

Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Mates  
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“Sorry. The story is not of interest to our readership,” was the answer from our local Jewish newspaper.

The story in question?

This year marked the 50th anniversary of women rabbis being ordained.

That anniversary of the ordination of the first female rabbi Sally Priesand 50 years ago was worthy of articles in the New York Times, as well as newspapers all around the country – Arizona, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Marin County but not South Florida. Even Israel, which sometimes holds disdain for us Reform Jews had coverage of the anniversary in Israeli newspapers like the Times of Israel and Haaretz. Prayers and poems and journals were written, art was commissioned, but our own local Jewish press, crickets.

As a woman who has worked for over two decades in a field where people expect rabbis to be men I was sad but not surprised. For more than half my life, I have had a front row seat to what Brandeis University law professor Anita Hill articulates about women’s experience in the world. “Women are told throughout their lives that the problem they are experiencing isn’t so bad which then suggests that no one is going to do anything about it... And if we start to tell people that early enough that will almost insure that they will remain silent...and insure that people ...will get the idea that whatever they are doing isn’t bad enough to warrant any kind of intervention. And so these are the kind of cultural messages that we need to check. “

For some of you, this pathway from a lack of coverage of a story about the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women rabbis in our local press to the reality of being a woman in the world that exists in my head is ridiculous. But I have an uncommon knowledge of being a woman in the Jewish world and the world at large. I know that all the branches of the Reform Movement, My rabbinical school, the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis have all in this past year put out reports on transgressions against primarily women that were carried out over decades and ignored. If we don’t care to hear about women’s voices and women’s stories on a minor scale as a local Jewish community, over time, bit by bit by bit this hurts our community on a major scale.

Uncommon Knowledge means possessing wisdom and information essential to a realm, a service, a technique or certain area. So you go to your doctor for their uncommon knowledge in medicine, your accountant for their uncommon knowledge in tax law and so on because their uncommon knowledge allows them to see pathways and connections and insights and solutions and information that you may not. You may have uncommon knowledge because of study or experience or practice.

A few years ago Malcolm Gladwell wrote of the 10,000 hour rule. He asserted that the key to achieving expertise was solid practice and study for at least 10,000 hours. But uncommon knowledge starts at different points for different areas. So if you are going to be a world-class

golfer or gymnast or baseball player, that work to achieve uncommon knowledge must start when you are very young. On the other hand, we can't even begin to gain expertise in other areas until we are older – a four year old can't articulate that they want to be an architect or astronomer until they can grasp more abstract concepts. But in Judaism, Uncommon Knowledge is different. It comes from the moment you are Jewish. It is there from the get go and also has to be cultivated. But it is there from the get go. I promise you. I'll show you.

Maybe that anniversary of women's ordination is not of such interest. Well there is another 50th anniversary marked this year. 50 years ago as a glass ceiling was broken in one realm of the Jewish world, hearts were shattered in another realm.

On Sept. 5, 1972, eight members of a Palestinian group called Black September climbed an unguarded fence of the Olympic village in Munich during the Summer Olympics. They burst into the building where the Israeli team was staying, killing wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg and weightlifter Yossi Romano. Some Israeli athletes managed to escape but nine were seized. The captors demanded the release of more than 200 Palestinians held by Israel and two German extremists in West German prisons. The attackers demanded a plane and safe passage to Cairo. After a day of tense negotiations, the assailants and their hostages were allowed to leave aboard two helicopters. Sharpshooters at the airfield opened fire. The attackers threw a grenade into one of the helicopters carrying hostages, which exploded, and shot the hostages in the other helicopter. The West Germans had ignored the warnings of potential attacks and failed to provide even minimal security for the Israeli delegation. Most painfully, the Munich Olympic games continued as planned, the terrorists were released from prison after two and a half months, and for decades the International Olympic Committee refused to commemorate the 11 athletes killed in the Olympics.

