

# Imagine: On Love and Lennon

*Z'ev Maghen*

About three years ago, I interrupted a perfectly enjoyable pilgrimage to the Old Country (the USA) in order to fly out and visit some friends in Los Angeles, that seaside sanctum of higher culture, clean air and tasteful architecture. So there I was at LAX on a balmy Friday morning, sitting in this nondescript bar nursing a black-and-white shake, and waiting for my ride. Out of the corner of my eye, I absent-mindedly surveyed the vigorous maneuverings of a small but dedicated cadre of neophyte Hare Krishnas, who had deployed themselves in full court press formation across the central concourse of the airport. These mantra-chanting devotees of the swami-whose-name-I-never-could-pronounce—festooned in full-fledged religious regalia—were scurrying up and down the thoroughfare like human ping-pong balls, energetically hawking illustrated copies of Vedic texts to the few passers-by who didn't ignore them, shove them aside or spit in their general direction. This was, of course, a familiar scene to me, jetsetter that I am.

I finished my shake (such as it was—they've never heard the phrase "black-and-white milk shake" on the West Coast, and my numerous attempts

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to explain this simple concept to the natives were invariably futile)—and made a beeline for the exit. I guess the old quadriceps ain't quite what they used to be, though, because within seconds, I perceived a pair of dainty, be-moccasined footsteps easily gaining on me from behind. A young feminine voice inquired politely: "Excuse me, sirrr, but—ehh—maybe you would like to take a look at zis boook?"

I froze. Stopped dead in my tracks. I knew that accent. I'd know it anywhere. My heart plummeted into my duodenum. I put my suitcase down. I turned around slowly. She was petite and pretty in her saffron sari and multitudinous bangles. She must have had auburn hair, once, judging from the stubble on her scalp. And her eyes were a deep, feline green, amplified by the dab of yellow mustard smeared ever so artfully between them. She held a tiny tambourine in one hand, and with the other extended, was sweetly offering me a psychedelic version of the *Upanishads*. We stood there smack in the middle of that broad, bustling promenade and stared at each other for a few seconds, and when I saw she was about to repeat her practiced pitch about the book, I hastened to preempt and queried quietly: "*Me'eifo at?*" (Where are you from?)

"*Merrramat Asharron,*" she answered, naturally, effortlessly, gurgling her "r" and eliding the "h" sound as people from her neck of the coastal plains are wont to do (Ramat Hasharon is a suburb of Tel Aviv). Apparently excited by this rare opportunity to spread the Good Word in her mother tongue, and undeterred by the intense suffering that must have been seared like a cattle brand all over my face, she warmed to her subject, and launched into a series of soundbites concerning the benefits of Krishna consciousness, including especially the need to realize ... to actualize ... to visualize ... to harmonize ... to get in touch with ... to remove the walls ... to blend into ... to meld ... to merge ... to coalesce ... to become one....

I never even started listening (I know the lines by rote: I'm a frequent flyer *and* an erstwhile deprogrammer). "*Eich kor'im lach?*" I asked her, still trying to get my mind and heart around this. (What's your name?)

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“*Shira*,” she responded, displaying no such curiosity in return. In the meantime, the other two appropriately attired and dapperly depilated members of her Maha squad had drifted over, no doubt intrigued by the seldom encountered phenomenon of someone actually stopping to converse, and lured by the heady scent of fresh, missionizable meat. Well, and wouldn’t you know it: The *whole gang* is from Ramat Hasharon. Meet Ofer (“*Shalom!*”) and Doron (“*Ma nishma!*”).

So the four of us stand there, chatting like old friends. We reminisce about the army like good Israelis do, talk about who served where and who spent more time “in the mud” and who hated it most; Shira, as it turns out, is a first lieutenant and outranks all of us, and I snap to attention and she laughs; Doron was a medic like myself, and we make a date to give each other ice-water infusions and joke about how the first thing we look at on a woman is her veins; I remind them of this kiosk on Herzl Boulevard in Ramat Hasharon where they fry up the *biggest* and *juiciest* falafel balls in the entire country, and all three nod their heads in vehement agreement and lick their lips in almost Pavlovian recollection: They know *exactly* the place I’m talking about (I’ve never been to Ramat Hasharon, but every town in Israel has a Herzl Boulevard, and every Israeli citizen from Dan to Beersheva is convinced that there is this one falafel stand in his neighborhood that makes the *biggest* and *juiciest* falafel balls in the entire country. I saw Hawkeye do this trick on *M\*A\*S\*H* once, with French fries).

So we’re shootin’ the breeze, the three Hebrew Hare Krishnas and I, discoursing in the recently resurrected and unsurpassably gorgeous idiom of the biblical prophets and kings, and finally, well, I just lose it. “What the hell are you *doing* here?” I blurt out, diverging slightly from the pleasantly banterish tone which has informed the conversation thus far. “You are Jews! You are *Israelis*, for God’s sake! What the hell are you doing here, in this place, on a Friday morning, wearing *these* clothes, chanting *those* words, and selling *that* book?!” Now in those pious days I used to read the Tora from the pulpit every week in synagogue, and since one has to rehearse continually, I never left home without the Pentateuch in my pack. At this moment,

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then, amazed at the extent of my own coolness, I reached back over my shoulder into my knapsack—the way I’m positive Robin Hood used to extract an arrow from his quiver—and just basically whipped out the Five Books of Moses. (Thwack!) “*That’s* not your book,” I cried, indicating the decorative and abridged Bhagavad-Gita Ofer was clutching like it was a newborn infant. “*This*”—and I resoundingly slapped the raggedy, worn-and-torn volume in my own hands—“*This* is your book!”

They all looked at me sadly, with genuine pity, the way one might look at an animal caught in a trap or at someone who had just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. “No, no. You don’t *understand*,” purred Shira, her tone managing to be both soothing and patronizing at the same time. “This isn’t a contest! We’re not choosing one book over another, or one religion over another, we’re not expressing a preference for one culture, one nation, or one ethnic or social group over another. That would mean creating *hierarchical relationships* between human beings. That would mean erecting false barriers between people, barriers which have been responsible for so much misery and bloodshed throughout history, barriers which have prevented human beings from reaching their true potential and destiny, from achieving inner peace—and *world* peace. You and I, and everyone else in this airport, and everything that lives and breathes in every corner of this planet of ours, we are all of us part of a great and wonderful unity, we are all brothers and sisters, we are all linked by the same network of indissoluble bonds—we just don’t *know* it yet. Krishna consciousness is about spreading that knowledge.”

Zoinks! What do you get when you combine a young socialist ideologue educated in the best Israeli schools with a hefty dose of ancient Sanskrit esotericism plus a dash of the Diggers? I tried to imagine Shira haranguing conscripts in boot camp. That must have been some show.

“Look around you, *habibi*,” Doron chimed in, seemingly on cue. “The world is constantly imploding, getting smaller all the time. The distances between societies are diminishing everywhere, and the borders that divide us from one another are being erased, like a thousand Berlin Walls tumbling

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down. The world is *progressing*, moving forward, toward oneness, toward mutual tolerance and understanding, away from the petty, archaic differences that have forever pitted us against each other. As the Lord says” (and here, astonished to the point of giddiness that he had actually gotten far enough with someone to be able to quote scripture, he flipped open his large-print, polychrome edition of the Rig-Veda to a pre-marked page, and reverently recited a passage highlighted in red): “*Let your hearts be as one heart, let the minds of all be as one mind, so that through the spirit of oneness you may heal the sickness of a divided community.*”

“Open your eyes!” he preached on, the already rosy cheeks of this juggernauted Jew turning increasingly sanguine with Eastern religious ardor. “These words are coming true! We are building a new reality for humankind today, and you—you are stuck, *habibi*, stuck in a past of self-isolation and limitation, hemmed in by an anachronism you refuse to let go of. But the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna can help you let go of it, can help you be *truly* free. If you’ll just concentrate and chant....”

I wondered if these guys were this good in English. Just my luck to meet up with the three most articulate initiates in the entire ashram (that they hadn’t read the books they were so zealously peddling, and were in large degree misrepresenting Vaishnava philosophy, was clear as glass. But so what? They were declaiming the world according to themselves—and no doubt according to their Israeli parents’ liberal-leaning “post-Zionist” progressivism—and that was more interesting to me, in any case. I wondered what their parents thought now).

“Yes, you have an antiquated attitude, my friend—a *dangerous* attitude.” This was Ofer, who was so tall that I found myself mourning his loss not just to the Jewish people as a whole, but to the Maccabee Tel Aviv basketball team in particular. He had managed to jettison pretty much every Israeli trapping that would have given him away, except the telltale Nimrod sandals and that really annoying hand gesture that means “wait” nowhere else on the planet except in our little corner of the Middle East. He used it on me now, as I tried to butt in and protest my general benignity.

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“You Are A Fascist,” he proclaimed, enunciating each word with conviction and solemnity, as if he were a judge pronouncing a death sentence (that was it: No more Mr. Nice Guy. Yoga and Karma and Krishna and Swami-what’s-his-name were long gone. For the moment, anyway, I was talking to pure Israeli leftist). “What you’re preaching—it’s exclusivism, it’s discrimination, it’s segregation, it’s elitism ... it is *l’umanut*,” he declared, employing for his *coup de grâce* a subtle nuance in Hebrew semantics which essentially distinguishes chauvinist from liberal nationalism (I doubted whether he found the latter any more palatable than the former).

“Why should people identify themselves according to this outmoded and flagrantly racist conception of yours?” he continued, “And how dare you define *others* based on such artificial and reactionary criteria?” (I’m translating freely here.) “Human beings should be judged by their individual characters, not by their national or religious affiliations! Why are you so *prejudiced*? Why do you play favorites? What, because I was born a Jew, and that man standing over there by the telephone was not, you should interact with me in a different way than with him? Maybe he’s the most upright, moral person in the entire city of LA, maybe he’s calling up some charity right now to donate a million dollars!” (I glanced over at the guy. He was unquestionably Jewish, and judging from his contorted visage and wild gesticulations, was probably talking to his broker.) “And because I had the ‘luck’ to be born of a Jewish mother, and *he* didn’t, because I got snipped a week after coming into the world, and *he* didn’t, for these reasons you should prefer me to him? You should *care* about me more than you do about him? Why, that’s SICK! It’s downright *disgusting*!”

