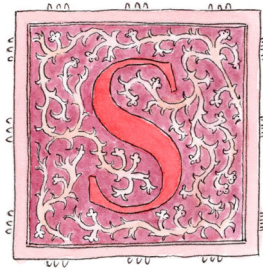


Seven Pillars of Wisdom for 21st-Century Jews



TOP ME IF you've heard this one before: Once upon a time, and not so long ago, things at our suburban shul/Jewish community center/local Federation were going great. Sure, we had disagreements — we're Jews! — but ours was the sort of community that felt truly diverse and inclusive and

warm. And then, something happened. What exactly isn't clear, but suddenly there were discussions we felt we just couldn't have, particularly about Donald Trump/Black Lives Matter/Israel and Palestine. Members started leaving, the rabbi/executive director/vice president for communal affairs did her best to patch things up, but it just doesn't feel the same.

Help us!

This, with very slight variations, is the grim note I get too often these days. You can spend an eternity pondering how we got here and a few foundations' endowments dreaming up complicated schemes to dig us out of what seems like a dishearteningly dark moment in American Jewish history. Or you can simply accept a set of

sober, unappealing, and irrefutable observations and move on with your life. They are, in ascending order of magnitude, as follows:

First, our turbulent moment in time isn't going away anytime soon. This isn't a pendulum that's swinging, or a crisis awaiting some soothing, responsible adult to lull it back to sleep. The answer isn't seeking moderates to elect or tepid policies to endorse. What we have here is nothing short of an epochal upheaval, the end of one period of history and the beginning of another.

Second, if you're wondering which era, precisely, is at an end, I regret to inform you that it's the Age of Enlightenment, that cheerful chapter in our collective story that gave us everything from representative democracy and life-saving science to Double Stuf Oreos. The mad howls drowning out rational discourse these days — the insistence, say, that gender, which is literally coded into every cell in our bodies, is fluid and malleable while race, a dubious notion watered down further by millennia of intermarriage, is harshly fixed — aren't the shouts of barbarians storming the gates. The call is coming from inside the house. The callers aren't Marxists or radical leftists or loony woke Millennials. They're professors and pundits and politicians who have come to believe that liberalism, now that it's no longer fettered by faith and family, and now that it has powerful digital technologies at its service, should take it upon itself to achieve its true essence and create a society of solipsistic individuals whose liberties and ethics are managed exclusively by a class of self-selected and infallible experts.

Third, if the former paragraph strikes you as harsh, it's because it is. You may reject the analysis at its core, but not the fervor with which the New Inquisitors approach anyone and anything they deem worthy of cancellation. That's because the movement upon us now, whatever you believe its reasons or origins to be, is very much a religious one, a fifth Great Awakening that won't stop until all either join it or are vanquished. The taking of the knee, the toppling of statues — all the markings of a crusade.

Fourth, this being the case, conversation is futile. Engaging

with the Twitter Torquemadas won't get you anywhere. Open the door—of your home, your school, your shul—to these ideas and possibilities, and pretty soon, like the arsonists in Max Frisch's delightfully depressing play of the same title, they'll burn everything down. That's because the cats urging you to examine your privilege, repent for sins real and imagined, and rewrite history to benefit the newly elect are religious zealots, a sort not particularly known for having a taste for compromise or compassion.

Fifth, and final, it all comes down to this: It's us versus them. If you're looking for labels to help you understand who belongs in what group, here are two imperfect but helpful ones: anti-Zionists and Zionists. Team A, to put it very bluntly, gravitates to the belief that America and Israel are essentially evil; it dislikes traditional religion, which it sees as nothing more than an excuse men came up with to oppress women, whites to lord it over blacks, the rich to take more from the poor, etc.; and it distrusts the nuclear family for many of the same reasons, which is why we're looking at historically low marriage and birth rates. Team B, on the other end, understands itself in terms of its fealty to family, faith, and nation, three organizing principles that stress community over self, which is why its members feel innately proud of Israel, the best earthly manifestation of these principles cohering into a real-life polity. Lament our Manichean moment, wish for a better time and an age more accommodating of nuance and complexity, but understand that to survive, you must stand with your people.

Who, exactly, might these people be? And what does standing with them entail? These are complicated questions, no less so because our contemporary wreckers of civilization, like some of their predecessors, swear that it's a uniquely Jewish redemption they have in mind. Taking a page out of the playbook of the Yevsektsiya—the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party, which was tasked with “the destruction of traditional Jewish life, the Zionist movement, and Hebrew culture” until it was itself destroyed in the Stalinist purges—these people are subverting many of our core principles in the

Rather than design audacious and costly blueprints for solving grand and abstract problems, we should focus our energies on giving passionate people the resources they need to cultivate their own small corner of the Jewish world.

service of foreign, malicious agendas and ideologies. In a powerful essay for *Tablet* magazine, Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy called these folks, somewhat harshly but not unfairly, the “un-Jews.” How, then, are Jews, communally and individually, to proceed?

Culture wars call for bullet points, so here are the seven pillars of a strong Jewish foundation for the future.