While many in Israel cared deeply about this anniversary, they had the impression that still 50 years later no one in the wider world cared. In the ceremonies that just took place in Germany to mark this painful anniversary, there were tensions between the German government and the families of the 11 athletes killed because of inadequate attention and inadequate reparations to the families of the murdered athletes. The pain and suffering of these families, Israel and the Jewish world has not gone away over the 50 years. I have met the daughter of one of the slain athletes who was only five months old when her father was killed and in the years following his death, her grandmother and uncle committed suicide so bereft by this loss.

Now think about this anniversary. I am guessing that if you are sitting here you have enough uncommon knowledge of world History, Germany's role in the Holocaust, the continued rise of Anti-Semitism today that even if you didn't know the particulars of this 50th anniversary, your heart is touched and maybe even pained by all this. That place where that 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary touches your heart and pains you is the Uncommon Knowledge you inherit being part of the Jewish community.

That is the blessing of the Uncommon Knowledge of the Jewish community. I can say G-d or Torah or Israel or or Bnai Mitzvah or Hamataschen or even Seinfeld and there is a part of you that perks up. There are shared experiences that even the most peripheral Jew can envision. Sitting at a Seder, lighting Hanukah candles or even watching the recent Ken Burns documentary

on the Holocaust. Even those of us with the most minimal Jewish identity can resonate with Jewish things. Particularly us American Jews.

Uncommon knowledge to maintain a strong Jewish identity, connected to Jewish tradition, Jewish history and Jewish life was fully possible from the vantage point of a Jew coming to America. But as Russ Roberts, dean of Shalem College has observed, “What was once destiny is now a decision.” That reality came about for the best of reasons. In our American democracy, freedoms our Jewish grandparents could have never imagined are ordinary, a given. And if our tomorrows look like yesterday, overall it should be good for us as American Jews and anniversaries and events tied to the Jewish world can be obscured by all the other things competing for our time, money and attention. The decision about whether to pay attention to what is going on in the Jewish world we may think has no impact on our lives. Which puts us in the same position as the Children of Israel that are addressed in our torah reading for Yom Kippur.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 reads. “Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it? No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.”

The actions carried out in living a Jewish life are an expression of inner commitment. If mitzvah is close to your mouth but if not to your heart it doesn't make sense to do. Moses here is making a last ditch effort to inculcate the Torah into the people who will be the ones to truly fulfill its message in partnership with G-d. Moses knows he will be gone soon and he wants to ensure that Torah is planted deeply enough in the hearts of the Jewish people to survive his death. Rabbi Ezra Bick teaches Moses is trying to inspire them, to get beyond their heads into their hearts, where he believes the key to their history and destiny lies.”

Like those Ancient Israelites, uncommon knowledge is not inaccessible for the modern Jew if we can overcome indifference and make sure that our hearts are filled with what Judaism teaches us as we go about living in the world at large so that we can see things fully and wholly, through the eyes of Judaism.

I have witnessed firsthand that if you cultivate your knowledge of Judaism beyond the peripheral that it can be powerful and dramatic and meaningful in unimaginable ways. Every other year, a small group of adults pursues adult b'nai mitzvah starting from learning the Hebrew aleph bet and in that great meaning is found. Annually, we convene attorneys to examine the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazis after WWII and because of this program kids have gone to law school and lawyers are exposed to an area of law that they take back to their own field of law with a greater understanding of the ever evolving nature of law. And I see it with our youth. Reminding our youth of how powerful it can be to make Judaism intentional and not optional is so much more impactful and meaningful as they form their world views. Right now I am teaching our 8<sup>th</sup> graders Jewish ethics in a field called Musar in Judaism. How many of us could have used a course on ethics in middle school, present company included? And we start class just checking in

to see how they are doing that day. Have you asked and 8th grader lately how they are doing? Try it. It's not easy to be an eighth grader and temple is a place where they can grow their uncommon knowledge in The Jewish realm to help them navigate the world at large.