I was glad he was done so I could stop craning my neck. He might very well have been arguing as much with his own internal inclinations as he was with me—I hadn’t managed to say very much, after all—but at any rate, Shira quickly laid a hand on his waist (you couldn’t really reach his shoulder) and led him aside. I wasn’t getting any closer to Krishna consciousness this way. The not-so-gentle giant inhaled half the oxygen in the arrivals lounge and rattled off three mantras at breakneck speed, all in one

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breath (not unlike the way we intone the names of Haman's sons in the Purim Megilla). Then he was back, calm and cool, all smiles and ready to Rama.

Shira placed a hand on my shoulder (you can reach my shoulder) and spoke to me softly. "Don't you see? All that His Divine Grace Swami Prah . . . is saying comes down to this: *We must strive with all our inner strength to love all people equally*. That is what these books we're distributing teach as well, and, in the last analysis, isn't that also the central message of *that* book, the one you're carrying?" (she pointed to the Tora).

I stood there engulfed in frustration. What could I possibly answer "on one foot" (as we say in Hebrew), in the few seconds remaining to us, that would even begin to make a dent in *all that*? I heaved a long sigh of resignation. "When was the last time you read *this* book?" was the best I could come up with under the circumstances, appealing in all directions to imaginary back-up units.

"That's not what *this* book says."

My ride showed up, and was of course parked in the red zone, which as you know is for the loading and unloading of passengers only. There was a genuinely poignant parting scene—during which, among other unexpected events, Doron pressed my hand and slipped me a surreptitious "*Shabat shalom, ahi!*" (Good Sabbath, my brother!)—and the tantric trio from Tel Aviv went off in search of easier prey. I don't know where my three semi-brainwashed but far from benighted Brahmins are now—whether they've since managed to achieve supreme bovinity, or whether they have fallen from grace and are currently putting their considerable mercantile talents to lucrative use fencing CD players on Olympic Boulevard. Either way, I sure hope I get to meet up with them again someday (yes, even if it means going back to Los Angeles). The ensuing pages contain the gist of what I would say to them, if I did.

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## II

You don't have to be a disciple of Eastern mysticism or philosophy to be struck by the apparent anomaly of being a committed, involved or practicing Jew today. You just have to be pre-lobotomy. Whatever doubts I may harbor regarding their idea of a fun Friday activity or their strange notion of musical rhythm, the objections raised by my airport interlocutors are not to be sneezed, coughed, hiccupped or spat at. Stripped of their atavistic, pseudo-Aryan trappings and Utopian-socialist rhetoric, the positions propounded by Shira, Doron and Ofer collectively represent far and away *the foremost issue and dilemma* facing the current generation of up-and-coming Jews, as they decide just how Jewish they want to be, as they debate how much space and how much importance to give Judaism and Jewishness in their lives.

For the vast majority of us, after all, the poser is not “Should I be Christian or Jewish?” or “Should I be Buddhist or Jewish?” or even “Should I be Druid or Jewish?” No. The real quandary, the fundamental inner conflict affecting and preoccupying most of today's Jewish young people—whether formulated in this manner or otherwise—is without doubt:

Should I be a *modern, progressive, secular, non-denominationally affiliated American, or Canadian, or Citizen of the World* (or just “Me” with no strings attached whatsoever) ... or should I be *actively and deeply and connectedly and unabashedly Jewish*—and how much of each, or where in-between, and which elements (if any) of these two available alter egos can be reconciled?

Put in even more concise fashion, the puzzle of the hour for most of us is simply this:

*Why on earth be a Jew in the (post-) modern world?*

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(An immediate qualifier: I am well aware that for a whole slew of young Jews, this issue burns inside them at about the level of a Bic lighter, if not lower. Such folks are complete strangers to the gut-wrenching inner turmoil associated with this question, and they are of two kinds.

The first group doesn't think about this question because, to put it simply, *they've already made their decision*. Indeed, their decision was to a large extent made *for* them, long ago, by parents who for whatever reason did not expose their children adequately to one or the other of the two worldviews described above. Either the kids had religion shoved down their throats from age one—no doubts allowed (let alone cultivated)—and never really had the opportunity to observe the truly compelling aspects of life on the other side of the overly protective fence; or—what is far more common—they grew up with no exposure worth mentioning to Judaism or the Jewish people, save perhaps a few years in Hebrew school, which in the majority of cases simply furnishes the poor pupil with enduring reasons to get as far away from his cultural heritage as humanly possible. So, to you “already resolved that issue, don't bother me” types, I say: Continuous self-re-examination, even after having arrived at what appear to be immutable conclusions, is the *conditio sine qua non* of wisdom, humanity, meaningfulness, relationships, progress, success, and pretty much everything else worthwhile in life. So I encourage you to read on.

The second group doesn't think about the question in question, primarily because (how do I put this delicately?) they don't *think*. Ladies and gentlemen of this mold aren't really inclined to ponder or deliberate any subjects more abstract than, say, the optimal head-height of a properly poured Heineken, the relative righteousness of the NCAA versus the NBA three-point line, how fat Oprah is this month, or what T-bills are going to do over the next quarter. Issues and ideas of identity, beauty, freedom, love, art, fantasy, justice, morality, mysticism, change, history, philosophy—such irrelevancies simply do not disturb or exercise such individuals as they pragmatically plod their way through incurably superficial lives. This piece has nothing for such folks.)

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The points proffered by my three Israeli amigos are of the most profound relevance and legitimacy; they are also, of course, in no sense novel. When universities were what they should be (and could be again, I remain convinced), long before any of us were born, our collegiate predecessors were *rarely known to do anything else* but stay up all night in meeting halls, public parks, drinking establishments, abandoned buildings, forests, caves, dormitories and even houses of ill repute, incessantly and passionately debating questions related to the epic conflict between universalism on the one hand, and particularism or nationalism on the other. Here, in these feverishly fought nocturnal battles of the intellect and spirit, both sides would not hesitate to haul out the big guns: Mazzini, Marinetti, and Garibaldi; Kant, Hegel, Herder, Croce and Fichte; Feuerbach, Lassalle, Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin; Rousseau, Diderot, Jefferson, Adam Smith; Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Spinoza and Hume, Russell and Rand, all going at it simultaneously in a massive, tumultuous, WWF tag-team free-for-all slug-match of the mind.

Those were the days.

Not to say that the debate is dead. Over the years, I have heard the arguments of Shira, Doron and Ofer—against attaching oneself to particularist sociocultural cliques which split humankind—advanced with conviction and passion in a whole gamut of guises by hundreds if not thousands of young Jews (not excluding, by the way, yours truly). For that matter, I suspect that a whole smorgasbord of people perusing these lines right now could easily cite more than a few reasons why the notion of making the fact of their being Jewish into this big deal in their daily lives, or into one of the defining characteristics of their personal identity—why this notion might be far from compelling to them, or why it ranks rather low on their priority list, or why it is entirely ideologically untenable in their view, or why it’s just downright stupid. I know I can.

Ever since my childhood, when I was dragged to High Holiday services once a year—where my boredom was of such magnitude that it could only be alleviated by continually conjuring up the vision of myself leaping headlong

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from the balcony to my death by impalement on the spikes of the Menora below—ever since then, I remember wondering what the point of all this was. My budding bewilderment was in no way mitigated by the edifying and intensely spiritual experience of my bar-mitzva, in the course of which I learned by rote for six months how to chant flawlessly the words (although without having so much as an inkling as to their meaning) of what turned out to be the wrong Haftora (I kid you not). After this I took to imbibing mass quantities of Jolt soda to help me stay up all night every night for the final month, and just barely learn the right one.

I rode a souped-up, Harley chopper right out of that neo-fundamentalist nightmare and into my carefree, suburban, red-white-and-blue American teenage dream (Okay, it was a Honda). I drank, smoked, won frisbee-golf tournaments and lost my innocence. Got a girl, named Sue (really), she was terrific and a Methodist. I couldn't see one reason in the whole wide world why we shouldn't be together forever (she turned out to be a staunch Republican and solved my problem). I was—and remain to this day—a full-blown child of Western philosophy, intent on participating in every facet of the modern universe of discourse, no holds barred, no parameters set. I never believed Jews were any better than anybody else (now I live smack in the middle of five million of them: I can *assure* you they're not). I'm still not buying a whole heck of a lot of what organized religion is selling, and probably never will. My personal nature is such that prescriptions and proscriptions and restraints—in short, any system or institution that aspires to tell me what to do—immediately sends me fleeing for the hills, the better to organize active rebellion.

None of the above circumstances, convictions or character traits (and there's a *lot* more where they came from) would appear at first glance to make living a full, fervent Jewish life a sensible option—let alone an attractive one—for your humble servant here. And I presume I'm not the only one in that boat.

Nor has my confusion on this score left me since moving to Israel in 1992. A few months ago some pals and I were patrolling the Syrian border

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at three-thirty in the morning (really). I was intensely exhausted, and kept nodding off and banging my chin on the safety switch of this weapon comparable in size and firepower to the Guns of Navarone. Not happy with this situation, I forced our driver off the road—by repeatedly slamming my rifle butt into the back of his helmet (we had an excellent rapport, “Dudu” and I)—so that we could finally have some coffee. As I stood there—for maybe the fifteenth night in a row—bushed beyond belief, freezing my family jewels off, feeling achy and unshowered and not a little bit exposed, and marshaling the courage to quaff this ipecac-like mixture of offal and lukewarm water which the Israelis themselves refer to as “mud,” I conjured up in my mind the two activities in which I had generally been engaged at this hour of the night during the overwhelming majority of my diaspora existence: (1) *Shluffing soundly* under my extra-fluffy, one hundred percent bona fide down quilt with the pictures of Rocky and Bullwinkle all over it; or, alternately, (2) *at Denny’s*, after a full night of furious and paroxysmal partying, wolfing down some delectable pancakes with an equally scrumptious side of bacon. Let me confess to you that at that moment, right there on the threshold of a Golan Heights minefield (where there are no pancakes), I rained down a hailstorm of execrations—individually and collectively—on Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Moses, King David, the Maccabees and everyone else and their mother who had a hand in sustaining us, keeping us in life, and allowing us to reach this season.

