acts of *Chesed* - of Kindness. It means we live a just life - always striving to do the right thing.

On the simplest level, Jewish people learn Torah by hearing it read and studied every Shabbes in shul.

On an advanced level, Jewish people study Talmud, with its give and take debates and discussions about all manner of topics. Our Tradition is to study “a page a day,” every single day (Daf Yomi). It takes then 7 ½ years to study the entire Talmud.

Coming to Temple once a week and following the Torah reading is pretty simple (but, you do have to come.) Studying a page of Talmud every day is pretty hard (but there are translations and commentaries out there to help you). But I’d like to offer you another possibility: Buying a book, and reading a page every day; maybe before you head off to work, maybe over lunch, or maybe before you go to bed. And I’ve got the perfect books: “A Code of Jewish Ethics” by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. The first volume is subtitled “You shall be Holy;” the second volume – “Love you neighbor as yourself.” Telushkin brings Laws from the Torah, discussions from the Talmud, and contemporary stories that teach what it means to live a Jewish life. By learning, and sharing, and debating these passages, you’re not just reading a Jewish book, you’re internalizing Jewish values. They

become a part of you. Then, when you're confronted by ethical dilemmas, you begin to consider them from a Jewish perspective; you can draw upon our rich heritage and history of texts and teachings to guide you in making the right choices.

Let me share with you a passage from Rabbi Telushkin's book, and show you how Jewish teachings and values are timeless in providing insight and guidance for us on contemporary issues that we face everyday.

First, some background... The two great leaders of the Jewish people at the end of the first Century BCE in the land of Israel were Hillel and Shammai. A famous story about them tells of a non-Jew who comes to Shammai and says: "I'll convert to Judaism if you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai sees the challenge as an impudent one, and he chases the man away. The non-Jew comes to Hillel and makes the same offer. Hillel sees this as an opportunity, and responds: "Whatever you hate, don't do to somebody else. That's the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary. Now go and learn it." The man is taken with Hillel's kind manner, and by his brilliant answer and he decides to become Jewish.

Both Hillel and Shammai had many disciples (called Bet Hillel, and Bet Shammai). These schools played an important role in the

development of Judaism in the first century. The Talmud records over 350 cases in which Rabbis from these two schools took different positions on Jewish law. (One concerned the lighting of the Chanukah menorah. Bet Shammai said we would start with eight candles on the first night, and reduce the number each subsequent night, until there was just one candle on the last night. Bet Hillel prescribed the procedure that we follow today: Start with one, and end with eight. Another controversy concerned grounds for divorce. Bet Shammai held that adultery was the only reason to dissolve a marriage. Bet Hillel stood for no-fault divorce: if the couple was unhappy, they shouldn't be forced to stay together.)

Scholars say that Bet Hillel took a more liberal approach to the law, that they represented the poorer classes, and were “loose constructionists” when it came to interpreting the Torah. By contrast, Bet Shammai was more conservative, probably representing the upper classes, and they held to a more narrow and literal interpretation of scripture.

Here's the main thing you need to know: In the hundreds of disputes over Jewish law between these two schools, the Talmud – in a majority of cases, sides with Bet Hillel.

And that brings us to the passage in Rabbi Telushkin's book, A Code

of Jewish Ethics:

“The Intellectual Advantages Gained By Being Tolerant”

The Talmud uses the expression: *Eilu v'eilu* - “These *and* these are the words of the living God” in its description of the more than 300 legal disputes between the Schools of Hillel and of Shammai. The (Heavenly Voice) goes on to declare that Jews should follow the rulings of Hillel and his disciples.

The Talmud explains why: “Because the School of Hillel were kindly and humble, and because they studied their own rulings *and* those of the School of Shammai, and even mentioned the teachings of the School of Shammai before their own.” Apparently, Hillel and his disciples’ greater humility and tolerance made them ethically worthy of being chosen over their opponents.

