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IDENTITY THEFT

Wednesday morning, our group gathers at Ben Gurion Airport to check in for our return flight to the United States. Again, Jay and I get seats near each other. As we board the plane, Jay turns to me with a slight grin and says, “Looking forward to another interesting twelve hours. You plan on relating more of your study sessions with the Rabbi, I hope.”

“Do I have a choice in the matter,” I ask.

“No,” responds Jay, “As long as you understand that.”

“I’m only kidding, Jay,” I assure him, “I enjoy sharing these ideas with you, as much as you appreciate hearing them; besides, this stuff is meant to share.”

After takeoff, we begin to engage in some small talk, mostly reflecting on the stimulating events of the past 10 days. We both agree that it was a highly moving and life-changing experience that could benefit most people, especially unaffiliated and non-active Jews.

“You know, Danni,” Jay remarks to my chagrin, “The most moving and memorable moment of the entire adventure for me, believe it or not, was your impromptu speech at the memorial event in Treblinka. I haven’t stopped thinking about your words, ‘We’re all here because we care about Jews and about Judaism... yet, what are you doing about it? What exactly are we trying to preserve? What do you perceive the future of Judaism to be; a country, a race? Is there any hope for Jewish continuity without its religious dimension...?’ Those are powerful questions that, in the past, I haven’t given much thought and, for which I have no answers.

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“I used to think that Israel, the Jewish State and homeland, is the complete answer, but I’ve come to realize that the emphasis on Israel puts the cart before the horse. Israel is not the reason for the Jewish people to exist. Rather, the Land of Israel is important because of the existence of the Jewish people. True, the Jewish people can only

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flourish to the maximum extent in the Land of Israel and fulfill their national destiny, but the Jewish people survived in exile for 2 millennia without a land. However, no Jewish community ever survived, for any period of time, without *Torah*.

“Trips to Israel can be a powerful emotional experience, but the power of that experience, usually, is directly proportional to the degree

to which being a Jew is a primary aspect of self-definition, which is less true of most young American Jews. Likely, they view a common culture, particular sense of humor, or taste for certain ethnic foods—qualities shared with many non-Jews—as central to their Jewish identity. Their Jewish identity is shallow, because it does not center on religious beliefs or practices.

“Birthright was started in 1994, with the goal of bringing young Jews to the homeland to find or develop roots within the state of Israel. Jewish young adults between 18 and 27 get the opportunity to go to Israel for 10 days completely free, just because they are Jewish. It since has become a prerequisite for any young Jew who wants to keep their parents happy, knowing their child is getting in touch with their heritage. They make sure their passport is in good standing and their bags are packed.

“The kids actually end up having a great time. They soon realize the trip is mostly partying in Israel and getting to meet other young Jews, whose parents were also convinced this is a ‘spiritual trip.’

“In the end, if being Jewish is a slight matter, it does not really matter whether the Jewish people continue to exist. If the continued existence

of the Jewish people is insignificant, of what importance is a state, primarily of Jewish citizens? Israel works most powerfully on those who, at minimum, have been entranced by the Jewish story; wondering how this people, of all the peoples of the world, preserved its national identity, removed from their land for over 2 thousand years. How did we survive? What did we find so important to preserve that we were willing to sacrifice so much to maintain our identity as Jews? Our forebears were willing to die for Judaism; yet, we're hardly willing to live for it.

"I mean, here I am a proud Jew, who is even active in the Jewish community, yet, I haven't a clue what Judaism really means to my very self, let alone anyone else. It is one thing, albeit unfortunate, to be assimilated, to have lost your Jewish identity and connection. But it's quite another thing to be a proud, active Jew and not know the true nature of what you're a part of. It's kind of like the proverbial messenger who forgot the message.

"I cannot help but ask myself, whether I'm truly fit to be in a leadership position. I have to admit that I'm one of those who resonate with a Judaism that is devoid of its religious dimension. So, as you well point out, I'm left to grapple with what I am ultimately left with? What is the value and meaning of a Judaism that is bereft of its vital religious essence? Sadly, I don't have an answer to the question.