*WHO NEEDS THIS?*

*That* is the question. Why be a Jew, a committed Jew, an involved Jew, today, under current circumstances, even if this doesn’t mean trudging through northern Israel in the middle of a frigid winter night? Why bother? Everything logical, indeed, everything *ideological* in the modern, Western worldview, would appear to be solidly stacked against such a foolish stance. Inertia itself is beating us, hands and feet tied behind its back: Like their gentile counterparts, most Jewish young people of this relatively placid and malleable generation (the sixties it ain’t) are more or less going

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with the increasingly coordinated and egregiously conformist global flow, streaming away from everything the Jewish people once were, away from everything we could yet be together. Now that just darkens my eyes and blackens my soul, and I won't stand for it. So what comes now is basically me throwing everything I've got into one mighty attempt to convince you ... to be a salmon.

(One last point before we embark. I am not going to advocate that we stay Jewish because Doron's dispensationalist vision of a new world order where there is no hatred of Jews or anybody else is pure Hindu hallucination, whereas in fact anti-Semitism will always force us to stick together in the necessary defensive formation of a persecuted clan. This may very well be the case—it has been more often than not in the past—but as a motivation, this particular claim has never been enough to get my personal motor running. *I am not now and never will be a Jew and a Zionist out of fear, or because I have no choice.* To hell with that.

Here's what else I am not going to do. I am not going to reveal to you for the first time how if you read the last six odd-numbered verses of the tenth chapter of the biblical book of Deuteronomy, backwards and diagonally, while simultaneously skipping over all personal pronouns and omitting every third, fifth and twenty-seventh bilabial fricative, it will spell out: "Read Ze'ev Maghen's treatise in 1999 and send him a generous donation" (i.e., no "Bible Codes," I promise). No exposés on how Darwin was strung out on methadone when he wrote *Origin of the Species*, no Genesis-Big Bang bull, no impartial studies on how keeping kosher increases your sexual potency and effectively prevents colon cancer, no portrayals of Semitic religion as the true fount of feminism or the real source of science or any other such puerile bunk currently making the rounds. What I have to say—and the manner in which I say it—might very well offend a broad assortment of readers in a wide variety of ways (you may have already noticed this), but there's one thing I guarantee not to insult: your intelligence.)

Shall we dance?

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### III

I was in junior high school when John Lennon died, and I was an absolute wreck. I grew up on my Mom's old Beatles albums, and by the time I reached adolescence, my personal classification system went: Billy Joel—John Lennon—God. So after that fruitcake son-of-a-bitch emptied his revolver into this consummate musician's chest on the corner of Seventy-Second and Central Park West on the eighth of December, 1980, I wore black to school for a month. I traveled all the way to New York and waved a candle till my arm fell off and sang "All we are saying, is give peace a chance" so many times that it really was *all* I was saying. Meanwhile, back home, I was suspended by the principal due to an unrelated bum rap (it was Aaron Mittleman, not me, who locked our French teacher in the closet and evacuated the class), and so was conveniently able to initiate "Stay in Bed and Grow Your Hair" week—soon joined, to the principal's (and my mother's) chagrin, by some fifteen classmates—at my house in John's honor. I even went out and spent good allowance money on two Yoko albums, where she intermittently shrieks and imitates whale sounds for some eighty-five minutes straight. Now *that's* a true fan.

I tell you all this in order to establish my credentials as a veteran, fanatic and peerlessly loyal Lennon lover, because now I'm going to kill him all over again.

John was at his best as a team player, but there's no question that his preeminent *pièce de résistance*, the composition that will be for all time immediately associated with his name, is "Imagine." And justifiably so: I don't care what the idiot editors of *Rolling Stone* think, it's a great song. Gives me gargantuan goose-bumps from the introductory adagio. The man was a genius, and this was his masterpiece. Even the words themselves are enough to make you weak in the knees:

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Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too

Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace  
You may say that I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one

(Tell me you didn't at least hum the melody while you were reading just now. If not, you're a freak.)

Those words, those words! They're so beautiful, so encompassing, so *right*. We agree with them viscerally, adopt them instinctively. They strike some of our deepest, most primal chords, they produce (at least for a moment) a kind of nebulous but heartfelt longing, a yearning for something better, for something perfect, for something beautiful. Everything we've been taught—indeed, a decent amount of what we human beings are *made* of—is passionately stirred by the simple yet incredibly compelling message of John's poetry (actually, the words were originally inspired by Yoko's verse, if you can believe *that*).

I know what you're thinking: Oh, how *predictable*! Now he's going to explain how "Imagine" is just a pipe dream, an unfeasible, quixotic, idyllic fantasy that's nice to sing about but has no place in our individual or

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collective practical planning for the future. Well, if that's what you think I'm up to ... you're *dead wrong*.

I am not challenging the wisdom of John's enterprise because I think it has no chance of succeeding (fact is, many aspects of it are coming truer every day). If I believed in his vision, if I truly desired that it be realized speedily and in our days, I would join up regardless, and struggle against all odds toward our common goal with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my might.

But I *don't* want John's vision to be fulfilled speedily and in our days. I don't want it to be fulfilled—*ever*. John's beautiful ballad is a death march, a requiem mass for the human race. His seemingly lovely lyrics constitute in truth the single most hideous and most unfortunate combination of syllables ever to be put to music. The realization of his dream, or even just a large part of it, would perforce entail the wholesale and irreversible destruction of the dreams, hopes, happinesses and very reason for living of yourself and every single person you know. If we, who for so long have unthinkingly admired and warbled Lennon's words, were to live to see his wish come true, the result would be more staggeringly horrific and more devastatingly ruinous than you could ever possibly—*imagine*.

Although some readers have no doubt long ago reached their own conclusions on this score, permit me to share with you my own personal take on this exceedingly crucial matter.

#### IV

**W**hy do you get up in the morning?

Please stop and think very seriously for a moment about this matchlessly significant and yet for some reason rarely broached question. What is the juice that gets you going every day? What motivates you to

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pursue ... anything? Why, ultimately, do you do ... pretty much *everything* you do? What are you really looking for? What have you *always* really been looking for—just between you, me and the page?

What is the *end* goal, direct or indirect, of the vast majority of your activities in life? What is the one thing you need more than anything else, the one thing you just couldn't live without, the one thing you probably wouldn't *want* to live without? What do you live for? What do you work for? What would you *die* for? In the immortal words of the Spice Girls: *Tell me what you want, what you really, really want...*

You'll agree it's not any of the basic necessities—food, shelter, clothing, Hewlett-Packard Office-Jet-Pro 1150C multi-function scanner-printer-copier-fax—you already have these. Know how I know? Because you wouldn't be reading this if you didn't. You'd be out somewhere purloining bread like Jean Valjean.

You think maybe it's your *health*? Look, I know that when two old Jewish men pass each other in the locker room on the way to or from the *schvitz*, it's a biblical precept that at least one of them has to rasp, "If you don't have your health, you don't have *nothing*." Granted. But we don't live *for* our health. Our health is only one of the things which allow us to pursue our true desires in life. So once again: What is it, that deepest, most powerful, most true desire of ours?

"Success," you say, or "fulfillment." Okay, what on earth are *those*? Of what elements are they comprised, and which are their *most important and indispensable* component parts?

"All right—happiness!" There you go again! You've managed once more to beg the question: What is it, more than anything else, that *makes* you happy?

All right, here's the final clue, a Beatles clue: All you need is ...

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LOVE.

And if you think this is a cliché, then it is the single most powerful cliché ever known to humankind, the one that pervades our thoughts, directs our actions, makes us move, runs our lives. *We live for love.* Love of parents, love of children, love of husband, love of wife, love of sisters, love of brothers, love of girlfriend, love of boyfriend, love of family, love of friends. *That's* what we want and need most of all, and such a vast percentage of the things we do throughout our entire lives is ultimately connected with and geared toward achieving, maintaining and increasing that one incomparably precious treasure: *Love.*

Sure, there are other objectives and experiences we may strive to attain—the fascination of scholarship, the rush of artistic creation or scientific discovery, the thrill of the fight or the game, the various hedonistic pleasures—but tell me you wouldn't give up any of these before you'd give up love, tell me you wouldn't give up the entire kit-and-caboodle of them for the sake of love, and I'll say it again: You're a freak. "*Without love*" (to enlist the Doobie Brothers), "*where would you be now?*"

Okay, so we're agreed: No one with enough brains to read this piece will deny that love is at least one of the primary motivating factors informing human endeavor.

So let's talk just a little bit about love, shall we?

## V

They asked Jesus and Rabbi Akiva—on different occasions (they lived almost a hundred years apart)—what their favorite verse was in the entire Bible. And wouldn't you know it, both of them picked the exact same

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one: *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho* ("Love your neighbor as yourself," Leviticus 19:18).

Now there is a fairly famous anecdote in the Talmud (*Baba Metzia* 62b) which describes the following situation: You and this other chap are out for a stroll in the desert. While you are both busy admiring the various lizard species and rock formations in your vicinity, *he* suddenly exclaims: "#@\$%&! I forgot my friggin' canteen!"

