

Throughout my remarks on Rosh Hashanah and the Kol Nidrei service last night, I have shared bits of biographical information that shed some light on who I am, where I am from, and what kinds of things I think about. I'd like to continue doing so today by revealing more about myself in the hopes that we get to know each other better. I encourage you to do the same as we continue to deepen our relationship. When I was in middle school, high school, and even college, I was, for lack of a better term, not cool.

I was not an athlete, nor a socialite. I wasn't up on the newest lingo, nor the latest pop culture trends. I didn't go to parties very much, and when I did, I felt really out of place. Going to dances and socials was especially uncomfortable for me.

I was into comic books, playing trumpet, and I really liked Hebrew school. Cantor Melissa, I wasn't even cool enough to hang out with the theater kids, just the band kids who played in the orchestra pit for all of the shows. While the other kids were looking forward to the release of the newest album from Nirvana, Pearl Jam, or Green Day, the pop

culture highlight of my youth was when Superman heroically sacrificed himself saving Metropolis in the pages of DC Comics, and then unexpectedly and triumphantly returned to life a few months later. To get a sense of my group of friends, think of the television show *Freaks and Geeks*, or *The Big Bang Theory*, but without all of the science.

For the uncool, cool is an unattainable ideal, something that you lack, but someone else possesses. The uncool see the cool as being on the inside, normal, and acting the way one should act. At some point in our lives, each one of us has experienced the feeling of being uncool, whether we were the new kid in school, picked last for the team, or felt out of place at a party.

The uncool might want to dress and talk the way the cool do, but when they try, it comes off as inauthentic, because it is rooted in insecurity. In reality, trying to be cool is a sacrifice. In order to win approval, the uncool give up their own agency and power by making themselves into something they are not. Moreover, it is typically for the sake of a fleeting validation, based on superficial elements. It is a

reaction which grates against our authentic selves. This is why trying to be cool can be so difficult. When we attempt to hide or deny the things that we love because we want acceptance from others, that insecurity becomes even more apparent.

Most of us have a desire to fit in, to be thought of as “normal,” and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. As social animals, it is sometimes very important to fit in. However, that desire can lead us down a path that rejects who we are and what gives our lives meaning, and might lead us to make choices that we could one day come to regret.

This sentiment is not limited to high school hallways, corporate board rooms, or country clubs. This is the story of the Jewish People. As Dara Horn has written, “Uncoolness is Judaism’s brand.” We have spent the last 4,000 years not being like everyone else, going all the way back to our humble beginnings as a small people in the land of Israel. Our ancestors were surrounded by other nations who worshiped pantheons of deities, with colorful costumes and even more colorful stories of character and conflict. While they had many gods that were

the ancient equivalent of today's big-screen blockbusters, we had only one God whom no one could see.

Not only that, but this God actually expected from us more than a daily barbecue of animal sacrifices. Our God wanted moral and ethical living! God's desire for both ritual and ethical living is made most clear in our scriptural readings today. Our Torah reading from Leviticus is the detailed procedure of animal sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood that will purge the ancient Temple of its impurities. The Haftarah from Isaiah instructs us not to perform empty rituals, but rather to imbue those rituals with meaning, by caring for the most marginalized in society. Isaiah tells us to free the oppressed, support the poor, and feed the hungry. Our fast and our worship of God are meaningless without a commitment to justice, decency, and dignity.

In the ancient world, this catalog of responsibilities was very uncool, and we are the descendants of the first person to understand and accept being uncool. Abraham was called by God to leave Mesopotamia, the center of high culture in the world, in order to go to a

new land that God would show him. He would create a new religious civilization, rooted in his own tribe that would offer the world a different set of values. Abraham was supposed to stand out from, and stand up to, the world around him. The Torah tells us God's mission for Abraham and why he was chosen. In the Book of Genesis, God says, "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Eternal One by doing what is just and right, in order that the Eternal One may bring about for Abraham what has been promised him." (Gen. 18:19) Abraham succeeded, because Abraham's descendants, including us in this very moment, created an evolving religious civilization that responds to that continuous call of God.

