TOP THREE NOT SO RANDOM THOUGHTS
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David Letterman – the reigning king of late night TV retired from his desk, microphone and double-breasted suits this week. I've never been much of a late night TV fan, largely because I can't stay up that late. But in the age of YouTube and PVRs you can enjoy late night with your morning coffee – so I would often catch the highlights from the various late night shows, and Letterman's Top Ten Lists were often among them.

I like Top Ten Lists – there is something very Jewish about them, even though the original from that other great talk show host, Moses was not really a ranking but rather I highlighting of some important statements among many important statements in the Torah.

So tonight I'd like to share with you my "Top Three List of Not So Randomly Assembled, and in No Particular Order Jewish Thoughts". I'll admit the title is not as

catchy as the Ten Commandments, nor is the list nearly as long. The first version of this sermon had 10 items but that was becoming a book. Then I cut it down to 5 and it was a good article, but still too long, so I give you three tonight and I'll share the rest with you over the next six years.

#1 Israel's fate will not only be determined on the country's southern or northern borders, but on the quads of North-American campuses. Ari Shavit writes in Haaretz, the Israeli Daily Newspaper that the contemptible, sophisticated and well-oiled offensive by the BDS movement is a strategic threat to Israel. If it isn't halted, it could position the democratic Jewish state as the South Africa of 2020. But the real existential threat facing the Jewish people is the increasing tension between the liberal identity of most young North-American Jews and the distorted image of Israel as an unjust oppressor and occupier. Shavit observes and I agree that our teens are not prepared for the Israel they

are encountering on campus. We never taught them its complexity. Israeli's live with the complexity every day, read an Israeli newspaper and it is filled with a spectrum of opinions from within the Jewish community on the issues internal and external that threaten Israel. No such dialogue exists in diaspora Jewry, and when those voices – largely on the left are raised, the center and right are quick to silence them for fear of aiding the enemy. Birthright has done wonders and lit a Jewish-Israeli spark in the hearts of hundreds of thousands in the past 15 years. But since Zionism has not provided a reliable, relevant and inspirational narrative to galvanize millennials, many are simply keeping their distance. And when they arrive on campus and are exposed to anti-Israel venom, the Jewish and pro-Israel identity of many of them collapses.

There is no greater danger to Israel and the Jewish people than this collapse. Our fate will not only be determined on the country's southern or northern

borders, but on the quads of North American university campuses. To win the hearts and minds of young North American Jews, we must define a revitalized, moral and liberal Zionism.

#2 Intermarriage is no longer the exception – it's the new normal. Overall, the current intermarriage rate in the North American Jewish community is 58 percent, up from 43 percent in 1990 and 17 percent in 1970. Among non-Orthodox Jews, the intermarriage rate is 71 percent. Coupled with current trends toward non-identification as religious amongst Millennials born Jewish and that number is probably an under estimation of a much higher intermarriage rate in the next ten years. This does not mean however that 71% of our Jewish community is leaving Judaism. Among Americans age 65 and older (and we only have data for Americans, but in this regard I don't believe Canadian numbers are statically different) who say they had one Jewish parent, 25% are Jewish today. By contrast,

among adults under 30 with one Jewish parent, 59% are Jewish today. In this sense, intermarriage may be transmitting Jewish identity to a growing number of Americans. Intermarriage is growing the Jewish community if we support interfaith families in establishing a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. The Reform movement, our movement is the only one among the three major Jewish movements that is positioned and focused on these children of interfaith families and we need to do more.

This weekend we celebrate Shavuoth and with it the reading on Sunday of the Book of Ruth. The biblical character of Ruth, the most-famous convert in Jewish tradition, finds community, meaning and direction by entering deeply into her new identity. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16).

She does it out of love, she does it through declaration not through study and she is embraced with open arms.

We need to do the same. The old western adage, “shoot first and ask questions later” should be rephrased with regard to conversion in our communities, “Say yes and ask questions later.”

Arnold Eisen the dean of the Conservative Movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary – comes right out and says it, “I believe that Jewish institutions and their rabbis should actively encourage non-Jewish family members in our midst to take the next step and formally commit to Judaism.”

To some this may seem a surprising idea. It is well known that Judaism has not been a proselytizing faith. Historically, Jewish authorities were wary of potential converts. The rabbis sought to make sure that converts were motivated solely by devotion to the God of Israel

and the desire to join the people of Israel. Conversion purely for the sake of marriage was disallowed.

