

“A Place Called Tsadek” by John Morris



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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

In this sermon I want to continue the conversation about anti-Semitism that has emerged at Seekers in recent months. A lot of what I have to say begins with my father, and of course this is Father's Day. Let me say first, then, that you're going to hear things about this man that are highly critical, but he also had many endearing qualities – kindness, humor, a reverence for education – and I always loved him.

I'm an only child. When I was eleven my parents and I moved

to Kensington, Maryland, and I started junior high there. Kensington had a high percentage of Jewish families, and I found that I had a lot in common with them, and many of my new best friends were Jewish. I don't mean to stereotype, but the fact was that so many of the smartest, funniest, most talented kids were Jewish – much as Roy was talking about last week – and that was what I wanted to be too. I should say that my parents were anti-religious and raised me as nothing, though my mother, as an Italian former Catholic, smuggled in the Lord's Prayer when she thought my father wasn't listening.

Towards the end of 7th grade, my father sat me down for a talk. I remember how uncomfortable he seemed, yet resolute, as if this former Army officer had an assignment he disliked but had to carry out. "Your grandmother – my mother –" he began, "is Jewish." This surprised me, and I said so. Grandma was still alive, and we regularly stayed with her in her apartment in Manhattan; she was full of fun and affection. I had never seen anything that suggested a Jewish background. She certainly never referred to it, or to synagogue, or the Torah, or Israel, or whatever else I imagined Jews talked about amongst themselves. When we visited at Christmas time, there was a Christmas tree, and we celebrated secular Christmas.

I said some of this to my father, and his reply was, more or less, that Grandma was *assimilated*. He may not have used that word, but he made the concept clear: Grandma did not believe in the Jewish religion, or any religion, she had no desire to be identified as Jewish, and she considered herself simply an American. Moreover, her family had emigrated to the U.S. from middle-class Germany in the mid-19th century, so they were completely a part of the American mainstream by now.

What about Grandpa?, I wanted to know – Grandpa had died a few years ago. Here my memory fails me. My father either said, "He was mixed" or "He was from Texas". Either is possible.

It's true that my grandfather had family in Texas, but it's also true that our family surname name Morris is not English or Welsh, but likely a version of the German name Moritz. So who knows. In any case, my father made it clear that he himself had been raised as nothing at all, just like he was raising me, and was very grateful for that, as he regarded religion as fairy-tales.

Well, if that had been the substance of our conversation, I no doubt would have walked away from it quite intrigued, perhaps eager to hear more from Grandma, and to discuss it with my Jewish friends at school. But all this was only preamble.

"You may be wondering," my father said, "why I'm bringing all this up now." And it occurred to me that yes, I had been wondering why now. My father's expression became grim. Here is what he said to me: He had noticed how many of my friends from school were Jewish. This had to stop. It was not acceptable for me to hang out with Jewish kids because people might then assume that *I* was Jewish. And this must not happen. My father explained that, when he was a boy, he had to fight to rid himself of the stigma of being seen as Jewish – not that he was, he kept insisting – that it had been a long struggle but, by the time he joined the Army, he had created a WASP identity for himself that everyone accepted.

At this point in his speech, I was starting to get the picture – Right, this isn't just about me, it's about *him*, *his* secret. If people thought his son was Jewish, well . . . guess what that made him. For my father, this was absolutely intolerable. His whole cover-up would have been for nothing.

OK, but cover up *what*? What was so wrong about being either Jewish or being mistaken for a Jew? At this point my father launched on an explanation that I know I didn't follow very well or understand at the time, so I'm reconstructing it now based on what I later was able to piece together.

Put simply, my father had nothing really against *his* kind of Jews, the assimilated German Jews like his mother. And if that were the only kind of Jews there were, there would be no anti-Semitism, no prejudice, according to my father. Sadly, a huge new wave of Jewish immigrants had come to the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century. These millions of people were poor, uneducated, superstitious, and uncouth. They spoke Yiddish. They made no attempt to assimilate but actually boasted of being "the Chosen People." They were loud, obnoxious, and rightly incurred the distaste of Gentiles. *This* was what I must never allow myself to be identified with, because . . . well, not only would it cripple my opportunities in life, but at the worst I would be gassed.

