

One of the congregants at my student pulpit approached me after services one night. “Nice service,” she said. “But next time could we try something more TRADITIONAL?” “What did you have in mind?” I asked. “You know!” She said, “A TRADITIONAL service--where all the prayers are in ENGLISH.”

This congregant’s comment brings up an interesting question. What DO we mean when we say the word *tradition*? And what does it mean that we don’t have a common understanding of the term?

Another congregant of mine once requested that we move to more traditional music. “Can you give me an example of what you mean by traditional?” I asked. She looked me straight in the eye and said, “Of course--traditional means *what they do in the shul I come from back home*.”

For better or worse, I think many of us, myself included, secretly harbor a belief that the shul we come from is the only TRUE bearer of Jewish tradition, and everyone else, though probably well-meaning, is doing it a little bit wrong.

The problem, of course, is that underneath our different definitions of “tradition,” lies the reality of a divided Jewish community. We are divided into denominations, subgroups within denominations, generations within subgroups within denominations, and as my congregant’s comment indicates, to some extent, every shul is a denomination unto itself. We are diverse in our liturgical preferences, our taste in music, our politics, and don’t even get me started about the differences in our theology.

And the question is, with all this diversity, What, if anything, do we have in common? IS there a core to Jewish tradition? And if not, how will we survive as a people?

I got a glimpse into an answer to these questions last month during Pesach break when I led a Seder at the congregation I currently serve as student rabbi. Now, on an average Friday night, attendance at services is pretty sparse. To get a minyan, I usually have to count the Torah. Sometimes I also have to count all the people who had said they’d like to be there but couldn’t make it.

But on the night of the Seder, I looked out at more than 100 people, with the usual range of diversity, but, for once, our differences seemed insignificant, compared with what we have in common.

And what DO we have in common? A sacred story.

Our sacred story centers around a journey out of slavery. That story is immensely powerful because there is something deep down in the human spirit that longs for the freedom of the individual, and demands that we collectively build a world where all are free.

But our story isn’t just about liberation. As we walk through the stages of the Dayeinu, we express gratitude, not only for being set free, but for being gathered at Sinai, where a rag-tag group of refugees is formed into a people--a community.

But our story isn't just about becoming community, either. At Sinai we accept commandments that outline our responsibilities to God and to other human beings.

Taken all together, then, this is a story about a journey: from slavery to liberation, from disjointedness to community, from powerlessness to responsibility. And it sets these three as our highest values: liberation, community, responsibility.

If our sacred story, and the values it implies, are what we have in common, that has implications for what it means to live a Jewish life. It especially has implications for anyone who aspires to be a leader in the Jewish community, including those of us graduating today.

No matter what gainful employment we may find, no matter what our contracts define as our job description, our REAL job is to make our sacred story live.

That's where our diversity comes in. Some of us may help connect the dots between OUR story of liberation and what is happening in Darfur, or New Orleans or East L.A.

Some will focus on the building of community, either within the Reform movement or through intra-faith or interfaith work.

Still others may focus on our responsibility to God and other human beings--creating new halachic paths, or exploring how to live out the command to love one another, and the command to love the stranger.

However we choose to live out our sacred story, the point is that our real work is not about the programs we create. It is about finding our own connection to our story. It's about being wells for our people, letting that story flow through us to nourish the community. It's about helping others find their connection to the story.

For this multi-faceted story IS the core of our tradition. It is the glue that will keep us together. It's the key to our survival, and it's what makes it important that we survive, Because it contains seeds of transformation sorely needed in a world where slavery in many forms, disintegration of community, and lack of responsibility are modern plagues.

Our story is our dream for our world. And we are called to be spokespeople for that dream, living symbols of that dream, servants of that dream.

Fellow servants of the dream, this is our sacred task--to let our story live in us and through us, transforming our lives, our Jewish community, and our world.