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**A sermon delivered by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel,
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The Melting Pot

Jewish fellow wants to become American citizen, but can't speak English.

"Don't worry" his friend tells him; "the judge always asks the same five questions.

All you have to do is memorize five answers in English".

Name: Moishe Weiss

How many children: five

How many states in the US: 50

First president: George Washington

Parents alive: Thank G-d both.

He practices....Day of "awe" arrives...

Judge asks:

First president: Moishe Weiss

States: 5

Children: 50

Your name: George Washington

Who is crazy, me or you: Thank G-d both.

Jew leaving Russia to the US. Russian Immigration opens suitcase and sees a bust of Stalin and asks what is this. Jew says "don't ask what this is; ask who it is. This is Stalin and I want to remember my glorious days in Russia for which he was responsible." They wave him through.

Comes to the US, immigration opens suitcase..... What is this?

"Don't ask what... ask WHO this is. It's Stalin. I want to thank G-d for saving me from this evil tyrant." They wave him through.

Comes to brother's house... Nephew sees him unpack. Asks: Who is that?

"Don't ask WHO is that; ask WHAT is that.... Its 5 kilos of gold!"

For a long time, America was defined as the "melting pot" of ethnic minorities. This metaphor was used to describe the ideal process of immigration: the immigrant must allow himself to be melted into formless liquid, and then molded into the American way of life.

Many immigrants, including and especially Jews, embraced this model. Leaving their Tefillin on Ellis Island, their Shabbos on the boats, and their Kashrut in the shtetl. A Jewish education for their children would limit their ability to integrate into society and therefore limit their success in "di goldeneh medinah" (the golden land).

The term "melting pot" was coined by a Jew named Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), who was the British-born son of Jewish immigrant parents from Latvia and Poland. Zangwill was a staunch advocate of emancipation as well as assimilation, and wrote a play called "The Melting Pot" – a hit in the United States in 1908-1909 -- to express his views.

The hero of the play, David, immigrates to America in the wake of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom in which his entire family is killed. David, the lone survivor, falls in love with a Russian Christian immigrant named Vera. The dramatic peak of the play is the moment when David meets Vera's father, who turns out to be the Russian officer responsible for the murder of David's family in Kishinev. Vera's father admits his guilt, David forgives him, and David and Vera live happily ever after, or, at least, agree to wed as the curtain falls...

In Zangwill's words: "America is God's Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians -- into the melting pot with you all!"

Zangwill was writing as a Jew who no longer wanted to be a Jew. His real hope was for a world in which the entire lexicon of racial and religious difference is thrown away. Consistent to his own philosophy, he broke off his support for Zionism, and married a non-Jewish woman.

When *The Melting Pot* opened in Washington D.C. on October 5, 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt leaned over the edge of his box and shouted, "That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play!"

The question I'd like to address today is: Was it in fact a great play or was it a tragic play?

It contributed to the climate which caused millions of Jews to sever their cords to thousands of years of history, to their own inner Jewish identity, and to the living wellsprings of Jewish faith and practice. Most of them assimilated and have been lost to our people.

But the idea seems so wonderful. Wouldn't it be great if the whole world was one language, culture, currency, faith – or lack thereof... We'd all be the same, all religious and racial differences would disappear, and we'd all... just get along... live happily ever after. The true utopia!

And why do we keep on talking about Jewish identity, Jewish tradition, Jewish peoplehood, Jewish continuity. Wouldn't we be better off if we did away with all of this and just melted into society and be just like everyone else; one big family – the People of the World!

Well, for starters, it won't work. We don't know how to assimilate well... As much as we try to hide our Jewishness and "fit in" – we still manage to stand out and be noticed as the Jew...

I recently asked a Jew in Manhasset why he didn't have a Mezuzah on his front door. I said I thought it was a good idea to have one. He said he didn't put one up – "I don't want to stand out."

I told him he reminded of the story of the Chasid, straight out of Boro Park, in full Chassidic garb, beard & long payos. He's at a trade show in Vegas. He shows up the first day of the show in a baseball cap and leather jacket, replacing his hat and black coat. His non-Jewish partners look at him – are you nuts? Did you lose it or something? He says: I don't want to stand out... I told the Manhasset Jew – the same applies to you... who do you think you're fooling?...

A Jew decides to convert and become a minister. He's got the gift of the gab; he'll be able to make a good living. First day at mass: My dear fellow Goyim...

Guy calls law firm, man, with heavy European accent answers the phone: Tank u for calling Goldberg & O'Brien. Man starts laughing, Goldberg & O'Brien, that's funny... U tink dets funny? U know vats even funnier? I'm O'Brien!

Jew down on his luck gets custodial job at the local church. After one week, priest sits him down: you're doing a great job, we're really happy with your work. But please, just a couple of things: Don't wash your hands with that water – it's the holy water; you can't hang your coat there, it's not a coat hanger, it's the cross; and by the way – it's Mother Theresa, not Mother Shapiro...

So it doesn't really work, this assimilation thing. We don't assimilate well...