You quickly assess your options. There is only enough water in *your* canteen for *one* human being to make it back to civilization alive (and no, you do not have your cellphone). So you could split the water—and you'd both perish. You could give your flask altruistically to your fellow traveler, and die a hideous death under the merciless, take-no-prisoners, desert sun. Or you could keep the canteen for yourself, and abandon him to the same fate (this is a slightly tougher decision than what shoes to wear to work in the morning). *What do you do?*

Two opinions, two legal rulings, are recorded in the Talmud regarding this matter. One of them comes straight from the mouth of the aforementioned Rabbi Akiva. The other one emanates from an individual with a very strange name, who is never mentioned anywhere else in rabbinic literature: Ben-Petura. Now, I don't want to go into all the speculative etymology (Ben-Petura—Ben-Pintura—Ben-Pindura: The always fickle letter "nun" creeps in and we have the common, somewhat derogatory Talmudic appellation for Jesus), but it is at least possible that the second jurisprudent whose expertise is consulted in this passage is none other than the Christian Savior himself. We'll never know for sure whether this is so, and it doesn't really matter for our purposes today. I am only interested in utilizing this dichotomy of views as a paradigm, and the two men who espouse them as archetypes. So let's assume, for the moment, that Ben-Petura is in fact Jesus; if he isn't, he's sure read a lot of the Nazarene's sermons, as we shall see.

Let's go back to the desert. The scorching rays of the noonday sun are cauterizing your corpuscles, your throat is so dry you could bake a matza in it, and you have quite a decision to make. Fast. Ben-Petura—Jesus advises

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you as follows: Share the water, and die together, because you are no better than your friend. Rabbi Akiva rules differently: *You take the flask.*

Now this is fascinating because, if you will recall, both Jesus and Akiva chose “Love your neighbor as yourself” as their all-time favorite Tora verse. Well, what in the name of Jehosaphat is going on here? I understand Jesus’ position: It is entirely consistent with genuinely loving your neighbor *as much* as you love yourself, which certainly appears to be exactly what the biblical commandment requires. Jesus’ verdict makes perfect sense in this light.

But Rabbi Akiva? What was *he* thinking? Did he *forget* that he had once put the same verse way up high on a pedestal as “the premier principle of the Tora”? His judgment—keep the canteen, share none of its contents, leave your buddy to expire miserably in the desert like a dog—seems to contradict everything that that hallowed Pentateuchal principle of mutual, equal love demands.

What we have here is a clear-cut case of diametrically opposed interpretations of scriptural intention (a common enough phenomenon in our sources). Jesus understands the Levitical injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself” just exactly the way it sounds (*psbuto k’mashma’o*, as we say in the holy tongue). We would know this even without the whole speculative business about his possible Ben-Petura alias. Because you see, the entire New Testament is simply riddled with examples which leave not a shadow of a doubt that the ideal in Jesus’—and eventually Christianity’s—eyes is at least *to strive to love all human beings equally.*

One day Jesus was in the middle of preaching to the multitudes—as was his wont—when all of a sudden (every Jewish child’s nightmare) his mom showed up:

Then one said unto him: “Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee.” But he answered and said unto him that told him: “Who is my mother? And who are my brethren?” And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said: “Behold my mother and my brethren.” (Matthew 12:46-49)

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This and more: Jesus wished there to be no misunderstanding regarding this matter:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (Matthew 10:34-35)

And in case it has yet to sink in:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethrens, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

We have not quoted verses out of context here. Christianity is a system concerned with belief, with faith, and as such it recognizes no separate national entities, no tribal affiliations, not even, in the final analysis, the significance of blood kinship. It is, at least theoretically, the world's largest equal-opportunity employer, viewing as it does all human beings as similarly deserving (more accurately: Similarly *undeserving*) potential recipients of salvation. Christianity is a thoroughly universalist—and at the same time a thoroughly individualist—religious creed, and Jesus of Nazareth was without a doubt the foremost prophet of universal love (although nowhere *near* the only one).

Okay, that's settled. Now, let's get married. Uh-huh, right this minute—you and me. I'm your beau of the ball, we've been having the most awesome time getting to know each other for months, and I just can't possibly wait another second. It's time to propose. Down I go on one knee. I look dreamily up into your eyes. I reach deftly into the pocket of my Giorgio Armani blazer and pull out a rock the size of a canteloupe. I take your two hands in mine, and, gently caressing them, I coo: "My darling, I love you. I love you *so* much. I love you as much as I love ... as much as I love ... as much as I love that *other* woman, the one walking down the street

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over there. See her? Oh, and *that* one, too, riding her bike past the newspaper stand. I love you *exactly* as much as I love all my previous girlfriends, as well, and I love you as much as all the girls who *weren't* ever my girlfriends. I love you as much as I love everybody else on this planet, and for that matter, I love you as much as I love the animals, too, and the weeds, and the plankton and—Oh *God!* What's that searing, indescribable pain in my groin? Hey, where are you going, my *daaaaaarlliiiiing?*"

No one gets turned on by "universal" love. It doesn't get you up in the morning, it doesn't give you goose-bumps or make you feel all warm and tingly inside, it doesn't send you traipsing through copses picking wildflowers and singing songs about birds, it doesn't provoke heroism, or sacrifice, or creativity, or loyalty, or anything. In short, "universal love" isn't love at all.

*Because love means preference.* The kind of love that means anything, the kind of love we all really want and need and live for, the kind of love that is *worth* anything to anyone—that is worth *everything* to *everyone*—is love that by its very nature, by its very definition, distinguishes and prefers. Show me a guy who tells you that he loves your kids as much as he loves his own, and I'll show you someone who *should never and under no circumstances be your babysitter*. Stay away from such people. Head for the hills. He who aspires to love everybody the same *has no idea what love means*, indeed, is really advocating—and may be entirely unaware of this—*the removal of all love worthy of the name from the planet Earth*.

Rabbi Akiva—and most of Judaism along with him—views the matter a bit differently. The kind of love (romantic or otherwise) that he unabashedly recognizes and unreservedly encourages, is one-hundred-percent biased, hopelessly *unequal*, deeply discriminatory, and incorrigibly preferential *distinguishing* love: The kind of love that plays favorites, that chooses sides, that confers *specialness*. As a Jewish luminary, Rabbi Akiva only understood that type of love that blossoms from the ubiquitous Hebrew root "k-d-sh," which is probably most accurately rendered into English as "to declare special, to *set apart* as unique."

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When a man marries a woman in Judaism, the institution is called *kidushin*, because they *set one another apart* from the rest of humanity, because they (ideally) love each other *more* than they love anybody else (this is a far cry from the fully internally consistent Pauline-Christian doctrine of marriage, which is: “Try your best to avoid it”). When Jews bless the wine on a Friday night, this is called *kidush*, because we are *setting apart*, we are *distinguishing* the Sabbath day from what surrounds it, and saying: I love this day more than any other day of the week. When Jews do that weird, Wizard-of-Oz, “there’s no place like home” thing three times with their heels, and declaim the words *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* in the Amida, this means: “There is none like unto you among the gods, O Lord.” We single you out, we love you best.

This is not a Jewish secret. It’s a human secret. It’s the way we all work, all of us, deep down inside. We all love *preferentially*, and that’s the only kind of love we value, the only kind of love we want back from the people we love. All those perpetually smiling, lovey-dovey, touchy-feely, Swami-from-Miami types who appear at first glance to be all about love, and nothing else but love, toward every single thing that lives and breathes, *are in reality all about stealing this absolutely essential human emotion away from you* (they’ve already lost it themselves). It is no coincidence that the first and most indispensable step one takes in order to successfully “deprogram” a Hare Krishna (or member of any other cult) is to rekindle his *particular* love for a *particular* someone who was once very special to him.

And this means something else that everybody already knows, but is for various reasons only occasionally acknowledged: *Because* love is such a major deal in all of our existences, and because the love we’re talking about is invariably distinguishing and preferential in nature, *human beings will ever and anon, at all places and all times, prefer hanging out in the company of some people over hanging out in the company of others*. They will always form special groups, little groups and big groups, groups to which they feel a special connection, a special sense of belonging. They will always relate emotionally to these groups in the manner of concentric circles, loving the nearer rings

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more than they love the farther ones. They will always seek to perpetuate these familial, sociocultural and possibly political entities for as long as they can. And they will always *distinguish* between their own special circles, and those that are special not to them—but to others.

Is this because human beings are small-minded, visionless creatures who can't appreciate the lustrous loveliness and messianic morality of universal oneness? *No*. It is because they are (thank God) supremely and congenitally motivated by preferential love, and special groups of this sort are the inexorable consequence and highest, most beautiful expression of such love. It is because loving in this way is the bread-and-butter of authentic human happiness. It is because if they didn't love in this way, human beings would have absolutely nothing left to live for. *Nothing*. This, to my mind, is the underlying meaning of the well-known Talmudic determination: "*O hevruta, o mituta*" (loosely: Give me society, or give me death). Either you have around you a particular group of people that you especially love (a "*hevreh*," as modern Hebrew slang has it)—or you might as well be dead.

(Jesus knew this; he knew it full well. That's why he continually emphasized that "My kingdom is not of this earth." He didn't want to—or at least was aware that he was unable to—bring about the establishment of "universal love" *here in the mundane sphere*: It just wouldn't work. Perhaps he even believed it *shouldn't* work. So he decided to institute it in the "kingdom of heaven." That is ultimately the reason why he departed. That is also the reason why there is no parallel in Christianity to Judaism's 613 commandments and their hundreds of thousands of derivatives, which are all about how to live and act and get along right down here in this world. Jesus, on the other hand, specifically relegated unto *Caesar* all things terrestrial. Early Christianity, at least, was not interested in creating a system designed for living and loving in this world: It was interested in ushering in the *next* one.)

Do you know who nearly managed to pull off John Lennon's vision of no religions, no nations, no countries, one world—*right here on earth*? Do you know who almost succeeded—even if only within relative geographic and demographic microcosms—in bringing about that beautiful dream of

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universal love, no barriers, no walls, and no special or distinct human cliques or clans? How about these fine-feathered fellows: Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot. Any of *these* names ring a bell? Because the only way to stop people from loving preferentially and start them loving universally; the only way to see to it that they do not divide up—as people who love at all naturally do—into distinct sociocultural and sociopolitical communities and associations, is by *forcibly ensuring that they all dress, eat, sleep, talk, sing, dance, work, play and think the same*—and killing them if they diverge. There’s your “One World,” John, with all the divisions and barriers erased, there’s Ofer and Doron and Shira’s magnificent, imploding, united utopia, where “all hearts are as one heart, all minds are as one mind, so that through the spirit of oneness you may heal the sickness of a divided community.” Feast your eyes.

