

Ruthie Fierberg, Sermon at The Emanuel Synagogue, June 19, 2010

It's no secret from most of this congregation that I was raised with a strong Jewish identity. Shuffling around the aisles of this sanctuary as a toddler, anxiously answering QuizBowl questions at Junior Congregation, later skipping out on Junior Congregation because I just couldn't resist Rabbi Zelermeier's sermons in the grown-up service.

But, it should be no surprise that when I left Emanuel to attend undergrad at Barnard College of Columbia University my Jewishness was shaken up.

For the first time in my life I confronted my Judaism – which I actually recommend to everyone here. There were times I was angry, frustrated, and saddened. But towards the end of my senior year, I began to come back around. Ultimately, it was a class I took at Columbia that solidified the faith with which I had been raised.

Zionism: A Cultural Perspective. My roommate had suggested that I take the course because of the renowned professor, but I wasn't convinced. There is something about the word "Zionism" that just turned me off. But after shopping classes day and night – and I mean day and night – I decided to stop in on Dan Miron's lecture.

Some people took the class for an easy A or because the readings were short. I took the class because when I sat in on it, I found the professor's voice intellectually intoxicating. I scribbled notes in highlighter; apparently, I had rushed off without a pen – as you can see I was *clearly* anticipating taking *this* class.

Never before had I sat before a more animated (or a more traditional) lecturer. No powerpoint. No notes. Just a man behind a podium, speaking and digging his hands through the air only to pause every once in a while to scratch his chest.

Not until later, when I opened to the title page of my professor's book, did I learn that Professor Dan Miron is the foremost Hebrew literary scholar in the **world**. I was lucky enough that this half of the year he was serving in his post at Columbia rather than his other post at Hebrew U in Israel.

What captivated me most, despite the course's title, was the way in which Prof. Miron consistently described the Jewish people as a nation. I suppose he best narrated it in his explanation of what scholars dub Spiritual Zionism. You see there is Herzl's Zionism, Political Zionism, Religious Zionism, Socialist Zionism.

But most intriguing and, I feel, applicable to the Jewish people today and forever is the message of Spiritual Zionism. Ahad Ha'am, whom you could say was the father of Spiritual Zionism, believed in a renewal of the Jewish people as a precursor to their renewal *in Zion*.

Professor Miron spoke in a thick Israeli accent to his class mainly of Jewish students, but certainly a mixed population, urging us to understand the *heart* of the Jewish people.

At the heart of the Jewish people is the Jewish soul. In his words, "You are Jewish because you are."

So simple. It sounds silly – like one of those circular definitions you'd find in Merriam Webster. And yet, it made perfect sense to me. "You are Jewish because you are."

A lightbulb went off in my head. Oh!! So that's why I feel so Jewish all the time.

But in all seriousness, this one sentence struck a nerve. It was as if someone else put into words what I had been trying to explain to the world my entire life. I am Jewish because I am. There is no changing it.

Professor Miron was trying to get at the depth of 'soul.' If you are born a Jew, you are born with a Jewish soul. There is a piece of you that no matter how you live your life is irremovable, inescapable and completely unique. It's a piece that connects you to G-d and to all of the Jews throughout the world. It is so far ingrained into YOU despite how deep a person may want to bury it – and people try hard to bury it.

But the Jewish soul (buried or not) is the common thread upon which we as Jews weave our Jewish identities. And Lord knows there are quite the variety in the patterns of these weavings.

Our common Jewish identity is where we can all gain and give strength to the Jewish people. Yet too often we suppress this identity. It's almost as if we are afraid to be different. We engage in this third-grade internal conflict: "but I don't want to be different."

The truth is, what makes us different makes us a viable source of positive change. What makes the Jewish people different – all the way down to the soul – is our faith. A faith whose only hard and fast rule is to be a good person. This is not to say that other faiths or other people's souls are devoid of goodness. I don't believe that. But Jews have an

unwavering resilience and determination throughout history that prove us a source of active undying goodness.

We are a cultural religion, a religious culture. The observance may vary and so may the cultural traditions, but one principle is constant: be a good person. In this way, our faith can help renew the hope and good in the world.

Yet, we seem to aim to eliminate this gift. Perhaps we feel in competition with non-Jews and the more we suppress our uniqueness the more level the playing field. We have an issue of self-respect which we demonstrate by allowing others to define us. For some reason, the modern world has taught that faith and spirituality are no longer valuable and we believe them.

Science and fact are favored over religion and intangibility. Now I have no gripes with science, but we must remind ourselves that science and religion are not mutually exclusive. Being spiritual does not make you less smart. In fact, I would argue it makes you more so. But our recent rejection of religion reveals one thing: we have an issue in self-respect.

We allow others to define who we are and what will make us strong.

In trying to prove ourselves in the world at large, we allow ourselves to be convinced that faith is the problem.

The last time I was home, Rabbi Small conducted a little survey at the beginning of his sermon. He asked for a show of hands from the congregation: who believed anti-Semitism was the biggest threat to Jews in the modern world? A few hands crept up at the time. But when he asked who believed assimilation was the biggest threat to Jews in the modern world, a sea of arms rose.

We know what our problem is. So did the Zionist scholars before us. S.Y. Agnon wrote a beautiful story, "The Lady and the Peddler," about how Jews allow themselves to be swallowed up. We allow the rest of the world to dictate how we should practice (or not practice) our religion. We must recapture our Jewish identity because if we have any respect for ourselves, we will not deny that deepest piece of ourselves: the Jewish soul.

For in our Jewish soul kindness hibernates. Generosity sleeps. Love slumbers. Hope lingers. We must awaken them. If we take on the issue of self-respect we also take on the task of defining ourselves as a people and using these aspects of our soul to benefit humankind.

Ahad Ha'am preached a revitalization of Jewish National Morality which consisted of three operating principles: do what is morally right, do for charity and believe in G-d.

We can choose to be powerful forces of humanitarianism with reverence for the human condition. We are the chosen people. As such we can *choose* who we want to be.

Zionist theorist Martin Buber described Judaism as a process. In terms of the Jewish people as a whole, the first step in the process is unity, the second action, and the third future-thinking.

As the "people of the book," I think the best action we can take after unifying beneath our Jewish soul is a step towards education. We need to approach our faith with a desire to understand and an enthusiasm to transmit knowledge down for generations to come. You can even begin with those short, easy A readings I had to do for Prof. Miron!

In my personal experience, I have absolutely learned that Judaism is a process. I can honestly still say that I'm not sure what I want from my Jewishness in my future. I try to take it one day at a time. Luckily Judaism, and my soul that came with it, is adaptable.

I am living proof of Ahad Ha'am's theory that the Jewish soul is inherent, it asserts itself through childhood and it is dynamic through life.

One thing is certain: I am Jewish because I am. There is no escaping my Jewish soul and I'm glad for it. All I can do is work to be a good person. I urge you to do the same because the capacity to do so lies within your soul.

Shabbat Shalom