Eisen writes, that "Converts, like other members of North-American religious communities, are in search of salvation in the here and now: They desire meaning profound enough to live for, ethics and values to live by, causes and communities larger than themselves, and truths to hold on to in a fast-changing and frenetic world. Converts testify to the special joy that comes of fulfilling responsibilities undertaken voluntarily and of the added strength brought to their families by shared conviction born of love.

We need to embrace the stranger in our midst and remove stumbling blocks that would deter those who are Jew curious from becoming Jewish. If that sounds like a mash up of two biblical verses, to "support the stranger in your midst because you were once strangers in the land" and to "not put stumbling blocks before the

blind – it is. This is nothing new, what is new is turning them away or making it hard for them to enter, what is old and commanded is the story of Ruth, welcome them with open arms and open hearts.

#3 Expensive Dues Aren't the Only Reason People Don't Go to Synagogues. I realize that right now I am quite nearly preaching to the choir, because you are all here on a beautiful Friday evening in a glorious Vancouver Spring, but there are a lot of Jews not only not here, but not even on our mailing list. The problem is less acute in Canada than it is in the United States, but we would be foolish to rest on our laurels or become complacent. What is happening there will one day be happening here, but we can be proactive and innovative.

A New York Times front-page article by Michael Paulson that was sent to me by almost every Jew on my Facebook page reported on the "Pay What You Want" model some synagogues are implementing to reduce

the financial barrier to membership. Paulson estimates about 30 synagogues across the North America are trying voluntary dues.

In Paulson's words, these changes have come from "an acknowledgement that many Jewish communal organizations are suffering the effects of growing secularization, declining affection for institutions, a dispersal of Jewish philanthropy and an end to the era in which membership in a congregation was seen as a social obligation."

One friend Facebook Friend, Rebecca Kotok, summed up the issue succinctly: "Many [Jewish leaders] are asking 'How can we get people more involved in our synagogue?' as opposed to asking 'How can we get people more involved with Jewish life?' Perhaps because the answer may be frightening as it may not include synagogues in their current iteration."

The pressing challenge now for non-Orthodox synagogues is not a financial one. That is not to deny a real need for dollars, but the financial insecurity is a symptom of the deeper problem that members (and potential members) do not see the value in Judaism. They do not see how the Judaism the synagogue offers has anything to do with their lives. If the perception of the product or the way it's delivered doesn't change, I don't see how a lower cost or even a free membership will make people want to spend time, their other hard-earned currency, at synagogues or in any aspect of Jewish life.

Again, you're here, so maybe this way of thinking is foreign to you, but what about your Jewish friends? What about on non-holidays, or yahrtzeits or special events? Provide value and people will pay. Show members the joy of Judaism and empower them to bring that joy home. Engage members with discussions on how to be a better person, a better parent, sibling,

spouse, friend, and a more ethical business person, and they will come back for more. If Judaism cannot answer the big questions in life and be relevant in our homes and everyday life, then members will go somewhere else and take their dollars with them. Our lives are short and finite and we only have so many lifecycle events for which we need a rabbi to facilitate.

My teacher and mentor Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, wrote in his new book on this subject that I have asked our Executive Board to read "There has to be harmony between the synagogue's mission and its agenda. A synagogue cannot just be in the business of being in business."

I shared with him that so many community, but don't always know how to define it. He taught me to think of community as a circle to which you feel you belong that will miss your presence; it reaches out to you when you're absent, and you long for it when you're not there.

The challenge for synagogues is that members–and those not even considering joining–find community in any number of places from yoga studios to the racquetball court to their careers, or their kids' schools and sports teams. If we can't give people a reason to infuse that circle with Judaism (not just with Jews, but with Judaism) then sadly I don't see a future for synagogues whether they cost money to belong or not.

Letterman would always sign off that his Top Ten List was from the home office in and then he would list some very average Midwestern American city like, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Lincoln, Nebraska, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I guess I could say that this list comes from the Oekanagan or Calgary – two places I have yet to visit but hope to get to one this summer. But instead I will sign off that this "Top Three List of Not So Randomly Assembled, and in No Particular Order Jewish Thoughts" comes from one of your Rabbis, right here on

our bima in Vancouver BC. I take responsibility for finding solutions to these challenges and I hope that you will join me so we can do this holy work together.