The story of Abraham introduces us to a strange term: *Ivri*, Hebrew. Each time this word is used in the Bible, it is only in conversation with those who are not Israelites, and it carries the sense of an outsider, a person from a different nation and ethnicity. A famous Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 42:8) provides us with a unique interpretation: Abraham was called an *Ivri*, a Hebrew, because the entire world stood

on one side and Abraham stood on the other side. The word *Ivri* is derived from a word that means “to traverse” or “to be across from something.” The “entire world” referred to the idolaters whom Abraham defied. Tradition tells us that to be a descendant of Abraham means not only to be distinct from, but to stand opposed to something. Since the birth of our people, it has been our mission to be countercultural, to stand against the values of the broader society in which we have lived, to be uncool.

Not only did Abraham leave Mesopotamia, but Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and began a millennia-long conversation with God to enact God’s moral vision. This included some of the most revolutionary ideas in human history: that every human being is created in the Divine Image; that we must care for the most marginalized in society; that we welcome the stranger; that every person is entitled to a day of rest.

These ideas made us uncool for quite some time. Over the course of the many centuries as a minority in communities around the world,

our ancestors made the choice to remain uncool and distinct from the rest of the world, even when the civilizations in which we lived enticed us to act cool.

Ancient Greek civilization was so cool, because the Greeks invented so many cool things: theater, art, drama, comedy, science, philosophy, athletics, and hedonistic pleasures. It proved to be too alluring to some Jews, who really wanted to play with the cool kids. But there was a cost: it also meant rejecting temperance, moderation, God's expectations, and the uniqueness of being Jewish. That was too high a price to pay for some Jews, leading to the rise of those very uncool Maccabees, and their very countercultural revolt.

For hundreds of years, Christianity and Islam basically told the Jews that we were not cool. While Jews were tolerated, these civilizations viewed Judaism as anachronistic, and Jews were only allowed to remain alive because it served as their proof that God had rejected us. In essence, the cool kids kept us around so that they could feel better about themselves, and they forced the us to sit at the other

side of the cafeteria, while they laughed at us. To continue the metaphor, sometimes the uncool kids were chased out of the school entirely. When given the opportunity, some Jews converted to these other religions to increase their social standing, or because they too bought into the idea that God had abandoned the Jews and looked upon other civilizations with Divine Favor. Becoming a Christian or Muslim meant that they were able to sit at the cool kids' table. While these converts to Christianity and Islam might have believed they were fully welcomed, the reality was that the cool kids never stopped looking at them with suspicion and superiority. Despite being treated as second class citizens, even to the point of persecution, most Jews were fine with being labeled as uncool, because it solidified their identity as descendants of Abraham with a mission to lead ethical lives, and their existence gave them a tenacious and hopeful faith in God.

The situation in America has been different. Since its inception, the ideal of our country has been that all of the uncool are welcomed. Emma Lazarus' famous poem, *The New Colossus*, declares,

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

The American narrative tells us that it doesn't matter who your parents or grandparents were, where you come from, or what your background is. What matters is what do you with the opportunities available.

Finally, a place and a society where we didn't have to try to be cool, because nobody else was cool.

In America, Jews have had to navigate several important questions: how do we remain unique in a society that has been so welcoming of us? How do we follow in the tradition of Abraham and challenge norms in a place that is so accepting and pluralistic? Because no one forced the Jews to be uncool, and because of the popular “melting pot” idea, many Jews gave up their distinctiveness in order to become American. Some were so focused on fitting in that they forgot how to be Jewish. Others

chose to understand America, not as a melting pot, but as a salad bowl, with different colors and flavors mixed together, yet still distinguishable, each with its own taste that adds something new to the whole dish. This seems to be the best model, and despite the challenges of assimilation, it has mainly worked. Americans, in general, are still aware of Jews as a distinct group within American society by our names and practices, and most Americans, as we explored last night, view us positively. We don't have to fear being uncool anymore.

When most of humanity was illiterate, Jews taught their children to read. When other societies built monuments and theaters, Jews built schools. In times of great poverty, Jews practiced tzedakah. In the age of collectivism, Jews stood up for the rights of the individual. One of the blessings of America is that we are treated as individuals, and not pre-judged based on our collective identity.

