

CAVALIER AND SLAY

I am not talking about the Warriors slaying the Cavaliers, which happened, and I won a bet, by the way. For some strange and overly optimistic reason, the Rabbi of B'nai Yeshurun congregation in Cleveland reached out to me and wanted to make a bet on the outcome of the NBA finals between the Golden State Warriors and the Cleveland Cavaliers. He offered me a case of gourmet microbrew from Ohio if Golden State won in exchange for some California Covenant Mensch or Tribe Wine if Cleveland won. The loser also had to wear the hat of the opposing team on the bima this coming Shabbat. Well, it was a sucker's bet, so I took it, and well, I look forward to sharing the beer with you and toasting the Warriors. But that is not at all what this sermon is about.

Cavalier and Slay rhymes with the book *Kavalier and Klay*, the outstanding novel about comic books, the Golem of Prague, and Judaism that made local author Michael Chabon famous and cemented his books as "Jewish literature." Since that time he has been prolific and profound, so prolific and profound, in fact, that he was given an honorary degree and invited to give the address at this year's Rabbinical School Ordination at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. And what a speech it was, though certainly not in the way the graduates hoped. It was a speech that was I would call "cavalier and slay," meaning quite cavalier about Judaism, and, if we are being honest, basically slayed our religion, our land, our peoplehood, and our history.

I hesitate to bring all this up with you for several reasons. First, you may not know what I am talking about, and I don't really want to inspire you to look all this up and now you probably will. On the other hand, this has been the talk of the Jewish world, literary and otherwise, for the past two weeks, and part of my job is to keep you informed Judaically, even if all the scuttle has been in relatively elitist circles. Secondly, Michael Chabon's brother is a member of our congregation. You probably know his sister-in-law even better, Cantor Jennie Chabon. And I was unable to reach them this week to get their thoughts on the matter. It's not so nice to talk about people, particularly people that you might know and see in public. On the other hand, brother Steven and Cantor Jennie are referred to in the speech, politely though perhaps subtly insultingly, at least of their lifestyle choice, so if it's already in the public record, I feel like I can and even should talk about it. Thirdly, this is Parashat Korach, and this is the East Bay. We seem to automatically side with the rebel in these parts, and when the rebel in this case is one of the most significant Jewish writers of the last decade who most of us admire greatly,

well, anything I say necessarily pales in comparison. On the other hand, I believe his speech both misunderstands and greatly insults Judaism, and I can't simply remain silent, even if it is an icon who is doing the insulting. And, disclaimer, please understand that if I seem to be attacking his words, it is indeed his words and not him that I am passionately against. Some of it what he said is an anti-Israel screed, but I am not going to address that aspect of his speech. That was to be expected from him. He has become a fervent critic of Israel (well, that would be a very nice way of putting it), as are many progressive Jewish artists. Some of his criticism in this particular speech was so brutal it caused some of the degree recipients to walk out and get their degrees after the ceremony, but the people at Hebrew Union College had to expect that, and that was their choice, or their stupidity, depending on your point-of-view. But that is all beside the point.

What I want to focus in on is not his criticism of Israel, but of the Jewish people. And to do that I have to read you some excerpts. And, with apologies, they are not that short. Here goes.

I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers. I am for mongrels and hybrids and creoles, for syncretism and confluence, for jazz and Afrobeat and Thai surf music...I am for ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity, muddle, complexity, diversity, creative balagan. Monocultural places—one language, one religion, one haplotype—make me profoundly uncomfortable whether they're found inside or beyond the ghetto walls.

So he has established that he believes Judaism is too ghetto-like. He abhors any distinctions and, well, Judaism certainly has them. Not content with the jabs, his next punch is literally below the belt, to the generative side of Judaism.

An endogamous marriage is a ghetto of two; as the traditional Jewish wedding ritual makes explicit, it draws a circle around the married couple, inscribes them—and any eventual children who come along—within a figurative wall of tradition, custom, shared history, and a common inheritance of chromosomes...

If that sounds like a relatively neutral statement to you, listen on, as he then shows us just how personal the pain of Jewish distinctiveness is to him.