## VI

**M**y grandfather on my father’s side was an Iranian Jew from a little town about a hundred and fifty miles south of Tehran, called Kashan. He told me this story.

Once, in the time of *his* grandfather’s grandfather, already in the previous century, a Jewish merchant from Kashan allegedly overcharged a local Muslim man of the cloth (oh, believe me, he *did* it). This complacent clergyman metamorphosed overnight into the Mad Mullah, and swore upon the Holy Qur’an that he’d have his revenge, and then some. He quickly assembled and whipped into a religious frenzy all the be-turbaned ayatollahs in the entire province, and together they proceeded to the palace of the *qaim-maqam*, the regional governor. By hook or by crook they managed to prevail upon him to issue an official edict requiring the conversion of every single Jewish man, woman and child to Islam by such-and-such a date, upon pain of death.

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Well, the appointed deadline was fast approaching, and the Jewish community of Kashan province was in an absolute tizzy. What to do? With two weeks left, the various elders finally buried their long-standing differences and held a solemn conference at the house of Kashan's chief rabbi. Prayers were offered, psalms were intoned, supplications were . . . supplicated. But nobody really had any suggestions worth considering. It was agreed by all present that a delegation should be sent to the governor, but no one could figure out what exactly they should say to him. The meeting was about to disperse, when the rabbi's wife—who had, of course, been bringing in round after round of sweet, samovar-seethed tea for the assembled guests—dared to address the company she had been so dutifully serving. "You leave it to me and my sisters," she enjoined confidently. "Just come back when it's time to go to the governor."

Iranian families are *big*, and soon the sound of looms hard at weaving could be heard not just at the rabbi's house, but at most of the houses surrounding it. The seven sisters worked like devils through day and night, scarcely pausing to rest, and when the elders returned one week later—on their way to petition the governor to rescind the evil decree—the Rabbi's wife laid two enormous, rolled-up Persian rugs, made of the finest Kashan silk, at their feet. "Now, when you are received in audience by the governor, here's what you will do . . .," she explained.

A few days later the delegation of venerable, white-bearded old men—w weary from their long trek through the desert on camel- and donkey-back—stood trembling in His Excellency's august presence. "You have wasted your time in traveling all the way here," he chided them, right off the bat. "There is nothing that will make me change my mind. You will all be good Muslims in time for next Friday's public prayers in the mosque. Nevertheless, since you have come all this way, I will go through the motions of entertaining your petition. What have you to say?"

The elders approached the governor's divan and bowed low (*real* low). "Your Honor, before presenting our petition, we have brought you a gift, as a

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token of our gratitude for these many long years during which we have been privileged to live quietly and obediently under your powerful protection.”

The governor liked gifts. Especially the kind one received from large delegations of rich and frightened Jewish merchants. “Enough of your pathetic truckling,” said he. “What have you brought me?” The elders immediately had both of the carpets brought in and unfurled at the ruler’s feet. “On behalf of the Jewish community of Kashan province, we beg leave to place these two humble offerings before His Excellency, and request that He choose *one* of them as our tribute.”

Both carpets were broad, plush, tightly woven, and made out of the most exquisite material. The first one was covered with colorful curving calyxes and designs of gold and green and turquoise, intricately intertwined with whirling waves of purple petunias which spiraled ceaselessly and centripetally towards the median. Splendid silhouettes of every size, shape and hue graced the corners, like an ornamental garnish surrounding and supporting a magnificent main course. The vast center was an alternately placid and surging sea of breathtaking royal blue, periodically punctuated by a cornucopia of gemlike little islands of the most elegant design, each embroidered in a different form and color and bordered by hundreds of finely interlaced, snow-white cilia swimming softly in agile and decorous understatement.

The second carpet was ... red.

That’s all it was. The whole rug was just one sprawling, solid red mat, from warp to woof, from end to end. “*What?*” cried the governor. “How *dare* you! I should have you all decapitated for such insolence! Do you take me for a fool? What kind of choice is this? Who in his right mind would *not* choose the first carpet—and who in full possession of his faculties *would* choose the second?”

The hoariest head of the Jewish delegation stepped forward from amongst his peers and looked the governor straight in the eye. “The silk rugs, my liege, are the territories under your benevolent sway—Kashan province. Today that province is filled with peoples of every imaginable

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culture and creed—Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Azeris, Mandaeans, Turkmen, Jews—and in this way it resembles the first carpet. Would Your Excellency, then, exchange the first carpet for the second?”

(“This gimmick,” my grandfather would conclude with a twinkle in his eye, “plus about one hundred and seventy five thousand gold *tomans* placed discreetly in the governor’s coffers, succeeded in averting the evil decree.”)

You know I have to ask: Which rug would *you* want? Which *world* do you want? The world of “Imagine,” where nothing of any significance separates us, where there are “no countries and no religions,” and where everybody is concomitantly possessed of the same tastes, the same loves, the same mind? The chiliastic BORGian paradise of Shira, Ofer and Doron, where all human beings blend into one another like some kind of massive, flavorless, mud-colored milk shake?

Or would you rather the world you live in be the diametric opposite of these worlds? A world of dazzling diversity, of independent and self-respecting societies and communities that value, retain and revel in their own uniqueness? Would you rather live in a world where real people unapologetically express real preferences for the company and society of particular persons with whom they have special cultural, historical and emotional bonds?

O, *when* will we stop striving to be the same, when will we stop “ever searching for the *one*”? (You guessed it, the Spice Girls again.) We’ll never get there anyway, but we’ll destroy so incredibly much of what makes life interesting and mysterious and exciting and beautiful along the way. Consult your biology book. It is *mitosis* which is the engine of creation, it is the proliferation of internal *heterogeneity* which is the substance and process of human life, of *all* life. It is increasing variety and diversity that are the hallmark of growth, of evolution, of progress—not approaching ever nearer the great, all-encompassing *One*, but rather ... *fleeing it headlong like the plague*.

Move over to psychology, and peruse your Piaget. This famous Swiss shrimp-shrink explained time and again how the deepening ability to distinguish between the self and others—and between others and others—is the most powerful indicant of infant maturation. In this manner, declared

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he, we go forward step by step, distancing ourselves further and further each day from our original, *non*-distinguishing, fetal disposition, that all-engulfing oneness which Freud dubbed “ocean consciousness.”

So what is it? Is *regression* your thing? Is life so bad and growth so scary that you want to make a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and head right back into the womb?

Divided we stand, my friends—united we fall.

## VII

“Okay,” you might say, “point taken, but it isn’t exactly a *new* point. You’re simply preaching multiculturalism. A day doesn’t go by when I don’t have that concept shoved in my face.” Me, too, and I support it with all my heart. And I think you will agree that in order to promote and maintain authentic, polychromatic, humanity-enriching multiculturalism, we simply have to preserve and cultivate multiple, coherent, and distinctive cultures the world over. There’s only one thing that the vast majority of young, fiery and so very often Jewish advocates of the modern multicultural approach almost always seem to forget: That one of the foremost examples of such cultures *is their own*.

What kind of sense does it make when (among others) college-age, Jewish-born intellectuals espouse the toleration, nay, *celebration* of the international cultural mosaic, while at the same time entirely ignoring and neglecting almost everything even remotely Mosaic? Is it not astounding—along similar lines—that the same Jewish post-modernist professors who have for three decades and more decried “Western Cultural Imperialism” of every type, are in the overwhelming majority of cases themselves the very personification of the unconditional surrender of what is perhaps the most ancient and enduring non-Western culture—their own Jewishness—

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at the feet of that very same “Western Cultural Imperialism”? What is going on in the hearts and heads of Jewish students who ostensibly support constructive dialogue and illuminating interaction among different ethnic, national, cultural and religious groups—but identify only peripherally (if at all) with their own? How on earth can people be expected to tolerate, respect and eventually learn from each other’s sociocultural differences ... *if they don’t have any?*

The Global Village is getting me down. I buy an outrageously expensive airline ticket, board the plane in New York and squirm around uncomfortably in my chair for ten hours, the bird lands, I deplane and, lo and behold, *I’m right back where I started from*: The same English language plastered all over the storefronts, the same Calvin Klein jeans plastered on everybody’s behind, the same rap music as back in the States issuing ever so rhythmically from the taxi driver’s radio (though neither he nor his passengers could ever possibly decipher a word of it—which, by the way, makes them very lucky people, if you ask me). Why are so many people driven by this lukewarm, lemming-like, perennial search for sameness? Why don’t they prefer being themselves—both individually *and* collectively?

Am I advocating that nations and cultures insulate themselves, that they dig in behind an ethnocentric and xenophobic fortress and erect all types of intellectual and ideological tariffs, the better to maintain their separate group identity, their “cultural purity” (to paraphrase Jimmy Carter)? Not on your life. *Au contraire!* I am specifically and passionately advocating that the various sociocultural units of the world interact and share, that they challenge, stimulate, edify, surprise, enlighten, influence, and *open the eyes* of one another.

But in order to share, you have to have *what* to share, you have to cultivate, and become knowledgeable about, and rejoice in, and build upon *your own unique, accumulated heritage*. You need to cherish and nourish specifically the *distinguishing traits* and characteristics that make you different and fascinating, and place you in possession of tantalizing and desirable gifts to bestow upon others—things they don’t already have! (Who wants to bring

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home a Bruce Lee or Michael Jackson T-shirt as a souvenir from Morocco? And yet these were the only two examples of Moroccan fashion memorabilia available at the Abu'l Hadi and Sons souvenir shop in Fez in the summer of 1987.) If you sow rutabaga and I grow kumquats, we certainly have every impetus to trade with each another; if we both plant kidney beans—what's the point?