We are indeed individuals, but the meaning of our individuality is found within a larger story. Ours is the Jewish story, a family that traces its origins to the man who stood in opposition to the destructive trends of

his world. We live in a time of loneliness and meaninglessness, which has led to a host of other societal problems. Standing in opposition to these tendencies, we must build stronger communities and find our identity in our multifaceted, four-thousand-year-old tradition that teaches people how to develop their souls and improve their lives. And we must share that with the world.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has written, “To be a Jew is not to go with the flow, to be like everyone else, to follow the path of least resistance, to worship the conventional wisdom of the age. To the contrary, to be a Jew is to have the courage to live in a way that is not the way of everyone...Judaism always has been, perhaps always will be, counter-cultural.” (*Ceremony and Celebration*, 84) To be a Jew means that it matters who we are and where we came from, and it tells us why we are here. It means that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, a story that began long before we were born, and will continue long after we are gone. It is up to us to decide whether or not

we will continue that story, imparting it to the younger generation. The future of our people rests with us.

I stated something last night, which is worth repeating today: We must have a thriving Jewish identity, which includes, but is not limited to, love of the State of Israel, engagement in synagogue life, regular practice of Jewish ritual, and raising Jewish children. We must elevate Jewishness to a primary element of our identity, knowing that it is an inheritance from our ancestors and a bequest to our descendants. It may be uncool, but it will strengthen our self-confidence, afford us positive reasons to flourish, and fortify our sense of Jewish self-worth.

The practices of Yom Kippur might seem like some of the most uncool things to do. We separate from the outside world, leave behind school and work, gather in one place, sing words in an ancient language, force ourselves to confront our mistakes, and we fast for an entire day, refraining from eating and drinking and other bodily pleasures. Totally uncool.

But I love Yom Kippur, exactly for these reasons. On this one day of the year, we set up boundaries and strictures so that there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. We acknowledge that this day is more important than going to school or attending to our daily work obligations. We assemble in our sacred space and dwell with our sacred community, speaking our shared language and working towards a shared purpose: moving our hearts and spirits in order to improve our lives, become better people, and recommit to our tradition. Some might think that is uncool. But they would be wrong. Because it's actually pretty cool.

I opened my remarks by telling you how uncool I was when I was younger. You might be thinking to yourself, "how is it that our cool rabbi was ever uncool?" I'll let you in on a little secret: I'm still uncool. I am, however, confident in my uncoolness. I was a pretty good and well-accomplished trumpet player back then, and now it is my privilege to sound shofar to the best of my ability. I collected comic books as a kid; thirty-five years and 13,000 comic books later, I proudly share my

love of superheroes and incorporate their lore into my teaching of Torah.

I loved Hebrew School, and well...here we are!

Owning your uncoolness is actually the secret to being cool. It allows us to be our true and authentic selves, even if that means being different. While that might draw some negative attention, it looks worse when we attempt to be someone we are not, rejecting what is essential in the process.

Being cool is not about the norm or the majority. It means being self-actualized, the highest level of development in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Cool people are not dependent on others or general culture for their self-satisfaction. Instead, they look to their own inherent resources and community traditions for their growth and development.

Furthermore, when we share ourselves honestly and genuinely, we empower others to do the same. Putting ourselves out there, no matter how uncool it might feel, is the only way to truly be cool.

Being Jewish is to swim against the current, and like our ancestor Abraham, to confidently challenge the idols of the time. This means

bringing Jewish tradition to bear on however we impact the world in whatever we do. Whether we are in law, contracting, medicine, business, education, the service industry, or any other profession, Judaism calls us to change the world using Jewish ideas, inspired by Torah and its interpretations. As a minority community with an ancient tradition, we have a wealth of knowledge to share, and by doing so, we will be personally edified and spiritually fulfilled, in addition to raising awareness and respect for Judaism in our greater society.

One of my favorite movies is the 2000 cult classic *Almost Famous*. It tells the story of William Miller, a very uncool teenage journalist, who was commissioned by Rolling Stone Magazine in the early 1970s to tour with a rock band and write a cover story on them. He constantly felt uncomfortable and out of place, especially around the band's groupies. The movie spoke to me on many levels during a very formative time in my life. Towards the end of the film, at a particularly low point for the main character, he sought advice from a mentor, a well-known and well-established rock journalist. This mentor, played by the incomparable

Philip Seymour Hoffman, said to William, “The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you’re uncool.”

The Jewish People are the embodiment of this quote. We are the definition of uncool, standing out, standing up, and smashing idols, ever since Abraham responded to the call of God. Let us be worthy of the legacy of our forefather, owning our uncoolness, living his values, and using our perspective to change the world.

I am not cool. As it turns out, you are not cool either. Join me, and let us all be uncool together. Because, really, that would be the coolest thing we could ever do.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah. May we be inscribed and sealed for good in the year ahead.