Our conversation concluded with some pieces of advice from my father about how to recognize who was Jewish. I find this bizarre in retrospect, since no one I knew made any attempt to hide it. But in my father's paranoid, self-hating world, you had to learn the signs. I'll spare you these anti-Semitic tropes, though I can recite to this day his explanation about the difference between names that ended in -ski versus those that ended in -sky.

I never did what my father asked, never distanced myself from the Jewish community, and through high school and college many of my closest friends were Jewish. (And I guess I should add that none of them, and no one else as far as I could see, assumed I too was Jewish on this account.) Once my father realized that I would not obey him, he seemed to drop the subject. He pretended it wasn't an issue. And so did I. To the end of his life, I never had a deep conversation with him about this subject, which I regret. I simply made it clear that I thought anti-Semitism was evil, and so was his class-based division among Jewish immigrants, and he might as well accept that. He died at 85, having been received into the Catholic church in the last year of his life. I asked him why. So I can have a Catholic funeral, he explained, and

didn't have to say another word. I got it: Now *no one* would think he was Jewish.

So where did this leave me? You won't be surprised to hear the answer: On the one hand, I gloried in whatever connections to Jewish culture I got from Jewish friends, Jewish writers and musicians and filmmakers. But on the other, a dark, subconscious part of me had accepted that a Jewish grandmother had to be a secret. There must be something wrong with me, if she was who she was. I would find myself worrying that someone would "think I was Jewish," and then immediately realize that I would be fine with that, and then the voice would say, "But you shouldn't be," and it would go on and on. All my intelligence and experience told me that Jews were my favorite people; yet this single, strong condemnation from my father made me feel torn and ashamed. It's interesting, I suppose, that becoming a Christian had no bearing whatsoever on any of this. In some part of me, this crazy internal discord has never ceased.

During the past year, in a time of awful polarization and rising American anti-Semitism, I've thought a lot about what it means to be a Jew, and how the Christian church constructed a calumny about the Jewish religion that has reverberated for hundreds and hundreds of years. Where do I fit? Where does my family fit? Was Grandma quote-unquote Jewish? I guess so – this is another regret I have, that I never talked to her about her early life, after what I learned from my father. She was a member of the tribe, which, according to at least one of my current Jewish friends, never disappears no matter how much disavowing and assimilating you do.

Was my father Jewish? This is more mysterious. Technically, according to matrilineage, yes. Can a lifelong anti-Semite be Jewish? My understanding is that it's all too common. But my real question is, Was he telling the truth when he said that he received absolutely no religious education as a child? Why, then, did he talk about trying to avoid the childhood

“stigma of being Jewish”? Isn’t it just as likely that he and his brother and their mother and maybe their father attended synagogue sometimes, and celebrated some of the Holy Days, and he got the crap beaten out of him on the mean streets of New York City, and decided there was no point in being victimized for something he didn’t believe in anyway. But who knows. In other areas of his life, my father was not a truthful person, but maybe this story was true . . . maybe he really knew nothing about his mother’s former faith, and wanted to keep it that way. Again, I regret that as an adult I never asked him about any of this.

I want to make an imaginative leap now, and ask you to compare my personal story with the story of the Christian church. My father tried to instill in me an unreasonable and unjust prejudice against the Jewish people, despite – or because of? – the fact that one of his parents was Jewish. The Christian church has tried to instill in us a similarly hateful prejudice against Jews, despite – or because of? – the fact that the founder of our religion was Jewish.

What does this tell us? It tells me that if bigotry begins at home, so to speak, you never completely leave it behind. We at Seekers are extremely progressive in our understanding of Christian teachings, but we can’t deny the roots of anti-Semitism in our collective history. What we can do is acknowledge, admit, declare, bring the whole ugly thing into the light, so that it doesn’t jump out and surprise us with some insidious bit of cruelty or stupidity. That’s what I’m trying to do by talking this morning about my own family story. It’s my way of extracting the poison, not letting it fester like an untreated wound. I believe we are collectively hearing this call at Seekers around the subject of anti-Semitism. I hope my experience can help. I’m about the most philo-Semitic gentile you could imagine, but the poison is in me too.

