

## **The Visual Generation**

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Rosh Hashanah Morning, September 10, 2018

The High Holy Days change last. So, if you only spend these two days with us, the changes in American Jewish life over the past few decades might not be that noticeable.

In 1978, forty years ago, I was serving in my first official student biweekly in Parkersburg, West Virginia, using the old (small) Union Prayer Book, accompanied by an organ and a non-Jewish soloist who sat up in the balcony behind the bimah. A lot has changed since then.

The Cantor and I, both women, standing here in front of you is one thing that's different, but it's only the tip of the iceberg. The congregation has changed as much or perhaps even more than its leadership.

Who is in the pews?

The composition of our American congregations is dramatically different than when I was first studying to become a rabbi. Outreach, the big battle of the 1980s for the inclusion of non-Jewish partners and of those who chose Judaism, has brought tens of thousands into our communities. In the 1990s the Reform movement, and a decade later the Conservative movement, became more welcoming to gays and lesbians and over time also to younger people who define themselves as queer or questioning, and even to the trans and non-binary communities. We are also more racially diverse, recognizing Mizrahi Jews and

others who are not of European descent as part of our families and congregations. A recent study found that in the SF Bay Area, Jews who are not white are fully one quarter of the members of Jewish-identified families.

Think of your own family—aunts, uncles, and cousins, perhaps a son-in-law or daughter-in-law, your children and grandchildren. Who's welcome is taken for granted today as part of our community, who might not have been so readily accepted 40 years ago?

These changes are not just in the **who**, they are also in the **how**. They influence how we speak to one another, and how we speak to and about God. They have influenced our style of worship, our music, what we wear to Temple, how we welcome children into our community, how we celebrate their coming of age, and even how we conduct rituals when a loved one has died. The range of choices for every aspect of Jewish life, and the resources available to non-specialists, has radically altered how people negotiate their practice. The synagogue, even in more isolated areas, is no longer the only show in town, and the seminary-ordained or –invested clergy are not the only ones hanging up their shingle as Jewish professionals.

All of this can be alternatively exhilarating or distressing, but this morning I want to talk about another change, one that seems equally challenging when I think about the future of our people.

We, the Jewish people, are the “People of the Book.” Originally it was a scroll, as it was actually the early Christians who first adopted the codex, the proto-book, so as to distinguish themselves. But eventually we too had books, along with the

Book of Books for which, in the eighth century, the Muslims gave us that familiar nickname (People of the Book). We were the people of the Biblical text, but also of much more, of commentaries and codes, written words that were studied and pondered, and through which we found our spirituality and our anchor in a world that was often inhospitable.

But today text is passé. We live in a visual world. It's not just Facebook with its pictures and Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, and whatever else those younger than me are using today. It's also the podcasts and the TED Talks. Someone recommends something to me and I look for a transcript to read, as for me reading is how I study and probe something deeply, but often a written text is not provided. It seems people today would rather see and hear than read.

People look twice at the books in my office, and I joke that I am a dying breed, with all that paper. The website Sefaria (from the Hebrew word *sefer*, book) has made so much of my library superfluous. But it isn't really about whether the words are on a page or on a screen, it's whether people relate to words at all.

Technology is shaped by the way we think, but it also shapes us in return.

A trivial example: coffee. It may not seem like much but you can trace the adoption of the custom of staying up all night to study on Shavuot and also on Sh'mini Atzeret to the introduction of coffee in different regions. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, coffee and all-night study had reached the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire. But it was not until the 1700s, when decade by decade as coffee spread to the Rhineland, that so too spread all-night study in the communities that this new taste sensation had reached.

So I worry about the change in the way we relate to text. What will happen to Jewish study if it is the sharing of images that becomes what people do naturally and not the sharing of text?

In many ways Judaism is a nonvisual culture. Our God has no body nor even an image of a body-*ein lo demut haguf ve eyn lo guf*. The second commandment forbids the worship of images of anything on the earth, or in the sea below, or in the heavens above the earth, and for some this has meant no images at all, as Islam has interpreted it.

Many of us have read Chaim Potok's novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*, about a young artist whose great work, a tribute to his mother, is unacceptable to his family. Sure the story is about the incompatibility of art to a branch of traditionalist Judaism, but more deeply, it is about the freedom of the artistic temperament and the boundaries and distinctions that are native to Jewish thought.

For a generation, rabbis have been worried about sports and Jewish continuity, about soccer sounding the death knoll of Jewish life, when what we really should have been concerned with were the unanticipated consequences of our smartphones and Alexa-like devices.

This summer a group of us from the congregation travelled to Spain and to Israel. Most of the trip was focused on the history of Sephardic Judaism, that part of the Jewish community that lived for a thousand years in Iberia only to be expelled in 1492. We saw evidence of how they continued to maintain their identity through their special language, Ladino, their rich culture of customs and foods, and a healthy sense of the superiority of the *Sepharadi Tahor*, the Jews of Spanish

descent. In Spain we saw synagogues that are now churches, but that had been built in the style of the mosques of that time period, reminding us that, despite whatever the rabbis of later generations might have decreed, the surrounding culture has a great impact on Jewish aesthetic sensibilities. The synagogues, with their domes, arches, and color, represented the incorporation of the surrounding material culture, not at all surprising for a community which in its integration with the surrounding community had no peer in Jewish history until the modern age.

Then we went to Israel and because of some relatively new discoveries and restorations, took the time to visit Sephori, the home of Yehudah HaNasi, the editor of the Mishnah, a place of Talmudic culture. And what did we find there? Jewish art, the Mona Lisa of the Galilee, in what appeared to be a Jewish home. And more than that, we found mosaic decorations in the synagogue, on Jewish themes but also including pagan motifs that were ostensibly banned by Jewish law. As those who have travelled in the Middle East know these were not the only mosaics which have caused scholars to scratch their heads and rethink what they thought they knew. Perhaps they operated on somewhat different wavelengths.

Can an alternative to text study offer us deeper levels of meaning? The Binding of Isaac, the story we read this morning, is known to me through its many reinterpretations in text, but it has another history. It is found in ancient Mosaics on synagogue floors in Israel and in the Diaspora. And it was also found in the illustrations of some High Holy Day prayer books and in an amazing illuminated Chumash. These artistic renderings in their own way offer Midrash. In a version that was placed over the Ark, in the early third century, we see the Hand of God and a silent figure—could that be Sarah, waiting in her tent, unmentioned in the

text? Were they trying to include her in a story from which she is conspicuously absent? The sixth century mosaic in the land of Israel reminds us of how young Isaac might have been, and in case we don't get the message they found in the story, it has the words *al tashlich* and *ve hineh ayil*, don't put forth your hand and here is the ram. In an illustration in a High Holy Day prayer book from Poland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the knife is a Crusader Sword and the story is told as part of a plea for God to move from judgement to mercy.

Our Judaism and our religious education will have to change to meet the generations coming up behind us who experience life and study differently than we do. It will be hard for some of us, shaped by an earlier style of Jewish learning. But having seen that change has been present in Jewish life, through the centuries, we should have confidence that the essence, the meaning, will survive this translation, from text to screen, as it has survived the other radical shifts from scroll to book, from daytime study to night, from fear of the other to inclusion.

Our task has been enunciated well by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *le chadesh et hayashan, ulkadesh et hechadash*, to renew to the old and to bring sacredness to the innovative.