Despite my instinctive mistrust of wall-building and boundary-patrolling, I went and married a Jew. We had four Jewish children, and enrolled them in temple preschools. We made hamantaschen and latkes, lit candles, ransomed afikomens. When they each turned 13 I sent my children reeling around an uproarious room, staggered by the astonishing heaviness of a Torah. So now, today..., were you to ask me if I hope my

children marry-in, I would say, Yes. I want them to marry into the tribe that prizes learning, inquiry, skepticism, openness to new ideas. I want them to marry into the tribe that sees nations and borders as antiquated canards and ethnicity as a construct prone, like all constructs, to endless reconfiguration. There will be plenty of potential partners for my children to choose among; a fair number of those potential partners are even likely to be Jews... On the day that the last Jewish couple dies, after watching their children marry Hindus, Lutherans, atheists, Sunnis, Buddhists—the fault for that extinction will lie squarely with Judaism itself, and not because Judaism failed to enforce its teachings against intermarriage but because it was necessary ever to have such teachings in the first place.

Rabbis used to warn us about the “dangers” of intermarriage. Thankfully, we have moved to a more open and tolerant mindset, welcoming interfaith couples into our midst and understanding that it is simply part of what it means to live in an open society. But this is different. This is a speech actively against Jews marrying other Jews. He wishes he hadn’t, despite him loving his own wife.

But beyond the intermarriage question, he seems to be regretting the choice to raise his children as Jews at all. His religion is learning and inquiry and openness to new ideas. These “constructs” are definitely critically important pieces of Judaism, but they are not the whole pie, the whole religion, the whole of Judaism. For him, well, they are. So that leads to a deep sadness for me, but also for him. Because next, this recipient of an honorary degree from a rabbinical school, describes his current Jewish life.

I stopped lighting candles. I didn’t bother with the *bedikat chametz*. When the next High Holidays rolled around, I stayed home. On Yom Kippur I fasted, maybe because I wanted to show myself, or my ancestors, or the God I don’t believe in, that my non-participation was not a matter of indolence or physical weakness. Or maybe I just did it *aftselakhis*—out of spite. Over the years that followed, my retreat from religious practice only deepened, and since we put the last of the *bnai mitzvah* behind us, it has become near-total.

He even describes the Passover Seder of his brother and sister-in-law, the Cantor, and their three children putting on puppet shows and how it is hard for him to feel anything when regarding the Passover story, as he says, and now I quote “it seems pretty clear that we just made the whole damn thing up.”

I am sad that he can’t be open to the miracle. I am sad that he can’t see himself as part of the seminal story of the Jewish people, which while I believe in it, at least in its outline form, the veracity of the story is not the point. The point is, as the Haggadah says, “B’chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo, that in

each and every generation we are obligated to see ourselves as part of the story. But I know, he doesn't like obligations or, as we put it in what has formed the basis of Judaism for 4000 years, or at least 3000, mitzvoth, or commandments. I am sad that these thoughts will be swirling around in his head today while he sits in the pews at Congregation B'nai Tikvah where his own nephew is, as he put it "reeling around an uproarious room staggered by the heaviness of the Torah" celebrating his Bar Mitzvah where his Mom is the Cantor. I'm sad that he can't just enjoy the damn Seder.

On the other hand, the job of an artist is to challenge us, to make us think, to disturb our complacency and make us articulate our own thoughts. He takes this function very seriously and excels at it like few others Jewish writers in this generation. And in a way, this is our opportunity—to articulate our own thoughts, to fall in love all over again with Jewish ritual, Jewish life, and the Jewish people. So here are a few of my own thoughts in response.

First, while his critique is stinging and eloquent and, because he is the one doing the writing, quite beautiful in its own way, it is nothing new. The argument between Judaism as something ultimately universalistic or particularistic goes back at least as far as the Biblical prophets. In my view, the ultimate answer in Judaism is not in either of these poles, but in balancing them. His words parallel early Reform Judaism, often called Classical Reform Judaism, which ultimately failed, at least in part, I believe, because the balance between them was out of whack. Listen to the words of Reform Judaism's 1885 Pittsburgh Platform.

We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization. We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.

It's the 1885 version of discomfort with our particularistic traditions, which Reform moved away from just a few decades later. The 60's version was John Lennon's Imagine. Today's is Michael Chabon's call for an end to all distinctions for the love of "syncretism and confluence." For all of them, it's our spiritually poor, primitive forebears who just didn't seem to understand anything. It's really a wonder such a pitiful people could survive for so long.