How lucky we are that we have arrived at a place where we have so much choice and what our lives look like. But if we Judaism looks like decision and not our destiny then we are missing so much. Milestones in Jewish history or the life cycle events of your Jewish life are not meant to be just dots connected from one point to another. Sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes beautiful at points and sometimes sad. Uncommon knowledge says what you know what Torah commands informs who you are in the world today. The best metaphor I can think of to illustrate uncommon knowledge is the Torah. Think of a torah. There are the black Hebrew letters that take up some of the space and there is the white scroll that takes up much more of the space. But the whole Torah is holy. Your Jewish moments are like those black letters and the white space is like the other parts of your life. There's a whole bunch more white but it's all holding together. Not just living by the Torah but like a Torah. Not in proximity but pursuit. Not in decision but destiny.

And that is just here in these walls. Raise your gaze across the world to Natan Khazin. Like many Jews from Ukraine, Khazin had made Aliyah to Israel and studied to become a rabbi. Fighting between Ukraine and Russia in 2014 led friends to beg Khazin to come back to Ukraine to help. That helping turned to commanding when he came to realize that all he had learned in the Israeli army prepared him for this moment. Natan Khazin became commander of a Jewish squadron of fighters in the Ukrainian revolution. His rise to military leadership as Khazin himself describes happened very fast. After the first barricades on Hrushevsky Street, when there was talk of storming the parliament, I went over to people and asked: "What's the main objective? Where are we headed? What are we doing?" After about half an hour, I realized that there was no one in charge on the ground. People didn't know what to do. They only knew that they must press forward. I asked some of the people there: "Do you know the correlation of forces? Do you know that in order to storm a building, when both sides are equally armed, the storming side needs to have three times as many people?" They answered "no." When I asked, "What's the tactical plan?" they didn't have one. He knew all these question to ask because he had had extensive combat experience from serving in the Israel Defense Forces.

Khazin reflects, "I never imagined that I would put my combat knowledge to use in quiet and peaceful Kiev. People said to me: "In Israel, in the Middle East, things are bad, there's a war. Come here, stay here and live in peaceful Kiev." As he took greater leadership at first he did not tell people he was Jewish. He said he felt like Queen Esther of the Purim story, who didn't say anything about her origins but "gradually he decided to reveal his religious was shocked that he was embraced and called "brother". I have photographs of me together with different fighting units. They always greeted me with "Shalom."

50 years ago, there was a woman who did make it into the newspaper. It was Prime Minister Golda Meir who was addressing the government in the midst of the Munich Olympic Crisis. As the New York Times reported, "After a 30-minute meeting of the Cabinet, Mrs. Meir walked quietly into the chamber of the parliament and mounted the wood-paneled podium. Her soft voice had a grave, almost weary tone as she spoke, like someone who was dealing with an old

problem that somehow would not go away. Slowly she read the names of the hostages: “Berger, Gutfreund, Halfin, Slavin...” with as much preciousness as one would give to reading words of Torah.

50 years later Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, just a few weeks ago, after another spate of terrorism, gave a speech with encapsulates the uncommon knowledge that one needs to have as a Jew. He said “There is another way to live. ... The choice is yours. Your future depends on you,” ...The right way to face our challenges is together,”

That speech was given to Gazan residents as a direct appeal; to work together with Israel and not let Hamas determine their future. But the words could just as easily appeal to our American Jewish community. “There is another way to live. ... The choice is yours. Your future depends on you,” ...The right way to face our challenges is together,” Take these words to heart.

Acknowledgement of the uncommon knowledge that exists in Judaism is not easy by any means. Sometimes it makes the world darker as is the case with the Munich Olympics anniversary. But sometimes it makes the world better as it does with the first female rabbi.

Uncommon knowledge that makes me so annoyed at the local Jewish press also makes me so brokenhearted for Munich Olympic athletes Israeli families and uncommon knowledge also makes me so appreciative that with all the places you could be today, all the freedoms that being an American Jew I know provides, you are here. We are here. Together. Just as the Israelites were thousands of years ago.

May the way you see the world, the way you understand your place in it, the milestones you mark and all the realms of your existence be enriched by the uncommon knowledge you have as a Jew, through the sting and through the honey, through Natan and Sally and Golda, through each and everyone one of you, of us, in 5783.  
Shana tova and Tsom Kal.