Think Small. You may be a dentist in Cleveland or the richest Jew in America. You may be the guy who goes to shul twice a year at best or the head honcho at a Major Jewish Organization. Whoever you are, here's an important reminder: It's not your job to save the Jews. That's because ours is not a top-down religion, nor does it have much of an appetite for sweeping, dogmatic solutions. Concepts such as going viral or growing too big to fail are innately alien to our faith. We pray in groups of 10 because we know one's too few but 100 is far too many. For community to be sustainable, it must consist of smallish clusters of people who occupy the same physical space and pursue the same attainable and sustainable goals.

And because community—not more government, or better tech, or muscular policies—is the antidote to the devastations of the current moment, the way out of the current crisis must begin by recognizing that there isn't one way out. There are a hundred, a thousand,

A century or more ago, Zionism brought us Jewish liberation; it's time we finally started acting the part.

3 million, or as many as there are groups of Jews interested in being Jewish together and charting a shared course for the future. Some things may still look the same from community to community—we are, after all, united by our *mesorah*, the written and oral Torah transmitted, as *Pirkei Avot* teach us, from Moses on downward through the generations. But the tradition contains multitudes, and the choices and ideas that inspire six couples in a suburb of Baltimore may not be the ones that excite the members of a small synagogue in Fresno.

So rather than design audacious and costly blueprints for solving grand and abstract problems, we should focus our energies on giving passionate people the resources they need to cultivate their own small corner of the Jewish world. This, after all, is how Judaism survived for nearly 2,000 years, with little nodes across the globe, connected by a neural network of belief, but otherwise free to cultivate customs, styles, and sensibilities. It made Judaism not only feasible—ask the Jebusites or the Hittites what happened to groups who clung to massive, unyielding tribal structures—but also unimaginably rich and diverse, with the best insights and practices eventually spreading across space and time.

These days, sadly, we're more likely than not to ignore this hard-earned bit of wisdom: The well-meaning men and women who run and fund much of Jewish life too often behave like the schlemiel in the old Jewish joke who looked for his lost penny but only under the streetlight, focusing on the large concentrations of Jewish people, money, and influence in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and a handful of other major urban centers. That's a shame. For American

Judaism to thrive, it must urgently decentralize, investing not in banner projects but in little local initiatives that make Jewish life exciting for small groups of people all over the place, the only sort of groups that ever really mattered.

Don't Be Stupid. I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by blandness, dragging themselves through social-media platforms, looking for an angry fix while ranting about ice cream or reality TV or what some model's brother posted on Instagram. For too many otherwise sane and sensible people, this is what being proudly Jewish has become: a constant stream of petty conflagrations, an exhortation to get upset every time some boob says or does something remotely offensive, and an invitation to a never-ending torrent of pointless arguments with random strangers. This attitude, which passes as activism for many who should know better, owes its life force to *hasbara*, the untranslatable Hebrew word that loosely means "explanation." It's the idea—most recently expressed by Israel's newly elected foreign minister, Yair Lapid—that if we only presented our point of view better, our haters would eventually come to see things our way.

This singularly stupid conviction rests on three fallacies: first, that we have an obligation to explain ourselves at all. Second, that people who hate Jews can be convinced if only they were presented with the right facts in the right order. And third, that even if we don't win any converts, there's intellectual and moral merit in a well-crafted argument. None of these assertions are true, and not a single minute more should be wasted on meaningless quibbles. Free and proud people owe no one any explanations, particularly on the matter of their inconvenient survival. Want to boycott Israel? Groovy! Thankfully, we've come up with an antidote, a system of thought that encourages Jews to wean themselves from caring what their haters think or do. It's called Zionism, and it means that if someone doesn't wish to grace us with their ice cream/bad TV shows/academic conferences, we can simply shrug our shoulders, move on, and acquire the thing elsewhere, most likely by making it ourselves and making it better. That's what people do when they're in command of their

destiny. A century or more ago, Zionism brought us Jewish liberation; it's time we finally started acting the part.

Be the Party. As most of us learn sometime around sophomore year of high school, attitude is everything. Which is why it's painful to watch so many Jews act as if the great good is always elsewhere, in the newsrooms of legacy publications or the boardrooms of multinational corporations or the classrooms of ivy-covered universities. You hardly need to have been the most popular kid in your class to know that no one wants to sit with the wannabes. People, bless them, tend to gravitate to those who seem confident, relaxed, happy, and proud of whatever it is they are and are doing. Which, for example, helps explain the enormous surge of popularity of Chabad on campus. Rather than engage in endless debates about politics or fret about what other groups are doing or saying or strive to attract the mediocrities other people consider cool, the rebbe's emissaries simply host Shabbat dinners that are genuinely welcoming and fun, inviting kids to take refuge from the thinky tedium of life on the quad, with a bite of chicken and a taste of Torah. It works because it feels lived-in and genuinely joyous, not like an attempt to solve a problem or seem smart or impress the dean. There's no easier way to win friends and influence people than simply behaving as if the best party ever is right here, right now, and everyone's invited.