Shammai and his followers apparently were so certain they possessed the whole truth that they didn’t bother to study their opponents’ views in depth. In contrast, the School of Hillel’s tolerance led it to study Shammai’s views as alternatives to be carefully considered. Consequently, the members of the School of Hillel were repeatedly forced to defend, refine, and deepen their own views.

Two different traditions exist in the Talmud concerning the personal relations between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai. One teaches that members of the two groups “treated each other with affection and kinship.” But another describes an incident in which disciples of Shammai ambushed and killed many of Hillel’s disciples, so that they could out vote them and institute the law according to their interpretation.

These accounts might simply be describing events that happened at different times. Yet, this disturbing account reminds us of intolerant individuals’ unhealthy potential to turn violent.

Being Jewish doesn’t mean taking a time-machine back 2,000 years, and living in the world of Hillel and Shammai. Being Jewish means transporting Hillel and Shammai 2,000 years forward, having them live in *our world*, and letting them teach us how we should think, and what we should do, *today*. We open “A Code of Jewish Ethics”, we read a passage, and then we ask ourselves: How can this help us make sense of *our world*?

Instead of Bet Hillel, and Bet Shammai, I see this as a story about Democrats and Republicans, and about the nature of politics in America. Two thousand years ago, these schools argued and fought over the key issues of their day. In 2016, people on the Right and the

Left are also bitterly fighting over critical issues:

The 2nd Amendment: Gun Control to reduce violence vs. the constitutional right to bear arms.

Abortion: A woman's right to reproductive freedom vs. a fetus' right to life.

Immigration & Refugees: Walling off our borders to control and protect us against potential terrorists and dangerous subversives vs. fulfilling Emma Lazarus' inscription on Lady Liberty: Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The **wretched** refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, **tempest-tossed** to me..”

Taxes: Taking more and more of people's assets to pay for government programs vs. letting people keep and spend their own money.

Global Warming: Saving our planet before we destroy it vs. utilizing precious resources.

LGBT Rights: Recognizing gender equality in all aspects of national civil life, including marriage vs. legislating religious views held by some and the rights of states to legislate for their own citizenries.

Capital Punishment: Dispensing justice for the ultimate crime vs. preventing cruel and unusual punishment.

Wall Street/Equality: Income inequality and the growing economic gap in society vs. regulating our free enterprise system and allowing business to flourish.

ISIS/Military Engagement throughout the World: Preventing the next terrorist attack vs. squandering American lives and resources.

Health Care: A governmental assured universal right for all vs. a non-regulated competitive market where all are responsible for their own health-care needs.

These are very difficult issues, with Americans split about down the middle on either side. And because they impact on our freedom, and on our faith, they arouse great passions in us. As each new administration takes office, and as each new congress is sworn in, the rhetoric is raised and the battles are begun to determine what our public policy should be.

And that brings us to one of the greatest problems facing America today: the tone of political discourse. There's a terrible lack of civility in the way we conduct our nation's business. It's not about effectively and eloquently arguing a case, or trying to convince

others of the righteousness of a cause, or working with opponents to reach an equitable compromise. Instead, it's all about winning at any cost – and it's about crushing and humiliating the opposition as you do so.

It's a politician screaming out in the middle of a State of the Union speech that the President's a liar; or engaging in political gridlock - one party refusing to vote for anything proposed by the other party; political operatives "swift-boating" a candidate who honorably served his country in combat, saying he was a coward and a traitor, or dishonoring those who served – whether a POW or a gold-star family who paid the ultimate price; it's cable news shows inciting millions of listeners and viewers not just to oppose policies and programs, but to hate the people and the party who proposed them; it's using race, or religion or sexual orientation as a way to defeat someone you don't agree with; it's people, who in their fear and zealotry liken the President to Adolf Hitler, or question whether he's even an American citizen, and believe he's an agent of radical Islam sent here to destroy our country; it's about name-calling and ridiculing the way a person speaks or looks (and taking aim at even their spouses or families) rather than engaging in a serious debate about issues.