But wouldn't it be good if we did? Would the ideal world be the Melting Pot, where we all melt into one unit leaving all the differences behind?

I submit to you, my dear friends, that the Melting Pot theory was wrong not only from a Jewish and religious point of view, but also from a purely American point of view.

Unity is not uniformity. Unity does not mean we are all the same. In fact we are NOT all the same. And therefore, unity which is achieved by making believe that we are is superficial and short lived. It's not real unity. The differences still remain as strong as ever, simmering just beneath the surface ready to erupt at any moment.

True unity means to understand the differences and still get along.

It's like in marriage: Young couple gets married thinking they're exactly identical. It's perfect; this will be a story book marriage forever. That is until reality kicks in a few months into the marriage (or a few weeks... days...) and they realize that he's got his meshugayes and she has her own shtick... True love begins to build when they realize that they care about one another in spite of the differences. They are one, not because they are alike, but because they are in fact one.

What is true in marriage is true in all relationships, including in the relationship between cultures, nations and civilizations. We cannot afford to form a skin-deep peace based on denying our differences and insisting that we are all identical.

In a way, melting pot idea is like communism – another idea that sounded good but in fact brought about destruction of its society

Joke – guy who is caught learning Hebrew in Soviet Union, they want to arrest him – you must be planning to go to Israel. No. why then r u learning Hebrew? In case I go to heaven. And what if you go to hell? “Russian I already know.”

Why doesn't it work? Such a nice idea, we're all the same... because in fact we're not all the same. G-d created each of us with our own uniqueness, our own talents, creativity, ingenuity, ego and desire for success. You can't squash it... Why would you want to squash it?

The Melting Pot theory is similarly tragically flawed.

Because diversity is sewn into the very fabric of existence. No two snow flakes are alike; no two zebra stripes are alike; no two fingerprints are alike. There are tens of millions of different species of plants and animals in our world. And there are the inherent divisions between people, such as male and female, body and soul, and the specific divisions into nations, cultures and individuals.

The diversity is built in. It points to the infinite greatness of the Creator. A great artist can paint any picture. A great musician can play any tune. A glimpse of G-d's greatness is expressed in the huge amount of diversity found in creation. In the words of the Psalmist: "Mo rabu maasecho Hashem – How diverse and many are your creations, Oh Lo-rd".

Making believe we're all the same won't work – because it's not true! We're NOT all the same. That's not the plan. That's not what the Designer In Chief had in mind... What He had in mind was for us to each be who and what we are supposed to be, and to get along, and respect one another, in spite of our differences, recognizing that we complement one another.

But how will we ever get along, if we're different?

Think about the diversity found within the human being. Mind, heart, eyes, ears, hands & feet. They're not all the same at all. They're as different as can be. So how do they get along?! That's because they've got one soul, one life force, one energy, one focus and direction, which that unites them.

So we don't need to be the same to get along. Like in the healthy body, each part of the body does its own thing; there's no attempt at uniformity. In fact, that would be tragic, and spell out illness and

death. While not being uniform at all, they work together in perfect unison towards the goal of the one soul!

Or take for example an orchestra, a hundred musicians playing in harmony. No, they don't all play the same instrument. That would be redundant and dull. Rather, each plays their own music. However, they keep their eyes on the one conductor. The key is not to be the same as everyone else. Rather the key is to remember that its not about you as an individual; it's about the entire orchestra, the big picture. Together, their diversity united, gorgeous music is created...

So the moral of the story than is: There's no need to be like "everyone else". Let's stop worrying about "standing out" too much. When we shy away from our role as Jews we're actually hurting our non-Jewish friends and neighbors. They need us to do our part even as they do theirs.

If you're the violinist, and you look around and you see many Sax players, and you feel uncomfortable. "Why should I stand out like this, being the only one standing here with the violin while all of these guys are on the sax. I should be like everyone else, let me put down this silly violin and join the chorus". Silly. You're doing no good for anyone. Because you're no good on the Sax; plus you're needed to play the violin. If you're not playing the violin, you're simply not needed. You can go home...

When we do mitzvhas, torah, shabbos, mezuzahs, when we accept our role to be a light unto the nations and be the moral compass to society, the carriers of the Message etc, we are then "useful" AND we will then be respected by the good gentiles around us. (And the not good gentiles, the Anti-Semites of the world, they won't like us anyway even if we try to "blend in" so why bother...)

Our non-Jewish neighbors like us when we act like Jews.

Story: I'm doing my prayers in Long Beach airport shortly after 9/11, I got to do them now because by the time I get to NY it'll be too late to say my prayers. So I put on my tallis & tefillin... I look like some Martian who just landed from another planet... Long Beach airport is a tiny place, it's two rooms. There is no quiet corner for me to go to do my prayers. I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable. A group of about 5 bikers with biceps the size of my waste-line (before the diet) and tatoos - roll in and sit down right next to me. I'm starting to sweat... I mean... I'm prayin'... I hear them saying: "What's with this dude? What he doin'? You don't know? He's Jewish. He's praying... That's good, he's on our flight; it'll be a safe flight."

