

ROSH HASHANAH morning 2023

Let's not be so WEIRD.

I've been called a lot of things in my life.

At Starbucks I've been called Yerin or Urine, and once instead of Rabbi I was called "Rib Eye."

I've been called Kapi, Mr. Kaplutnik, and in the IDF I had no name, I was just 722 4690.

My kids call me Aba, or Daddy, when they need my credit card.

I've been called a dirty Jew, an obnoxious Israeli, and not a "real rabbi," but I've never been called WEIRD.

Until this summer.

I was called WEIRD by Micha Goodman, one of the most revered writers and thinkers and a resident scholar at The Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

And he is right. I am WEIRD - but guess what - so are you.

When I say weird, I am not talking about Webster's definition, meaning strange, odd, or maybe even creepy.

When I say weird, I am referring to the acronym W.E.I.R.D. which stands for:

Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic – democratic, NOT as party affiliation, but rather describing people living in a country founded on democratic ideals.

Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic –

W.E.I.R.D

The term was introduced in 2010 by Joseph Henrich who provides the rationale of why and how, over time, our minds have become WEIRD, and how as WEIRD people we think and act very differently than people from non-WEIRD cultures.

Henrich shares many examples to illustrate his point- but my favorite was a study in which two different groups of people - one WEIRD and one not, were shown a photograph of a crowd in which every single person is either looking extremely sad or even crying, but in the middle of the crowd, there is one young woman with a big smile on her face.

If I asked you how this young woman is feeling, it is safe to say that most of you would look at her face and answer that she is happy. However, a non-WEIRD person would have the exact opposite answer - they would say “she is extremely sad”.

“How could that be? She is smiling,” you might retort.

To which, they would answer: “how is it possible for her to be happy when everyone around her is so sad?”

The ability to determine the feelings of one single individual, with total disregard for anyone or anything around them, is something non-WEIRD people just can't understand.

But we can - in our eyes there is nothing WEIRD about it.

You see, the biggest difference between the two groups of people is our sense of individualism.

For WEIRD people, individual freedoms and rights are paramount. An absolute and eternal truth. But in fact, they are not.

These ideas are largely confined to the West - where “WEIRD” people live.

So, you are probably asking yourself...” So what? What is the problem with individualism?”

I am here today to tell you that as JEWS –we were never meant to be so WEIRD.

Judaism was not founded on the worship of the individual. Judaism was never meant to be a religion where the “I” stands in the center. Where the ME, ME, ME comes before the US.

3000 years ago - our rabbis taught us- אם אין אני לי מי
“If I am not for myself, who will be there for me - but if I am only for myself - who am I?”

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says:

“Judaism is a communal faith, which is why the covenant at Mt. Sinai was made, not with individuals, but with an entire people. As Jews we confess our sins together, we mourn together. The holiest prayers in Judaism require the gathering together of 10 people.”

There is a place in Judaism for focusing on the individual, for taking care of ourselves. But when we become so involved with our own individual needs, and wants, then the voices of rabbis from the past come back to haunt us, asking – who have you become?

So, I ask you – who have we become?

I believe we have become too self-involved. We engage with our Judaism only in the places that make us feel good and comfortable. We prioritize theater, dinner with friends, travelling and soccer practice over the need to deepen our own Jewish roots. We watered down Judaism to a family meal twice a year, we became blind to the beauty, strength and comfort that can be found in a strong Jewish identity and Jewish community.

To the point we put at risk the ability of our community to survive in the future.

It wasn't always like this.

From Judaism's conception, our minds were wired with two words, sacrifices and commandments.

For well over 3000 years, we were taught that nothing important happens in our lives without sacrifice, and that we were given 613 commandments that give our lives meaning and purpose.

Then came the 19th century, and the establishment of the Reform movement, eliminating the mentioning of sacrifices and pushing forward WEIRD ideas, like personal autonomy.

Which is our ability to “Pick and Choose” how we live our Jewish lives, and throwing out any sense of obligation to God or community. Personal autonomy left it to the individual to make his or her choices, not realizing that our minds might not be capable of doing so, because they have changed with time, they became WEIRD.

And while as a proud Reform Jew, I am glad that we have no aspirations to return to such rituals as animal sacrifices, I often think about how far we have moved, as a movement, from the idea of sacrificing something of ourselves for a greater ideal, from the idea that we have obligations to each other - not just to ourselves.

And so, this is where we find ourselves, a WEIRD people, navigating between religious tradition grounded in sacrifice and communal obligations, and individualism, where the “I” comes before the “us”, the “me” before the “we”.

In a place where we can be smiling and happy, even if all around us people are hurting.

Where the pendulum between individual needs, and communal benefit, has swung too far putting our Judaism at risk.

Let me reiterate what I said earlier. I believe Reform Judaism cannot, and will not, survive in this age of individualism.

Orthodox Judaism, on the other hand, grounded in the roots of sacrifice and commandments, will.

But orthodox Judaism is not the Judaism I want to practice. It's good for some people, not for me.

Our Judaism is one that doesn't discriminate against any person based on their gender or their sexual orientation, one where gay people can get married under a chupa and the non-Jewish parents of my Bar Mitzvah students can hold the Torah with pride. It's one where my wish to be cremated will be respected. It's a Judaism where I do not have to accept the Torah as a literal text, believe in an omnipresent God, or obey Rabbis who know with absolute certainty exactly what God wants of me. Where I do not need to adhere to a set of laws set 500 years ago, that leave almost no place for personal interpretation. Mine is not a Judaism that in its worst manifestations promotes Jewish supremacy and dangerous messianic ideas.

Our Judaism has a mission, a purpose. It's pretty basic.

We are supposed to be a light unto the nations.

