

D'var Rav: Words from the Rabbi

GONZO JUDAISM

What do Sigmund Freud, Groucho Marx, and the prophet Jeremiah all have in common?

It's not just that each of them was a Jew. It's the fact that they were *characters*—each personality, in his own colorful way and with an in-your-face audacity, upset the status quo, completely turned the tables on the conventions and rules of the respective societies in which they lived.

Freud overthrew established theories about the human psyche. Groucho made everything and everyone fair game through his subversive humor. Jeremiah boldly called truth to power and urged his community to change its nature. Rebellious from the fringes of their worlds, these iconic figures all possessed and expressed the “gonzo” impulse long before the word had entered our vocabulary.

As a gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson revolutionized his field and inserted himself into the center of the story, and he did it with a brashness that did not always sit well with his publishers. Jews today need to act—and act *out*—with that same bravado, to place ourselves squarely in the center of the story and the action, even if it is disquieting to the leaders in the largely complacent Jewish establishment.

We need to reclaim our rebel roots.

Gonzo Judaism is about trying to recover that revolutionary impulse and using it to reshape contemporary Judaism, a Judaism that many of us find irrelevant, ossified, and boring. It's about taking risks and thinking freely, but it's also about looking back into our past in order to move ahead. It's a return *as well as* a rejection. Gonzo Judaism is about embracing this paradox—and accepting paradox is what postmodern Judaism needs more than anything else.

Our own communal efforts should be directed in large measure toward anyone who feels—or has *ever* felt—detached from or alienated by Judaism, yet wants to find some way to connect with it. They should be directed, not toward the dogmatist who knows everything, but toward the person with an open mind and an open heart.

Our goal should be to reach not only the already committed, but also those on the margins of Jewish life, to meet them where they really are, not where we *think* they ought to be. We at The New Shul are doing it. We—you—can do even better.

B'shalom, Niles