Know Who Your Friends Are. Speaking of winning friends and influencing people, it turns out that the art of picking your crew — another high school survival skill — is largely lost these days in too many corners of Jewish officialdom. Here, then, is a necessary refresher: Our friends aren't necessarily those we'd *like* to see by our side. They aren't the ones whose mothers or grandmothers marched with our own, no matter how noble the cause. They aren't merely alumni of the same schools or subscribers to the same symphony orchestras. Our friends are the people who believe what we believe, and who stand up for us when it matters most, not meekly and mildly but with flailing arms and a full heart. American Jews are fortunate to

More than most other faith traditions,
Judaism must be practiced, not just pondered
or discussed. Its insights become available
through deeds, its benefits revealed only once
sincere commitments are made and kept.

have at their side a stunningly diverse coalition of supporters, from the Church of God in Christ — the country's largest Pentecostal denomination, a largely African-American group that has recently dispatched one of its senior leaders to be the bishop of Jerusalem — to Indian Americans, who came out en masse to demonstrate in support of Israel during its recent conflagration with Hamas. Instead of finding reasons to fear and loathe those fellow Americans who actually want to stand with us, we should learn to hug them back and stop pining for the attention of the Hollywood darlings or the sophisticates who would never embrace us anyway. As a wise rabbi once put it, if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with — or at least those who are with you.

Just Do It. For too long, American Jewish life was one big escrow account. Pay your local Jewish organizations, went the logic, and they in turn will make sure that communal life proceeds apace. This model worked well in the second half of the 20th century, which was all about helping Jews learn how to become fully American; it's not the best fit for the first half of the 21st century, which is all about helping Americans learn how to be fully Jewish again. That's why the organizations and platforms that do best are not the ones that offer effortless engagement but the ones that ask members to do something, anything, from studying a page of Talmud

a day to learning a *bissel* Yiddish while they walk the dog. More than most other faith traditions, Judaism must be practiced, not just pondered or discussed. Its insights become available through deeds, its benefits revealed only once sincere commitments are made and kept. And knowing that its adherents are Jews, the most stiff-necked of all people, it offers enough paths to redemption to satisfy anyone's spiritual wanderlust. That old Nike commercial had it just right: If you want something to happen, even something as elusive as spiritual fulfillment, just do it.

Pay Up. Conviction and confidence alone, however, can take you only so far. If you want to soar to great heights, you better have great health insurance, and too many of our most dedicated and inspired leaders don't. Amble into any Jewish organization anywhere in the country, and two things are likely to be true. First, the person most responsible for the organization's success isn't necessarily its storied and adequately paid leader, but some young person who gave up a more remunerative career option to work full-time for the Jews. And second, that person most likely does not benefit from access to a generous family-leave policy, say, or subsidized day care, or a living wage that makes raising a Jewishly engaged family feasible. Any organization that says it cares about nurturing Jewish life—which is to say, really, every Jewish organization—should do its utmost to make Jewish life affordable and sustainable, beginning with those dedicated few who have made our communal well-being their life's work. When the Jewish professional world is known for offering unparalleled benefits to those caring and committed enough to enter it—particularly when it comes to having, raising, housing, feeding, and educating children—we'll know we're closer to redemption.

Have a Theory of Change. Finally, as we rethink our American Jewish lives, individually and communally alike, let us remember one key insight: We are a covenantal people. As my friend Rabbi Ari Lamm likes to teach: A covenant, unlike a contract (social or otherwise), isn't interested in tightly controlling every possible outcome. A covenant wants you to sign the dotted line first and learn to keep

your promises later, as that first covenanter, Abraham, learned the hard way. A covenant, in fact, is possible only because it assumes that people change, and it wishes to inspire them to change wisely. That's why covenantal people waste no time adjudicating the shortcomings of the past and a lot of energy imagining a better tomorrow. It's also why they're more likely to forgive failings, forge alliances with past enemies, and adapt more readily to change. Rather than live out the dramas of their ancestors, they focus on the part they are meant to play. And rather than expect today's moral crisis to require the same solution as yesterday's, they are free to dream up unorthodox approaches and take measured risks in pursuit of their goals.



Risk, perhaps, is at the heart of the matter. In large part, the technology industry grew into a colossus because it understood that money was plentiful but good ideas forever in short supply, which meant that prudent investors acted dutifully by taking risks and investing in a slew of start-ups, realizing that the handful that succeed would more than pay for the bulk that didn't.

Jewish communal life is too often organized around the exact reverse principle, believing that good ideas and passionate people are readily available everywhere while money comes only from a few deep pockets. When our best and brightest have to invest much of their time and energy in getting and keeping grants, writing quarterly reports, and managing the expectations of funders, they naturally grow risk-averse, mirroring the same emotional valence of the foundations and organizations that support them. We can do better than that. We've got enough bright people on our team, and the hour is getting late. If change is to begin somewhere, even before the aforementioned attitudes take hold, it will begin by radically reducing the time and effort it takes the sort of folks who can save us to get the money and the help they need to get going.

We have the dreams; all we need now are the dollars and the love. *