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A Sweet Year



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THE READERS SPEAK

'The Spy'

Editor:

Israel's continued existence can be summed up in just three words. Guile. Gall. Deception.

Israel's army has vanquished surrounding Arab armies (four times) not because of its military superiority but because of its intelligence services.

Israel's most famous, effective and valuable spy was Eli (Eliyahu) Cohen, a household name in Israel. Almost every Israeli knows about "Our Man In Damascus." Streets, parks, schools bear his name.

Eli was more important to Israel's military prowess than Gen. Moshe Dayan, Gen. Ariel Sharon and even Menachem Begin, the leader of the pre-state Jewish underground.

The Egyptian-born accountant volunteered to work for the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency.

Through guile, gall and deception, posing as a successful businessman in Damascus, he was able to penetrate the highest echelons of Syria's military and intelligence. His contribution to Israel's defeat of Syria's Russian-equipped, armed-to-the-teeth military was immeasurable.

In the Netflix series "The Spy" (IJN, Sept. 13), Cohen is played by Sacha

Baron Cohen. Sacha and Eli share more than just the same family name. Sacha looks strikingly similar to Eli. I had always thought of Sacha as a relentless prankster. I now know that he is also a stunning actor. His performance is unforgettable.

I just binged on the series. Couldn't let go of it. I recommend it most highly.

PAUL KORDA
Longmont, Colo.

Shame on Columbia

Editor:

Columbia University stands in disgrace, having hosted the unrepentant Prime Minister of Malaysia who, in keeping with his self-proclaimed "proud anti-Semite" status, defended his hate speech as a right. This would not be tolerated by the University from a leader who expressed such animosity and false assertions about any other group. Donors of Columbia should send a strong message by denying them support. This is not the first such incident but must be the last.

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MALCOLM HOENLEIN
Executive vice president and CEO
Conference of Presidents
New York, NY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The IJN welcomes letters from readers. Opinions are the author's, not necessarily the IJN's. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar, syntax and accuracy. Letters must be submitted via e-mail to larry@ijn.com, or typed, double spaced; and must be signed, with return address and phone number. They must be addressed to 'Editor' — no 'open' letters, poetry, personal thank you's or third party letters (copies of letters written to someone else) accepted.

Environmental teshuvah

By NIGEL SAVAGE

Special to the IJN

FOR MANY JEWS, the High Holidays are the Super Bowl of gluttony. There is more food on the table than a normal person can and should consume, and much of it will ultimately go to waste.

If each of us takes on just one change, collectively, we will make a big difference on the world stage. During the High Holidays we focus on *teshuvah*, repentance, for our actions and our hope is that the Jewish community will do the same when it comes to the environment.

Here are five tips for "environmental *teshuvah*" — for using the forthcoming High Holiday period to launch personal initiatives to change our environmental behavior.

1. Eat a plant-rich diet:

Commit to eating less industrial meat — red meat, poultry and seafood — as well as less dairy and eggs.

The Worldwatch Institute's research indicates that animal agriculture is responsible for at least 51% of greenhouse gas emissions

worldwide. Everyone is starting from a different place, so "less" is different for everyone. Any amount of reduction is a step in the right direction.

2. Waste less food:

Buy only what you need and eat leftovers. Create an "eat me first" section in your fridge for food that's running out of time. "Best by," "sell by" and other dates are not expiration dates; trust your senses to tell you whether food is still safe to eat. Be creative with your meals over the holidays and look to repurpose leftovers so that you're minimizing waste.

3. Get to know and buy from local farmers:

Give local farmers your money (in exchange, of course, for delicious food!). Sukkot is the harvest festival, so invite a farmer into your *sukkah* for a meal and ask how the harvest is going.

4. Reduce packaging, especially plastic:

Pay attention to how your food is packaged and aim for less packaging overall and for better packaging. Avoid plastics, especially single-use. Buy in bulk. Bring your own reusable bags when you go shopping — small ones for bulk products and produce, and large ones for all the groceries.

Support companies that strive to reduce the amount of packaging they use and incorporate recycled content into their packaging.

5. Choose good honey:

Dip your apples in delicious, raw honey produced by a small-scale beekeeper. Pollinators, including bees, are critical to our food system and are facing increasing environmental challenges to their well-being, with honeybees in particular experiencing severe population declines. Supporting local and small-scale beekeepers improves the health of pollinators.

Nigel Savage is founder and CEO of Hazon.

TORAH WITH RABBI SACKS

When I was a student at university in the late 1960s — the era of student protests, psychedelic drugs and the Beatles meditating with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi — a story went the rounds.

An American Jewish woman in her sixties travelled to north India to see a celebrated guru. There were huge crowds waiting to see the holy man, but she pushed through, saying that she needed to see him urgently. Eventually, after weaving through the swaying crowds, she entered the tent and stood in the presence of the master himself. What she said that day has entered the realm of legend. She said, "Marvin, listen to your mother. Enough already. Come home."

Starting in the sixties Jews made their way into many religions and cultures with one notable exception: their own. Yet Judaism has historically had its mystics and meditators, its poets and philosophers, its holy men and women, its visionaries and prophets. It has often seemed as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity. We prefer the far to the near.

Moses already foresaw this possibility: Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?"

Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it (Deut. 30:11-14).

Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel's history during the First and Second Temple periods.

First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon.

Later, in Second Temple times,

they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. It is a strange phenomenon, best expressed in the memorable line of Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who do not love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism,



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Nitzavim: Not beyond the sea

were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end antisemitism; it inflamed it.

Hence the power of Moses' insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have to go elsewhere. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler's Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a *chazzan*, wrote "White Christmas." Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the

quality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism G-d is close. You do not need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence.

It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the *challot*, in the praise of the *Eishet Chayil* and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from

I am a Rabbi. For many years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the Rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that our ancestors knew so well and loved so much.

We were afraid — of the intellectual challenges of an aggressively secular culture, of the social challenges of being in yet not entirely of the world, of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the State of Israel criticised and condemned.

So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful. What makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, "It is not in heaven . . . nor is it beyond the sea," was: Kinderlach, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of G-d at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So G-d found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is Shechinah, from *shachen*, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the *Shema* twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world.

When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him.

Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success.

To find Him you do not have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life.

Shabbat Shalom.

Following every spiritual path but our own

Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. This tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Deuteronomy. It occurs in ages of affluence, not poverty, in eras of freedom, not slavery.

When we seem to have little to thank G-d for, we thank G-d. When we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of Emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results

first "enlightened" Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach's long-neglected St Matthew Passion.

Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian thinkers of the twentieth century — described by Albert Camus as "the only great spirit of our times" — was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a Jew. And so on.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism's failure to confront the challenge?

The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and in the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers.

But we still spiritually underachieve. The deepest roots of spiri-

working but resting, not from buying but enjoying — the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, G-d is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts.

He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, and the contrition of Yom Kippur.

He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

G-d is near: That is the overwhelming feeling I get from a lifetime of engaging with the faith of our ancestors. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstruseologies, no metaphysical ingenuities — beautiful though all these are — because for us G-d is the G-d of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.