Our role is to be a contra cultural force - and step away from the idol worship of individualism.

In the past we used a fear of God's punishment should we disobey God's commandments and the shame of being excommunicated - those are no longer an option.

None of us want to live in a world where we do things out of fear or shame. How many of you were told you can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery if you have a tattoo?

Thank God we still have the ancient tactic of Jewish guilt.

Just like the Jewish mother who sees her son at the holidays and when he comments that she lost a lot of weight, she tells her son that she really hasn't been eating lately." "Why?" He wonders. To which his mother replies, "I didn't want to have a full mouth if you called!"

But as we all know too well, even after this exchange, the son didn't call more often. Jewish guilt doesn't really work for our kids or grandchildren.

So, what's another option?

I recently asked a friend if he ever does anything Jewish simply out of a sense of obligation – not out of desire. His honest reply was that he goes to Shiva visits only because he feels obligated.

It might surprise you – but my response was "That's wonderful." That is exactly what we do as Jews, we put others first, we feel their pain, we respond to it, we make the sacrifice. We act as a community.

No new widower should ask me when deciding if they should sit Shiva or not "but who will come?" We all should.

I don't not want to live in a world where "each person is on their own." Where we lose the sense of "Kol Israel Arvim Ze la Ze," of mutual responsibility for each other.

I want to feel obligated; I want to know that my presence matters.

And I understand this requires personal sacrifice.

A real sacrifice, as in to suffer loss of something, to give up something -not to advance ourselves, our careers, our financial situation, or that of our families, but a sacrifice for the benefit of our community, our people, a sacrifice made for a belief or for an ideal?

When is the last time that we took upon ourselves doing something Jewish not because we wanted to - but because we HAD to. Not because it was fun but because it was important.

Well – you are doing it now! Yes, our services I hope are beautiful, meaningful and uplifting, but I know that most of you are here today driven by a deep sense of obligation. Because you know, or feel you are part of a Jewish community, something greater than yourselves, a tradition, a history, a purpose, that requires effort and sacrifice to not just survive but to flourish!

21 years ago, I came to this country and one of the things I immediately fell in love with was... Red Lobster. You see, in Israel, I grew up in a non-observant home, and while we didn't have any restrictions on eating seafood, it was expensive, and saved for only the most special occasions. But here...Red Lobster... "All You Can Eat Tuesdays". So, I lived from Tuesday to Tuesday until one day I stopped, and realized I represent something. I was the Jewish Educator at the JCC and I felt such a sense of gratitude to be in that role that I felt it came with an obligation – to be a better representative of Judaism. It was close to 20 years ago, this very week, that I last entered a Red Lobster, or a red lobster entered me.

It might not be a huge thing that changed the world, but this commitment, and the sacrifice it required (yes, I still

remember how tasty lobster is) helped me develop a stronger and more solid connection to who I was as a Jew.

Now, I am not assuming you are going to leave here today and give up lobster. In fact, that might not be a significant sacrifice to you – but what I want you to do is to leave here today and figure out WHAT IS?

Today I am asking you not to make a New Year's resolution, but rather a New Year's commitment.

And by doing so you are not giving up on your freedoms because a commitment is actually the ultimate assertion of human freedom. It's shifting our level of awareness so that we can reach the highest levels of our aspirations.

I'm asking you to realize that just like me – you are WEIRD, that individualism has become our idol we worship, and that if you believe that as a Jewish people, as a Reform Movement, we have a role to play in the world, then you understand it can't happen without making a real commitment, without willing to make sacrifices.

Can you make a commitment that this year you will do something more than you did last year to feed your Jewish soul?

If you are a working parent, pulled in a million directions, can you make a commitment to create, enhance or bring back a sense of Shabbat to your home? I don't know a better way to instill a love of Judaism in your children.

Can you make the sacrifice and leave work early, give up an after-school activity or a show at the Maltz and attend Friday night services?

If you golf or play cards or tennis a few times a week, can you occasionally give that up to attend a lunch and learn class? To educate yourself Jewishly?

If you are a happily ever retiree travelling the world - can you sacrifice yet another trip to another exotic place in the world and commit to finally making that trip to Israel a reality? Or going back because your last trip was far too long ago?

Can you postpone those errands, and commit to volunteering with our social justice efforts? Next time you go to Publix, can you pick up some bread, peanut butter and jelly and make those sandwiches for the hungry? How is it possible that not every single member here contributes to this cause?

If your kid has a Bar/ Bat Mitzvah coming up - can you give up a softball practice to not skip a Bar Mitzvah lesson? Can you commit to not turning your back on the temple once the celebration is over? To be there for your community even when you don't "need or use" the temple?

Can you make a financial sacrifice? Can you let go of that one additional "thing", be it what it is, and instead give its value to a Jewish cause you never gave to, or give more to the one you already support?

Can you make the sacrifice of leaving just a little bit less of your wealth to your kids and grandchildren – who God willing they are doing very well – and leave that little bit – as a legacy gift to a Jewish organization, for that organization that little

can be a lot. A little legacy gift so that what you believe in will survive many years after you are gone.

Can you give up that dinner with friends and commit to going to that Shiva, to not be the smiling person when people around you are in pain?

Can we leave here today with a commitment to affirm that being Jewish isn't a religion for individuals, that it isn't about "what's in it for me" but rather about my role, my obligation, my sacrifice - so that when those voices from the past come to haunt us and ask what have you become - we have a good answer.

I believe we can. With some help from God.

Adonai our God help us remember the WE over the ME, help us realize the power in us, give us the courage to make the necessary sacrifices, be by our side as we fulfill our role as a people, to be that source of light.

Help us be less WEIRD.