I guess like most people, my general ideas about “the way things should be” are to a large extent the product of my childhood. My suburban Philadelphia block was made up of about ten separate houses with ample space between, all of which formed the peripheral ring around this huge, green, common lawn in the middle. The families inhabiting these houses—the Ciartes, the Fitzgeralds, the Popowitches, the Hing-Yips, the Rosenbergs, the Sanchezes—were as incurably and pridefully diverse as the architecture of the houses themselves. Visiting each other, as we often did, was a mind-expanding *tour de force*: The unexpected smells, the strange conventions, the vastly different notions of decor (for years I begged my parents to paint the inside of our house pink and green like the Ciartes had).

Now, what if someone had taken all these families, and somehow convinced them that it was a waste of space, all these separate houses; a waste of crockery, all these diverse dishes; a waste of artistic effort, all these varying internal and external decors? Everybody should move into one big, humungous house and do all that stuff together, and uniformly. Then everything would be hunky-dory, and far more economical, and look how much closer and more unified everybody would be!

How would you like to live in *that* house?

We *need* our separate houses. It's the only way we can be good neighbors. It's the only way we can avoid *butchering* each other with chain-saws and Ginsu knives in a matter of two to three days, tops. And it's the only way that the interaction between us—nightly on the grassy knoll, or daily in the world of work—can bear any fruit and be any fun. Just as you no doubt live your personal life within a given community as an individual, self-confidently sporting your own singular and special trademark qualities, so nations and

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ethnic groups need to actively participate in and contribute to the world order and the totality of human civilization as proud, particular, peculiar, *unique* sociocultural entities, each boasting a brash and defiant attitude of “national individualism,” each, as it were, building, decorating and living in its own distinctive cultural home within the overall neighborhood of nations. Here is Woodrow Wilson’s simple yet crucial insight: The need for “self-determination.” Here is Samuel Coleridge’s “most general definition of beauty—*Multeity in Unity*.”

“Gotcha!” you say, a self-satisfied smirk spreading speedily across your visage. “All you’ve been pushing for pages now is the direct-ratio relationship between waxing heterogeneity and human progress, between expanding diversity and a life that’s worth living—and now, you’ve thrown the loaded term ‘individualism’ into the pot, to boot. Very well. By your logic, then, we should none of us affiliate with *any* association or community or nation or even family. Rather, we should focus solely on our own, independent, individual selves—renouncing loyalty to or prejudicial affection for any one particular group—and thereby provide the world with the largest amount of variety and individualism possible! *Six billion* different and unique colors!”

This is indeed the conclusion which has been reached, consciously or unconsciously, by a great many members of what is often (correctly) referred to as “alienated Western society.” But this approach is not one iota different from the universal “oneness-or-bust” frenzy we’ve been striving to dethrone and debunk so far. *If you love everybody you love nobody—and if you love nobody you love nobody*. It’s a big circle, and you’ve come full ’round it. You’re talking about eradicating preferential love again—or at least severely restricting its scope and outlets to yourself and perhaps a few intimate relatives and acquaintances (is that all the love you’ve got?). You are talking about opting out of that special community, the *hevreh*, which the Talmud rightly says it is not worth living without.

And consider, if you will, the humble Persian carpet from my grandfather’s story. Suppose the elders of Kashan had unrolled before the

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governor not two rugs, but three: The first of elaborate and colorful design, as described; the second, just plain red; and the third, made up of literally tens of thousands of tiny pixels and knots, each dyed its own unique tint, and with no attempt at thematic organization or color coordination whatsoever. What would *that* rug look like? Dreck, that's what. Neither full-blown universalism nor full-blown individualism makes for a beautiful world. Only a world which is based on a conception and structure planted firmly *between* these two poles can ever be called truly beautiful.

For God's sake, *be* an individual—and an individualist! I for one certainly lay claim to such a title—with a vengeance. It is *because* I am an arrogant, uncompromising, incorrigible individualist, and I know like I know my own bedsheets that nobody can ever take my “me-ness” away from me without a sawed-off twelve-gauge shotgun or some such—it is *because* of this that it never occurred to me to be afraid that I would lose myself in a crowd; it is *because* of this that I am able and willing to provide myself with the incredible privilege of being an integral participant in that unparalleled, nearly impossible phenomenon ... called the Jewish people.

(I guess I should stop here and say this, just for the record: The above generalizations about the position taken respectively by Christianity and Judaism on the issue of love of—and affiliation with—national, cultural, tribal and familial collectives, are just that: generalizations. I have no doubt they could become the target of virulent and often justified assault, at least on some counts. Again, however, I don't think anyone knowledgeable about these issues would dare to deny that non-Jewish creeds from Bahai to Buddhism, from Islam to Secular Humanism, from Christianity to Communism, are at least far stronger supporters of universal love than Judaism ever was or ever will be. This, I think, everyone will grant. It is true if for no other reason than that none of the other faiths or doctrines mentioned above lays claim in any way to being the cultural-ideological constitution of a particular national or ethnic group. Indeed, such an imputation would be an insult and anathema to the most fundamental principles of every single one of them.

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Judaism, on the other hand, makes specifically this claim, and the Jews have traditionally seen the Tora as their own, special, personal possession and guide (there are a few eschatological prognostications emanating from the mouths of the Prophets which might be construed as contradicting this, but even here, the daily Jewish expression of gratitude to “He who separated and distinguished us”—*hamavdil* or *asher bahar*—remains at all times the dominant motif). We Jews are and have always been not only adherents to a set of spiritual dogmas, but *members of an extended family*, of a nation, and of a “tribe” (as the appellative “Jew”—*yehudi*—most emphatically implies). We have never referred to ourselves anywhere in our sources as “*dat yisra’el*” (the Religion of Israel) or “*emunat yisra’el*” (the Faith of Israel). Rather, we have always denoted ourselves throughout our long history by the significant cognomens “*am yisra’el*” (the Nation of Israel), “*klal yisra’el*” (the Totality of Israel), “*knesset yisra’el*” (the Assembly of Israel), “*beit yisra’el*” (the House of Israel) and “*bnei yisra’el*” (the Children of Israel). You see where the emphasis lies, right?

The point is, however, that I promised that I would utilize the purported positions of these various religions and ideologies regarding questions of love and oneness, solely as a paradigm—and that, I hope you understand, is the only thing I am doing. If all the learned rabbis in the entire State of Israel were to assemble in my living room tomorrow and—prior to excoriating and excommunicating one another for various perceived heresies—prove to me chapter and verse that the attitude to love and oneness which I have outlined herein is completely foreign to Judaism, and that it is, say, specifically *Christianity* which happens to see such issues in that way (i.e., the opposite of the theory I am propounding)—this wouldn’t matter even a *smidgen* to the argument on behalf of which I am so vehemently expostulating. I would *still* advocate the particular positions I am currently advocating, regardless of which theology or philosophy is privileged to be used or abused as the paradigm. It is the attitude *itself* (preferential love, socio-cultural diversity) which I am pushing with all my might—*not* the religion.)

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## VIII

A few issues, however, may still be troubling you. For instance: Isn't the world I am asking for perforce a world forever doomed to incessant, desolating warfare between peoples, all of whom love "their own" with a passion and hate everybody else with the same?

For starters, even assuming the One-Worlders could ever bring us peace, which they most definitively cannot, it would only be at the price of a terrorist, totalitarian, socially engineered nightmare that would make George Orwell and Aldous Huxley wet their pants. That is the only possible, earth-bound consummation of the words: "Imagine all the people, living life in peace." (Stop humming.) If you've got no will, no emotions, no preferences and no special ties left to speak of, I guess that'll take the fight out of you pretty good, all right.

Contrary to the immortal and oft-cited last utterance of the early Zionist hero Joseph Trumpeldor—"It is good to die for our country"—you would probably agree with me that there isn't the slightest thing good about dying for your country, your nation, your religious beliefs, or whatever. I don't wish this fate upon anybody (except maybe Saddam Hussein; I hope he is privileged to die for his country—soon). What I *do* wish, upon every single person still persevering through these pages, is that you do have things in your life that are dear enough to you that you would be *willing* to die for them, if it ever—God forbid—became absolutely necessary. Says John: "Nothing to kill or die for..." Says me: In that case, nothing much to live for, either.

There is another important subject to be addressed in this connection, however, a subject we left dangling more than ten pages ago. Back then we were trying to figure out the motives of Rabbi Akiva for apparently contradicting himself by lauding the precept "Love your neighbor as yourself," while at the same time ruling elsewhere (in the case of the forgotten flask)

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that when it comes to choosing between your life and that of your neighbor—*your* life is paramount. We have tried to show that as a Judaic scholar, Akiva was reared on the principle of preferential love, and thus he was forced to rule as he did. But we still haven't resolved the glaring disagreement between his ruling and the explicit scriptural prescription he praises so highly. Let's try to do that now.

Last week I was sitting in this Yemenite restaurant in Jerusalem reading a book and munching my *malawah*. At seven P.M., the air was shrilly pierced—as it is every hour on the hour—by those six long beeps that some sadistic socialist functionary from the early days of pre-state broadcasting decided was an appropriate way to introduce the news. After a run-of-the-mill item—some foreign dignitary's helicopter had been hovering on the brink of Israeli airspace for the last three hours and was about to plunge into the Mediterranean because officials of the Foreign and Defense ministries were quarreling over whose prerogative it was to issue the entry permit—the anchorperson announced that two hundred thirty people had been killed in an airplane crash in Indonesia.

“That's terrible,” I thought, and proceeded to cut myself another large, juicy morsel of *malawah*, drench it in my side dish of *humus*, and loft it lazily into my watering, hangar-like mouth. Yummmmm. “That's really *awful*—oh, there's a nice big piece of chicken smothered in delectable *harif* sauce, come to papa ... mmmm, yummmmm....”

And then I stopped. I was actually a little angry at myself for being unable to get sufficiently upset about those two hundred thirty Indonesians and their poor, grief-stricken, destroyed families to have it affect my appetite even for five seconds. So I tried an experiment. I took the headline I had just heard on the radio, and changed only one or two words. Now it read: TWO HUNDRED THIRTY ISRAELI SOLDIERS DIE IN PLANE CRASH OVER NEGEV.

