

I think I have previously shared the story of the trumpet playing friend I had in college who asked me what animal my *chai* was. You can't blame him; in a piece of jewelry the *yud* has to be attached to the *chet*, so it could be some freakish type of animal. To make a long story short, his question led to him telling me that he had never seen—not just known, but seen—a Jew before. My telling him that if he had been to Chicago he had seen Jews, and if he had been to the Symphony Hall to hear the Chicago Orchestra he had seen Jews on the stage stunned him (“But wouldn't they tell you?”). All of this was completely without any malice or hostility; he simply didn't think he had ever seen a real live Jew.

Yesterday was the first session of my Bible course at Butler University. I had assigned a short paper due on the first day of class, and I had students stand and read their papers. After hearing several students describe the small farm communities they were raised in (one was “predominantly white, well, completely white”), a thought occurred to me. I asked a question, “Would you please raise your hand if I am the first rabbi you've ever met?”

Every single student raised his or her hand. This was getting interesting. I decided to press on.

“Would you please keep your hand up if I am the first Jewish person you have ever spoken to?”

Out of twenty-five students, three or four hands went down. At least twenty-one stayed up. I was, in fact, the first Jew that 85% of my students had ever spoken to. One bright young lady did say, “At least, as far as I know.”

Think for a moment about how you would feel in my position. Would it occur to you that these young men and women would be forming their first impressions of Jewish people based on you and your actions? It definitely occurred to me, and I was glad that their first exposure to a Jewish person was someone who was dazzlingly brilliant, funnier than most professional comedians, a talented and patient teacher, and stunningly humble and modest about it all.

The fact is, you are all in my position although to a much lesser extent. You may disagree, and my assertion may not apply to every non-Jew you know, but I do believe to a greater or lesser extent depending on circumstances, we are all ambassadors of the Jewish people to the non-Jewish community. Can anyone honestly say that if someone was going to steal millions of dollars from individuals and charities, you would not have preferred that it not been a Jewish man like Bernie Madoff, but someone whose first name was Christopher?

If you completely disagree with me, if you don't care that the Ponzi scheme was run by a Jew or a non-Jew, please let me share a bit of Torah in the broader sense of the word. Not from the Five Books of Moses, but from the Book of Isaiah, two brief examples:

Isaiah 49:6 For He has said: "It is too little that you should be My servant In that I raise up the tribes of Jacob And restore the survivors of Israel: *I will also make you a light of nations, That My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.*"

Isaiah 60:3 *And nations shall walk by your light, Kings, by your shining radiance.*

This is part of our mission as a Jewish people. Yes, we are charged with involving ourselves with repairing the world, *tikkun olam*, but part of how we do *tikkun olam* is by modeling Godly behavior. It does not matter at all if you are in front of a group of young people forming their first impressions of a Jewish person, or with someone to whom it would never occur that you are Jewish, or with someone who does not know you are Jewish. The essential teaching is that we are to be models of appropriate behavior.

In a world in which there are so many negative role models, we are to be positive ones. Most of us are at a disadvantage in terms of exposure. We are not rich, famous celebrities, and perhaps we should thank God for that. But what people are most likely to notice about you is not your appearance or your clothing or what kind of car you drive. They are going to notice how you treat them. Nothing else makes as strong an impression.

If you dare, spend a week wearing a name tag and notice if it changes your behavior. I'm willing to bet you find yourself being at least a little more patient, a little kinder, a little more understanding than when you are anonymous. Put a sign on your car identifying yourself and see if it does not affect your driving. When I had Lee County Sheriff's office insignia on my car, I was the most courteous driver on the road.

So imagine that you have a big, blue sign on your forehead that says "Jewish." Each day, try to be not simply nice, but to go a little bit beyond the usual. Be a little extra nice, a little more patient, even more understanding and compassionate. It does matter that the person on the receiving end won't associate it with your Jewishness. You'll know. God will know. And the person on the receiving end

might just emulate your behavior, consciously or not. You'll have made someone's day a little nicer, you'll have made the world just a wee bit better, and you'll know that you have fulfilled part of your obligations as a Jewish person: serving as a light unto the nations.