"Ironically, I'm not, in the least bit, an anomaly. I am actually part of the norm when it comes to Jewish lay leadership these days. It's like, that's the way it's meant to be; no one questions or tries to change it. To be honest, it's crazy how normal it actually is. What future can Judaism hold, if its very leadership contains but a foggy notion of what it is they're trying to preserve?"

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I listen to Jay, not knowing whether to feel bad or good for him. Obviously, he is having an epiphany and is unnerved. But, in reality, his eyes are being opened to the unwavering truth and despite the pain, it is no doubt a healthy thing. I can only tell him that I relate to the way he is feeling, because I've been there myself.

"Sorry, Danni, I didn't mean to get off like that, but I feel like I've been misled and I am misleading others. I don't even know the Hebrew Aleph-Bet, how am I a leader? How can I be charged with the task of preserving the Jewish future or, as the prevailing buzzword goes, 'Jewish Continuity;' when I don't know the first thing about our Jewish religion and heritage? Isn't that like the proverbial adage, 'The blind leading the blind?'"

"Well congratulations on your epiphany, Jay. Now what do you plan to do about it?"

"Do about it? About what? I'm merely making an observation, albeit an uncomfortable one," asserts Jay. "What do you expect me to do, change reality?"

"No," I say, "Only to change yourself!"

"I need time to sort things out," Danni, "I can't think about what I should do or not do at this very moment."

"Fair enough, Jay, I understand where you're coming from, I'll respect your wishes and drop the subject for now. I'm always available for you, if and when you decide to talk about it."

"Thank you, Danni, that's very kind of you. You're a good friend and a true blessing in my life," Jay offers. "I hope you really understand that I'm not trying to push you away or anything; it's just that I need time. I need some more time."

In truth, I did understand where Jay was coming from; yet, I was still somewhat perplexed. Something didn't feel quite right about the situation. Jay seemed a little overly emotional or stressed about his circumstance. Yes, he may have realized that his life's paradigm was

shattered in some way, but it's not like he couldn't fix it. Many people realize half way through life that they're cruising down the wrong highway, only to make a U-turn and pick up on the right road.

Among the many great figures in Jewish history, R' Akiva's influence and stature is a source of inspiration throughout the ages. The *Talmud* compares him to Moses,⁶⁶ the ultimate compliment within Judaism. His story is one of the most inspirational Jewish stories:

The *Midrash* relates that during the first four decades of his life, Rabbi Akiva was a completely unlettered and ignorant Jew. Moreover, later in life, he freely admitted that when he was ignorant, he possessed a deep and abiding hatred toward the *Torah* scholars of his time.

While shepherding his flock in the hills of Judah, one day R' Akiva became thirsty and went to a brook to take a drink. As he was drawing water, something caught his eye. He saw drops of water falling on a huge stone; directly where the drops were falling was a deep hole in the stone. The shepherd was fascinated. He gazed at the drops and at the stone. "What mighty power there is in a drop of water," mused the shepherd.

"What are you gazing at," he heard someone ask. It was Rachel, his wife and master's daughter. "Look what the little drops of water did to the rock," R' Akiva exclaimed. "Do you think there is hope for me? Suppose I began to study *Torah*, could my heart be penetrated? I'm already 40 years old! Is it not too late to start?"

"It is never too late, Akiva," she assured him.

Upon gazing at the drops of water for a long while, the shepherd's mind was made up. Then and there, Akiva ben Joseph decided to go off and learn *Torah*. If dripping water could bore a hole into solid rock, then, even he—a 40 year old man—could learn *Torah* through diligent effort.⁶⁷

I'm not sure if Jay was familiar with the story of Rabbi Akiva, but in our

⁶⁶ Menachos 29a.

⁶⁷ Avot d'Rav Natan 6:2.