



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 19, 2010.

I Believe We Should Stop Rejoicing in Our Heritage
Anschel Schaffer-Cohen

I believe that we need to stop defining ourselves by our heritage. I know that's not something we're supposed to say here; I have some photocopied Humanistic blessings which start with "We rejoice in our heritage." We gather on the anniversaries of our ancestors' triumphs over adversity. On alternate Sundays we corral children into classrooms to recount history and myth, and to remind them about what we call the Jewish values of *tzedakah*, *shalom*, and *tikun olam*.

But this emphasis on heritage has decidedly negative consequences. I stand before you, the product of seven years of KidSchool education. My Bar Mitzvah paper is offered as an example to prospective parents at open houses. I am, like it or not, the KidSchool poster child. But I have a confession to make. I learned something else there besides charity, peace, and repairing the world. By the time I was twelve or thirteen I had learned that these were Jewish values. No one ever told me this, but I had an inkling that, as a Jew, I was somehow more capable than my Gentile friends and classmates of caring about the world. After hearing these words over and over in Hebrew, after beginning my Bar Mitzvah project with a study of my ancestors' values, I associated the values with my heritage; by analogy, I expected those with a different heritage not to share these values.

And if I define myself by the history of Jewish oppression, what about my friend Larissa, who's German? If I can invoke my oppressed ancestors, and call it just, must she then invoke her oppressor ancestors? Surely we aren't responsible for the sins of our forebears. But if we can pick and choose only the flattering parts of our heritage, ordering our ancestry à la carte, what's the point of remembering our heritage at all? If I claim heritage from Albert Einstein but not Mayer Rothschild, why shouldn't I claim heritage from Frederick Douglass or Gandhi? Some would say that this is my "cultural" or "spiritual" heritage; in this sense I do rejoice in my heritage. But the word heritage has suffered a complete loss of meaning--it's simply a list of people and ideas from the past that I find appealing.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason that we need to stop "rejoicing in our heritage" is that heritage is not really a choice. I'm not proud of being a Jew. How could I be proud of something I didn't choose and can't change? I reserve my pride for what I have control over: my personal philosophy, my political beliefs, the people I spend my time with. These are the things I have actively chosen or done, they are how I define myself to myself, and they are how I would like to be seen by others. As a society, we need to replace hereditary identity with individual and personal identity.

I should answer the obvious question: after all that, why do I work at KidSchool? The truth is that I'm ambivalent: at some moments it feels like the most natural job in the world for me; at others I worry that I'm helping to perpetuate the same heritage-centric world-view that I've personally rejected. But if there is a good reason for me to teach there, here it is: maybe, by offering another perspective, I can help my students avoid my own pitfalls.