A few groups – some of them religious – have stood up and spoken out against this negative trend. The Anti-Defamation League issued a statement on Civility in National Public Discourse: It reads: “Let our debate on the issues of the moment be thoughtful and reasoned; Let us look to our elected leaders for leadership, whether or not we support their policies; Let all of us encourage advocacy that is vigorous and pointed but not personal or hostile; we reject appeals of bigotry, racism and prejudice; we reject calls to violence.”

While I welcome the ADL’s statement, the point was already made 1,500 years ago. If you want to know what’s wrong with politics in America today – and how to fix it – all you need to do is open the Talmud, and learn the story of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai.

The Schools of Hillel and Shammai each believed that their own teachings were the word of God. But Bet Hillel knew enough to also believe that there was truth and Godliness in the positions of their opponents. Because they did, they treated those with whom they disagreed with equal respect. They could argue and debate, but at the end of the day, they could be friends with – and even marry, the daughters of their adversaries. But there’s a cautionary tale here: At times, the disciples of Shammai resorted to violence and even murder to get their way. That’s what happened in Israel, in 1995,

when an opponent of the Oslo Peace Accords assassinated then Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin. In many ways, Israel still hasn't healed from his murder. Unless we in America learn the lessons of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, yes, the same thing could happen here.

It's convenient to blame politicians and pundits for the climate of civic discourse in our country, but the unpleasant truth is that we are all responsible. But what is it that we are supposed to do?

I believe the answer is to be more Jewish! Being Jewish helps us not only be better human beings - it helps us be better Americans! Our Jewish values can guide how we think, and influence how we act as American citizens... Our Jewish values teach us to love our fellowman like ourselves; to treat each other respectfully and courteously for each of us has been created *B'tzelem Elohim* – in God's image; they teach us not to gossip or slander – not insult, demean or ridicule others because of their gender, race, religion or ethnicity.

Believe me, if any of our students in SLJ engaged in this kind of language or behavior, they'd immediately be in our Director, Kim Beame's office, with us calling you the parents. And, if this is what we insist on for our children, then this is what we certainly must insist on for our Presidential candidates and our country's leaders!

Our Jewish values must guide us on how we think, and influence how we act as Americans. And it's Jewish learning that ultimately leads us to acting and Being Jewish.

From the Talmudic story of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, we learn that "These *AND* these are the words of the living God" – that there are elements of truth to be found on all sides of the controversial issues that face our country. The key question is NOT: "Which side is right?" but "How do we work through these issues in a civil way?"

From Bet Shammai we discover what happens when people think that they alone possess the truth; and in trying to destroy their adversaries, they, in the end, defeat themselves.

From Bet Hillel we find a model of dealing with difficult issues, and with people of differing views - after 2,000 years, it is still their way that has prevailed.

You don't have to be Jewish to arrive at these insights. But "Being Jewish," and having immersed yourself in Jewish Learning, this wisdom becomes embedded in your minds, then your hearts and in your souls. It makes us better Americans and better human beings; more capable of elevating our behavior and actions, and of

influencing the same amongst others around us. What's at stake here is nothing less than whether or not we can repair our society and save the world.

Friends, Being a Jew is easy: show up once a year, sit for a couple of hours, and then move on.

Being Jewish, that's hard. It's 24/7 - 365. There's a lot to do, and a lot to know. But things that are hard are usually the things that are most worthwhile. Do you want to be a nobler human being? Do you want to be a more virtuous American? Then don't settle for being just a Jew...be more Jewish!

The road to being Jewish begins with Jewish Learning... Saturday morning Torah Learning service at 9:00 am; weekly Melton Classes (during the day or night) offered here in our synagogue and elsewhere in our community; or just reading on your own – Telushkin's "A Code of Jewish Ethics." These are all wonderful places to start.

I am here to help. Your synagogue is here to help. Let more Jewish learning lead us all to *Being* more Jewish in the coming year.

Shana Tova.