Story in hospital, after saying shma with yid, wife of goy in next bed asks me to pray with her husband. I begin doing an English prayer. She says: "can you say that prayer in that other language?"

Story about Author Herman Wouk. When he was drafted into the army in WWII he went to the FR for a Bracha. The FR told him to be very careful with Tefillin.

Herman was Chief Mate on a ship in the Pacific Ocean and was usually on duty up on the bridge in the morning. As the skies lit up, Herman would put on Tefillin on the bridge in front of the entire crew. This went on every day.

The ship was a vintage WWI mine sweeper and should have fallen apart a hundred times over the course of the war, but somehow it stayed together.

However, shortly after the war, there was a terrible typhoon and the old tub fell apart. A distress signal went out and the American ships in the area came around to pick up the survivors.

When they gathered in Australia to take count they realized that there had not been a single fatality. The sailors (all gentiles) agreed - it was Wouk's boxes that saved their lives.

Society actually realized the fallacy of the Melting Pot idea, and eventually abandoned it. In the 60's, the Melting Pot was replaced by multiculturalism, which celebrates each culture encouraging it to express its own uniqueness; each person expressing their own individuality, etc.

Most religious leaders were aghast with the 60s because of the "freedom" and immorality that it brought with it. The Rebbe, Rabbi Scheerson, was an exception. (Not because he was particularly interested in Woodstock...) The Rebbe saw it as an opportunity. He saw the spirit of it: freedom to be who you really are, without inhibitions. The Rebbe saw the 60s as the time America matured in the sense that it grew out of the need to conform. If so, said the Rebbe, if people will be encouraged and free to be themselves, chances are Jews will be Jewish! And He was right. The amount of young Jews who embraced, or re-embraced, their Jewish roots and a religious lifestyle in the 60s was unprecedented before and unsurpassed thereafter.

Story of hippy Jew I met in LA who had returned to his Jewish roots and become a fully observant Jew. He was still a hippy though. He lived in his van, which was painted with all kinds of slogans like: Yeah G-d! Peace & Love... We asked him once what made him become observant. Why would such a free spirited guy take on a code for life? He said it was the 60s that did it... We started laugh, how can that be. He explained: He was at Berkley University campus, everyone was trying to act more free, more crazy than the next guy, with a variety of hair colors, lots of body piercing, "different" types of styles of dress... He needed to find a meshugayes of his own. But whatever idea he thought of was already taken...

He remembered that his rabbi back in Hebrew school (during the few days that he managed to go) used to wear a garment called tzitzis, a small prayer shawl under the shirt. He decided this is the perfect craziness! He began parading around Berkeley with shorts, bare chested and a huge pair of tzitzis! Boy was it nuts! He was an instant hit.

Then he met the Chabad rabbi – it was love at first sight. The rabbi found him some wild yarmulkah to complement his uniform... Then at Sukkot that rabbi came over to him with a new "crazy" idea: Take this palm branch, he said, and this lemon-like thing, carry it around campus. Pretty nuts, heh? Then whenever you meet a Jewish student give it to them and ask them to give it a shake! I'm telling you, the rabbi assured him, this is as nuts as it gets.... And so it was, the rest is history.

He told us: The whole world is crazy. I decided let me be crazy "my way" – the Jewish way...

The point of the story is: Don't be afraid to embrace yiddishkeit, mitzvos... it's not making you more restricted, in fact it is your freedom... your freedom to be who you really are!

I close with this:

Growing up, through elementary and high school, there was one boy in our class named Daniel who never participated in after school activities. He was busy practicing his violin. Whatever we were doing, whether it was a baseball game, a trip to the city, whatever, he was busy with his violin and couldn't make it. I recently ran in to him. Today he's a talented violinist and plays for symphonies in Manhattan, off Broadway etc. I hadn't seen him in a while so we got to talking. I asked him: Danny, how is it that you had the discipline to spend all that time practicing the violin; how did you give up all of the fun of grades school and then high school, devoting every free moment to the violin?

He looked at me – Shalom, you don't know? I'm a 6th generation violinist... My mother, her father, her grandfather, his mother etc. For 6 generations in my family we played the violin. I wasn't going to break the chain...

Dear friends, every one of us sitting in this room is 150th generation "violinist". If you identify yourself as a Jew, it's because for 150 generations there was an unbroken chain of tradition, of Jewish observance. Because whenever there was a generation or 2 or 3 of Jews who let go of Shabbos, kosher, tefillin, etc. their descendents then assimilated and disappeared from the Jewish people. Each of us has got 150 generations behind us. Let's not break the chain! Don't look around at the sax players or the pianists. Don't try to look like someone else and do someone else's part. Take out the old violin – and play! That's what you do. That's your thing! That's what you're needed for.

That's what will bring you the greatest fulfillment in life. That's also what will make your gentile neighbors appreciate and respect you. You're playing your role... you're doing your part...

Shana Tova!