“Oh, God. That really *hurts*. It physically *hurts*. As if someone punched me really hard in the stomach. Is that what it feels like? That much pain? I'm not thinking about my next bite of food anymore, that's for sure. I'm pretty

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close to being nauseous. So now I know. Now I have some inkling at least of what those crushed, devastated, wrecked, innocent families are experiencing right now, as the news reaches them one by one that everything they ever lived for is gone. Dear *God*...

You may not believe this, but I actually got up and left without finishing my *malawah* (and there was at least a third still sitting there on the plate). I know, I know: My momentary abstinence really helped those Indonesian families. That's not my point. Let me give you another example.

A couple of years ago I was under Manhattan, riding the One Train downtown to South Ferry. Round about Sixty-Sixth Street, the door on the end of our car slid open, and a man with no legs came through, propelling himself with his arms and carrying a bucket in his teeth. He didn't say anything (obviously), wore no explanatory sign, but I guarantee you this: By the time he made it to the other end of the car, there was *easily* upwards of fifty more dollars in that bucket. Granted, people give for all types of reasons. But I know what made *me* at least reach for the paper and not the change. It wasn't "altruism," whatever that is. It was really a much simpler, more compelling deal: As I would imagine most other people did on that train, I looked at that indescribably miserable man and instinctively said to myself: "My God: What if that were *me*? What if that were my father, or my brother, or my son?"

Preferential love is the most powerful love there is, the only truly *motivating* love there is. It is by *means* of that love—the *special* love we harbor for those close to us—that we learn how to begin to love others, who are farther away. Genuine and galvanizing empathy for "the other" is acquired most effectively and lastingly through a process which involves, first and foremost, immersion in love of self, then of family, then of friends, then of community ... and so on. It is via *emotional analogy* to these types of strong-bond affections that one becomes capable of executing a sort of "love leap," a hyper-space transference of the strength and immediacy of the feelings one retains for his favorite people, smack onto those who have no direct claim on such sentiments.

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If you don't love your own best of all, we said, you really have no idea what *genuine* love is. If you have no idea what genuine love is, your chances of learning to love people in Indonesia or Syria or Tajikistan or Wyoming, your chances of learning to feel for people in faraway places or contexts (or on the other side of a tense border, or in the opposite camp of a *kulturkampf*), are pretty slim indeed.

Here, then, is (my guess at) Rabbi Akiva's exegesis of the much-touted verse: "Love your neighbor as yourself." In his eyes, it doesn't signify "Love your neighbor *as much as* you love yourself"; Rabbi Akiva doesn't believe in such artificial love, we know that from the flask story. To him it reads (and the Hebrew happens to support this, even though Akiva was not generally the type who cared): "Love your neighbor *in the same fashion* as you love yourself." Use the feelings you have toward yourself as a guide for how to feel about him. You will never love him *as much* as you love yourself—you *should* never love him as much as you love yourself—but you will learn to love him at all, in the first place, solely through your overwhelmingly powerful love of yourself and your own. It is to this process and no other that the Tora refers when it urges—in over twenty different versions of the same statement—"Love the stranger: For you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:19)

The world of preferential love and distinct sociocultural and political entities certainly need not be one of hatred and interminable warfare (what is Isaiah's vision? "*Nation* shall not lift up sword against *nation*, neither shall they learn war anymore" Isaiah 2:4). It may, in fact, be the only system available to the human race which will ever have a chance of breeding genuine global empathy and tolerance.

Imagine *that*.

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## IX

You are still not happy. “Okay,” you might say, “I’ll concede, for the moment, the following points: (1) I accept that the kind of love that means the most to me is preferential, distinguishing love: I want it, I need it, I can’t live without it; (2) I’ll give you that the world should optimally resemble a tapestry of distinctive families, or groups, or peoples, or nations; and (3) I’ll even grant you that I personally, for the sake of my own happiness and for the general good of humanity, should connect myself in a vigorous and loving fashion to one of said groups. Fine. What you haven’t really told me is ... *why on earth should that group be the Jews?*”

Well said. After all, you might claim that you’ve had little or no exposure to Judaism or the Jewish community, so what’s it to you; or you might claim that what meager exposure you did have was not exactly tantalizing, and you can’t see much point in going back for seconds; or you might (finally) ask this extremely excellent question: Why shouldn’t I adopt as my “special society” all the members of the intramural hockey league I play in? Or all the guys I go bowling with? Or all the fighting feminists of the world? Or everybody who digs Biz? Or all the people who live in the same city I do? Or all the people who live in the same country I do (I’m as good a patriot as the next fellow!)? Why not *these* groups as my first loves? After all, I probably have a great deal more in common with them than I do with your average Jewish person walking down the street.

I’ll tell you (in the immortal words of Tevya the milkman): ... *I don’t know.*

Because here we stand on the threshold of things that are not really rational: They are emotional (which, however, as we have been striving to argue, is a far more fundamental and powerful human motivation). It is very hard—indeed, well nigh impossible—to logically argue something

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that belongs not to the realm of logic, but to the kingdom of the heart. Nevertheless, I'll give it my best shot.

I could start by telling you how much *we* need *you*, and how much what you personally decide to do with your life has earth-shattering consequences and ramifications for your whole extended national clan, wherever they sleep and dream, wherever they wake and work, wherever they fight and fall. The Midrash tells this terse tale: There are twelve people in a boat. One guy, he starts drilling a hole under his seat. When everybody gapes at him in dismay and astonishment, he looks up and says: "What's it to ya? I'm only drilling under my *own* seat."

The idea is, of course, that we Jews are all in the same boat, so your particular actions or inactions naturally attract our interest and concern, whether you like it or not—because they are inextricably bound up with our collective prospects and welfare. Make no mistake about it: Whether you are aware of this or not, *the future of the Jewish people is as much up to you as it is up to Benjamin Netanyahu*. But this is too close to a Jewish guilt trip, and I'm just not into that. A very brilliant Zionist revolutionary by the name of Vladimir Jabotinsky always made it clear to his cohorts and disciples in the movement that if a Jew chooses to opt out of his nation's ongoing struggle and experience, there certainly is no effective or morally defensible way to force him back in. If he wants to go, let him go—more work for the rest of us.

I could also advance the proposition that you ought to join us with a passion and a fury for the following very simple reason: You are a Jew. You are a Jew, and another Jew (who was once upon a time *extremely* assimilated)—the heart that was huge enough to imagine the State of Israel and then bring that imagination to fruition, Dr. Theodor Herzl—once declared plainly: "The greatest happiness in life, is to be that which one is." I couldn't agree more. And if you *are* going to be who you are—a Jew—*then do it up*. Don't be a "by-default Jew," a "checkbook Jew," a "High-Holiday Jew," a "peripheral Jew" or a "marginal Jew." Be a "bold, breathless" Jew, be a "wild, wanton" Jew, be an "I'm going to milk this cultural identity thing for *everything it's got*" Jew—be a knowledgeable, thirsty, caring, daring, *actively involved* Jew.

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This is not a bad argument, but neither is it without problems. Although I certainly don't intend anything of the sort—far from it!—it is possible that a certain tinge of traditionalism or conservatism could be read into a thesis which suggests: “Be what you are—because that is what you are.” It could conceivably smack of an attack on human mobility—a concept as dear to me as it is dear (in my humble interpretation) to the Tora itself. Besides, you might easily parry by claiming that “being who you are” at this point in your life entails being a bowler, or a feminist, or a Bostonian, or an American or Canadian, far more than it does being a Jew, which is “what you are” only due to an accident of birth. So this contention doesn't completely pass muster, either.

What of the oft-repeated apologetic asseveration that the Jewish legal and behavioral system is morally superior to that of any other religion, culture and ideology? I personally happen to believe—after a respectable amount of round-robin investigation—that Judaism as a lifestyle and *weltanschauung* has a good deal more to recommend itself than many other ready-made systems available to people for the adopting and practicing—but that's just me. I also happen to think there are a lot of *less* than palatable provisions to be found in the dos and don'ts of Judaic jurisprudence, and besides: Who says we should conduct every aspect of our existence according to a prefabricated plan purveyed to us by our illustrious predecessors? We were given minds, I would venture, for the purpose of judging and evaluating each and every instance and episode in our lives independently, on a case-by-case basis—not so that we should know how and where to look up the proper response to every single stimulus in a book. So this argument goes down the tubes as well.

Let's try a different approach. Again, the gnawing question: “Why not choose my bowling buddies, or the people on my block, or the International Society of Vegans, or who knows what other coherent entity as my spiritual center and the object of my primary affections? Why is the Jewish people a better candidate for this exalted position in my thoughts and emotions than these previously named options?”

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Let's hum along with Dr. Winston O'Boogie—Lennon's favorite nickname—once again: "Imagine all the people, living for today..." *Living for today*. Oh, John, my main *man*, what it *is*? Did you *think* about this wish before you made it? Granted, this line suffers a number of possible interpretations, but they all more or less connect to the problem I would like to raise here.

We have already discussed the ugliness and emptiness engendered by the modern Western ailment of exaggerated individualism and complete non-affiliation. The symptoms of this disease are sequestration and isolation from a whole concentrically constructed solar system of potentially enriching relationships on the horizontal—or spatial—plane. In a word, this is the affliction of "living for yourself."

Well, one thing is for sure: Being Jewish cures *this* affliction, like no antidote I've ever seen. As a Jew, you literally have millions of people all around you, right this very second, throughout the world, with whom you share a secret, with whom you can exchange a knowing glance, at whom you can wink (use your judgment). These people are *your* people, they feel tied to you, they are pulling for you, they are *on your side* (travel tip: this does *not* mean you will not get ripped off by Israeli cab drivers—that's *their* way of saying, "I love you").