And, of course, if we follow this confluence to its logical conclusion, how will we be able to appreciate any culture, Jewish, Ashkenazic, Sephardic,

Afrobeat, Thai food, or anything else? Or is it just **our** culture, **our** tribe, **our** way of life that so many Jews that Michael Chabon eloquently speaks for can't seem to love and admire and respect like we love and admire and respect others?

Because, in so many ways, our system is about drawing distinctions, as Chabon himself describes.

As for Judaism itself, the whole thing's a giant interlocking system of distinctions and divisions and the means—through prayer and ritual, narrative and commentary—of drawing them. The whole story begins with three mighty acts of division: day from night, heaven from earth, sea from land. After that it's all boundaries and bright lines, from the bookended candle-lightings of Shabbat to a woman's monthly *mikveh*, from circumcision to the bar mitzvah ceremony, from the Four Questions to the *bedikat chametz*, from the shearing of a bride's hair to the intricate string-webs of an *eruv*.

And he is absolutely right. Judaism is very much about these sacred distinctions. And his challenge, for those of us who treasure this way of life and these distinctions, is to be able to love them and to articulate them. And that, I have to say, is why I am a rabbi. If it were my ordination ceremony, I wouldn't have walked out on his speech; that kind of rebellion is simply not in my nature. But I certainly would have been uncomfortable. I might have even left the Reform movement over it. Oh wait, I guess I did—21 years ago or so. I didn't go to rabbinical school to learn how to deconstruct Judaism or be cavalier about it. I don't put up with a 24 hour/7 days a week job so I can "slay" Judaism. I do it because I love and believe in our unique way of life and the distinctions we draw.

I believe that following the distinctive Jewish path enables a person to live with sanity, spirituality, and morality.

I believe our rituals and traditions order and elevate our lives.

I believe that the Jewish calendar makes sense and gives us sacred purpose.

I believe in the value and power of our symbols.

I believe in the way the Shabbat candlesticks and the twisted Havdalah candle help us separate the holy Shabbat from the rest of the week's profaneness.

I believe in the shofar and its call for us to repent and return and make ourselves better people.

I believe that fasting on Yom Kippur calls us to be more sympathetic to those who are truly hungry.

I believe in the Sukkah that temporarily shelters us in the Fall and calls us to be more sympathetic to those who need shelter as well to help us understand the fragility of life itself.

I believe in Chanukah and its messages of miracle, religious freedom, and that some things are worth fighting for.

I believe in dressing up on Purim and eating strange, triangular pastries shaped like the enemy's ear to remind us that no matter how much some have wanted to destroy us, they couldn't, and that we should celebrate that in all its inherent silliness and paradox.

I believe in eating Matzoh and Maror and Charoset to remember that we were once slaves and that we, nor anyone else, should ever have to endure that again.

I believe in staying up all night studying Torah on Shavuot because our Torah is worth studying.

I believe in fasting on the 9th of Av, remembering that two separate Temples were destroyed, the edict of the Spanish Inquisition was issued, and the Warsaw Ghetto was liquidated, among other tragedies, because I feel deeply, deeply connected to my ancestors who went through such suffering.

I believe in the power of prayer—lehipalel, to judge oneself, and Hodu l'Adonai, expressing gratitude to Hashem our God.

I believe in the power of the Kaddish and the shiva and the shloshim and in shoveling dirt on graves, because I have seen these rituals bring forth the mechayei hametim, restoring life to the dead, in this case meaning guiding people through a time when they themselves did not feel like living.

I believe also in the Kiddush and in drinking its sacred wine, considered the symbol of joy in Judaism, because holiness and distinction are worth celebrating with joy.

I believe in this “giant interlocking system of distinctions and divisions and the means—through prayer and ritual, narrative and commentary—of drawing them.”

These are just a few of the gifts Judaism has given us and the world, and I believe that they do not make us primitive or spiritually poor, but, on the contrary, that they make us more spiritual, more moral, and, most importantly, they make our world a far richer and better place.

Eretz Yisrael, Tefilot Yisrael, Minhagei Yisrael, Mateh Yisrael, Am Yisrael Chai!