

My Cri Du Coeur

I first heard the expression *cri du coeur* from the former Chancellor of the United Synagogue, Ismar Shorsch who passed away in 2006. I am not sure why, but somehow I was given an advanced edition of *The Siddur, Sim Shalom*, to review. I was critical of the book, which in my view, lacked fidelity to tradition and liturgy. Rabbi Shorsch expressed appreciation for my *cri du coeur* and said that my views would be taken into consideration.

As a modern Orthodox Jew, my *Rav* has always been the likes of Moshe Feinstein, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Those great thinkers lived in a thoroughly Jewish world, notwithstanding the many challenges which they faced. They nevertheless were able to espouse a philosophy of fidelity to religious observance together with coexistence in the modern world.

Thanks to my close friend Dr. Jan Schwartz, I have become more familiar with the work of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. To me Rabbi Sacks speaks to the struggles of the modern Orthodox Jew. His work, *The Great Partnership*, is a marvelous pillar built on the shoulders of his great predecessors in the modern Orthodox Jewish world.

The reality of living a modern Orthodox Jewish life in a place either ignorant or hostile to Jewish observance is yet another story. My own path is relatively unimportant, except to the extent that it brings out in sharp contrast the difficulty of living as an Observant Jew outside of the major epicenters of Jewish settlement. I was born on Second Avenue in New York City, raised in Great Neck, New York, and commuted to New York University in college. My first time away from home or any extended period of time was as a law student at Georgetown University Law School. From there it was a circuitous route to work in the federal court system in the upstate portion of the Middle District of Pennsylvania. After that? Well after that I wound up with a law firm in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where I made my life. As a young married man, I sought and received the spiritual guidance of Rabbi Norman Singer, may his soul rest in peace, himself a student of Soloveitchik, at Yeshiva University. Rabbi Singer suddenly died, Rabbi Schmuel Pewzner from Harrisburg, a Chabad Rabbi, urged me to stay in the Galut, Bamidbar, to do my part in continuing the Jewish tradition in Williamsport. He gave me a book to read about the Rebbe, *Towards A Meaningful Life*. Little did I know that I had been put on a path to being a Schliach.

The years went by and I raised a beautiful, traditional Jewish family. No parent could be prouder and Rabbi Pewzner was right, that if my wife made a Jewish home, the children would follow in our path.

However, it has not been easy. I am angered and frustrated at some Jews in the community who show disrespect for observant Jews. In fact, many of those in leadership are openly hostile to the idea of serious Jewish observance. In the non-Jewish community there were grotesque instances of antisemitism but more typically the environment was one of indifference and annoyance. Whether it was being told that I could not try a case "because the jury might not like Jews" or being mocked by a federal judge because I did not eat food at Inns of Court events, I have borne many indignities. The other side of that coin is that I have staked out a name and reputation

for myself. I may be the quintessential observant Jew in northcentral Pennsylvania, but everyone knows who I am, that I cannot work on the Jewish holidays, and that they will not get emails from me on Shabbat. Events might be scheduled when I cannot attend and food served that I will not eat but no one can stop me from putting on Tallis and Tefillin every morning alone in my office.

My *cri du coeur* is not so much a complaint as it is an observation about the difficulty and rewards of remaining an observant Jew in what Rabbi Shraga Sherman, Chabad Rabbi at the Main Line Synagogue in Philadelphia, more than jokingly refers to as Bamidbar. I call it the Galut. There has always been what psychologists call dissonance created by the push and pull of the community. On the one hand, the Pirkei Avot admonishes against separating oneself from the community. On the other, there, is the obligation to live in a place where there is the availability of Torah study.

Travel time and trips to New York and Philadelphia to say Kaddish for my mother and to visit with our children is daunting. My wife is heroic. We are like the old TV series about "The Man Who Led Three Lives." Harmonizing those two lives is a challenge that, dare I say, perhaps even HaRav Kook could not have anticipated.

As I review my own words, the last thing that I seek is sympathy. I am proud of what my family has achieved, and I am grateful to my friends and colleagues of all faiths in Williamsport. By the struggles I have become strengthened in my commitment to a modern Orthodox Jewish life. We are a people who have struggled, even those of us who have given up learning and observance. On two nights I called for a minyan in my house to say Kaddish and I was astounded by the prompt and large turnout by Jews who I thought would have little or no interest in such an endeavor. They were there, said a few L'chaims with me, and imbibed in some overly sugary pastries. The Hasidim are right that in every corner of the globe is a Jew with a spark that perhaps simply needs to be fanned until it bursts into a flame.

In the meantime, I will continue my effort to live consistently with modern Orthodox Judaism whether it is in Philadelphia, Great Neck or Williamsport, Pennsylvania. All the best to our great sages in their continued successful efforts to fan the flames everywhere in the world where Jews roam.

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