What exactly do we Christians need to repent? I started to

write about this and realized I was merely paraphrasing Deborah's sermon from a couple of months ago. So instead I'll quote it: "Anti-Semitism," she told us, "is a Christian invention. Before Christianity, the people who came to be known as Jews were often oppressed by other, more powerful, groups, but no more so than any other group that had different gods and different customs than the current rulers. Hatred and fear of the Jews *because they are Jews* is something new and very different. It is grounded in the belief that Christians are the new chosen people, and therefore that Jews no longer have the right to exist."

She also talked about what John Carroll calls "the shift from a religious definition of Jewishness to a racial one," which led to "a near permanent resonance in the modern European fantasy of Jews as parasites—successful and assimilated, but feeding on the host society."

When I consider the taint of anti-Semitism in myself and in others, it is this repugnant racial version that I mostly see. Does anyone here actually think the Jewish people should be accused of "killing our Lord"? I doubt it. But we all, to some degree, have been inculcated into the deeply held Christian belief that Jews are, not only "other," but a threat. So . . . just as we Seekers embrace being anti-racist, it's high time we also acknowledge living within a religious tradition that is responsible for anti-Semitism — and that we will have no further truck with it.

As I move toward the end of this sermon, let me call out a couple of things that I'm *not* saying. I'm not saying that these reflections about identity and anti-Semitism have led me to some new understanding of the Israeli/Palestinian tragedy. Wow, would that ever be arrogant! Having a Jewish grandmother gives me exactly zero insight into how to achieve peace in Palestine, and it also doesn't incline me to "take sides" with Israel. I'm happy to discuss my opinions about the Gaza war with anyone who's interested, but that's far outside the

context of my words this morning.

The second thing is this: Maybe it's obvious, but I'm not suddenly claiming some kind of Jewish identity for myself. Much as I wish I had it, this would be pretty insulting to people who do identify as Jewish, and have endured a lot of the slings and arrows that go along with it. And yet . . . if this were Germany in the 1930s, my self-identification or lack of same as a Jew would be irrelevant to the Nazis. They would have sent me to the death camps anyway. So we don't always get to choose our own labels. Knowing this, I'm going to identify, not as Jewish, but *with* the Jewish people, with the oppressed and slandered. I refuse to wait for some fascist to rave about Jewish blood; I'll stand up and be counted now, thank you very much.

Here's a nice coincidence: In addition to being Father's Day, today, June 16th, is Bloomsday, the day in 1904 in which the action of James Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place. Joyce's hero, Leopold Bloom, is a wandering Jew in Catholic Dublin, the eternal other, trying to find his way home. So that's just a reminder that compassionate, intelligent Christians have been wrestling with this story of prejudice and exclusion for a long time.

My father's mother died when I was 13. And here came a huge surprise . . . her funeral was held at a synagogue. What? How had this come about? Who had requested it? I didn't know then, and don't know now. But I sat beside my father during the service, and as the rabbi intoned the words in Hebrew, there were tears on my father's face, and he could barely breathe. It was the first and last time I ever saw my father cry.

I'll close with a dream I had last week. I come to a beautiful town that I somehow recognize, though I know I've never been there before. Old, elegant buildings, narrow streets. I enter a shop and ask several women behind the

counter, What is the name of this place? One of them replies, "Tsadek." Could you spell that? I ask. And she does: T-S-A-D-E-K. It means nothing to me. When I woke up, I remembered the word "tzaddik," which I did know; it's Hebrew, and refers to an honorable person. But just to see, I looked up "tsadek" as well. And there is such a word, though I'm certain I never heard it before. It's Yiddish, and means "righteous" or "just." So in my dream, the Holy Spirit guided me to this place, which I recognized though I was a stranger. The Spirit gave me a word that was new to me, tsadek. I can only pray that all of us may find our identity in righteousness and justice. Amen.