I don't know if this special relationship is a product of the historical and international uniqueness of the Jewish phenomenon—we are neither a "nation" like the French, nor a "religion" like the Christians—or whether it is because as a group, we are not too big (like the population of America) and not too small (like the tenants in your apartment building), but just the right size to elicit that super-family feel, that combination of transcendence *and* immanence, of greatness *and* closeness. Or maybe it is just because the rest of humanity has always been so kind to us. I don't know exactly *why* there is this powerful electricity constantly coursing and pulsating between Jews the world over—I just know it's there.

Just before my latest stint in the reserves, I was in New York blading with my brother down the lower West Side promenade hard by the Hudson,

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and we stopped to rest near the World Trade Center. This guy a few feet away from us was trying to pick up a young lady by aggressively and intimately massaging her dog, and Alex and I switched to Hebrew in order to comment upon his original methodology. As we were talking, this be-suited fellow sitting on the bench opposite—clearly taking a five-minute lunch break from an action-packed morning of corporate raiding—kept staring at us. Finally, he rose, walked over, and stood rather awkwardly dead center in front of our bench. I looked up at him, and he faltered, gestured, fumbled, hesitated, and then just stammered, “Um ... uh ... *Shalom!*” I extended my hand and he shook it warmly and smiled. Still flustered, he half-saluted us goodbye, and went back to merging and acquiring.

What he really wanted to say was: “Hey—I’m Jewish, too.” What he really intended by “Um ... uh ... *Shalom,*” was: “I embrace you, my brother, member of my tribe from a faraway place. We share something tremendous and indescribable, something ancient and exalted, something wonderful and mysterious. We were soldered together, you and I, by the fires of hell on earth, and our bonds are since unsunderable. I’m glad you are in the world, and it gives me strength and pleasure to see you. Here: Have some genuine affection.” He meant all this, and more. He wanted to momentarily close that circuit and tap into that energy flow.

The modern Western sickness of living solely for oneself, however—for which Jewish identity is such a powerful serum—is usually accompanied by *another* malady, which Lennon and so many others aspire to infect us all with: Living solely for today. This second disorder—let’s call it “time hermitism,” for lack of a better term (is there a *worse* term?)—emaciates our psyches by disconnecting us from a vast and fascinating potpourri of mind- and soul-expanding elements on the vertical—or temporal—plane. You can be alone in space, and you can be alone in time.

“Living for today”—an extremely pervasive slogan among so many people for so many years—means, essentially, *being alone in time*, alone historically speaking (a feat which can obviously be achieved even while surrounded in the present by a whole soccer stadium’s worth of companions).

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Well, I suppose that's fine, if that's what you like. Living for the moment—and only for the moment—has certain genuine advantages. But I think that in the long run, you lose out *big* time. I mean, let's reason from the specific to the general again: Did you ever see that *Star Trek* where they strap Kirk down into a big, black, padded chair, and beam this memory-erasing light at his head, such that after a few minutes he would have been emptied of all recollection? Now suppose we strapped you into that chair, and erased your entire memory—everything you did, everything you felt, everything you learned, everything you treasured, everything you daily and constantly reference. What, do you suppose, would be left?

A turnip, that's what. "You" are the accumulation of your experiences throughout your life. Growing and living and enjoying and fulfilling is all about the interaction, combination and application of those past experiences—which constitute the greater part (if not the whole) of your consciousness—to what it is you are thinking, feeling and doing at the present instant. If all you know and all you feel is what you know and feel *today*—or this week, or this year—well, you aren't going to get invited to a lot of dinner parties, I can promise you that.

But along the same lines, "you" are—or should be—even more. Why settle, after all? You have the opportunity to extend your horizons further than any normal eye can see, further than any detached intellect can perceive, further than any untouched heart can feel. You can reach beyond your individual, birth-and-death-bound walls, and palpate immortality. You can draw on, you can *gorge* upon, the accumulated experience, knowledge and inextinguishable fire of the manifold ascending centuries which preceded you. You can stand higher than Everest on the shoulders of a hundred generations, and thereby see light-years farther into the future than those who have grounded themselves at sea level, and cannot see past their noses in any direction. In a word: You can be HUGE.

How does one do all this? After all, *you personally* were born quite recently. You haven't existed, built, climbed, fallen, lost, won, wept, rejoiced, created, learned, argued, loved and struggled for thousands of years. Nevertheless: You

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happen to have lucked out. As a Jew, you are a distinguished member of a nation which *has* done all these things, and then some. You have special eyes, eyes that can see for miles and miles. If you only will it—enough to work at it—you can extend your arms and touch the eons and the millennia, you can suck in the insights and bask in the glory and writhe in the pain and draw on the power emanating from every era and every episode and every experience of your indomitable, indestructible, obstinately everlasting people.

This is not an ability acquired solely through learning or reading (although this is a *major* ingredient, I hasten to emphasize); it is first and foremost a function of connection, of belonging, of powerful love. If you reach out and grasp your people's hands—you *were there*. You participated in what they did, in all places at all times, you fought their battles, felt their feelings and learned their lessons. You tended flocks with Rachel, and slaved in Potiphar's house with Joseph; you sang in the wilderness with Miriam, and toppled the walls of Jericho with Joshua; you carried first fruits to the Temple Mount, and were mesmerized by Elijah on the slopes of Carmel; you brought the house down on the Philistines with Samson, and bewailed your lost youth in the mountains with Jephthah's daughter; you fought the chariots of Hatzor under Deborah, and danced before the ascending Ark with David; you went into exile with the prophet Jeremiah, and hung your harp and wept by the rivers of Babylon; you defied the divinity of Nebuchadnezzar with the courage and cunning of Daniel, and vanquished the might of imperial Persia with the wisdom and beauty of Esther; you sought communion with the infinite with Shim'on bar Yohai, and studied law and lore in the vineyards of Yavneh with El'azar ben Arach; you were with Judah the Maccabee at Modi'in, with the Zealots at Masada, with Akiva in the Roman torture chamber and with Bar-Kochva at Betar; you devoted your life to Tora at Sura and Pumpedita, and philosophized by the Nile in Fustat with the circle of Maimonides; you were crucified for refusing the cross in the Crusades, and were turned into ashes for your stubbornness at the *autos-da-fé*; you were exiled from the shores of Spain by Isabella, and

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chased down and raped by the hordes of Chmielniki; you went out to Safed's fields to greet the Sabbath bride with Luria, and went in to Galicia's huts to seek the ecstasy of the fervent Ba'al Shem Tov; you fled the Black Hundreds across Russia's taiga, and were welcomed by Lazarus at the gates of Ellis Island; you filed into gas chambers at Bergen Belsen, and were hurled living into the flames at Matthausen and Sobibor; you parachuted into Hungary with Hanna Senesh, and fought back at Warsaw with Mordechai Anilewitz; you were shot with your family in the forests of Poland, and dug a mass grave and perished there at Babi Yar; you revived your dead language, you resurrected your sapped strength, you returned to yourself and renewed the lapsed covenant, you arose like a lion and hewed out your freedom on the plains and the mountains of your old-new land.

Throughout all this and so much more, *you were there with them*—and they are here with you. This is the thrust of the Passover Haggada when it exhorts: “In every generation, a person must see himself as if he *personally* left Egypt.” This is the intention of the Talmud when it whispers—based upon a strongly suggestive biblical verse—that we were *all* present and accounted for at the foot of Mount Sinai in the desert, over three thousand years ago. This, I would venture, is the deepest symbolic meaning and ultimate emotional motivation behind the Jewish-originated concept of the Resurrection of the Dead in the End of Days: You see, I think that in certain ways, we loved one another so damn much that we simply couldn't bear the notion that we wouldn't all—all of us, from every place and every Jewish generation throughout history—eventually have the opportunity and pleasure of meeting each other face-to-face, and just spending some quality time. Not to worry, crooned the rabbis of the Talmud (with the Supremes): *Someday, we'll be together....*

I am a Jew, and I am tied to teleology as well as to history. I live not just “for today,” and not even just for all that has *led up* to today—I also live for a thousand tomorrows. I do not know what will be in ten centuries from now, but I know that Jews will be. How do I know? Because I will work for it, because I will see to it—and I believe in myself as much as I believe in my

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people. Yes, Jews there will be. And through them, *I* will be, and through them, I will *touch* what will be, and through them, I will *create* what will be. You and I are members of a unique, extended family, extended in *time* as well as in space, extended into the *future* as well as into the past. My noble ancestors will pardon me for the odious comparison, but it is like having access to a vast Internet of Existence, like being plugged-in and logged-on to forever (and believe it or not, at the highest and deepest levels, the connection is *interactive*). In the words of Leo Tolstoy (not that we need his approval or reinforcement, he just happens to be the world's most talented writer, and he put this—and everything else—rather nicely):

The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither fire nor swords nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, he who was the first to produce the oracles of God, he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, the pioneer of liberty and the creator of true civilization, and who transmitted all these to the rest of the world—such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as eternity itself.

You need not, then, live the impoverished life of the “time hermit.” You, my sister or brother, spiritual daughter or son of Sarah and Abraham, you are blessed with the opportunity to connect with and benefit from a sprawling, boundless, spatial *and* temporal network, suffused with the deepest secrets of the ages, humming with the love of countless generations, a love that was always channeled directly and unhesitatingly at you.

By tying into all of this—while *fiercely* maintaining your own, stubborn individuality—you indeed achieve a great deal: You add innumerable new intellectual and emotional dimensions to your life, as you absorb, meltdown and refashion in your own image the fruits of untold centuries of evolving Jewish thought and churning Jewish tumult; you teach yourself the syntax and vocabulary of a timeless language, which you can use—as it were—to communicate with all that went into creating

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you, and all that you will one day create; you partake in a four-thousand-year-long journey of savage struggle and jubilant exultation, of unimaginable sacrifice and ineffable beauty, an adventure recently rekindled in a phoenix-like flash of incandescent splendor the likes of which human history has never seen; and eventually you burn, my brother and sister, you burn with the light and the fever and the strength and the passion of the magnificent and undying people of Israel, the bush that burns, but is never consumed.

Try getting that from bowling.

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