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## Maarat Ayin: Eduardo Saverin's decision to renounce his U.S. citizenship

by Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan | May 23, 2012

By now everyone has heard that Eduardo Saverin, one of the co-founders of Facebook, filed legal papers in September 2011 to formally renounce his American citizenship. Brazilian by birth, Saverin became an American citizen in 1998. Born in Sao Paulo, Saverin's father was, according to press accounts, a wealthy Jewish industrialist with varied interests in clothing, shipping, real estate and commercial exports.

Many of the press reports are focused on the financial implications of this move. Jim Cramer, appearing on "Meet the Press" last weekend, called the Facebook IPO a total fiasco, "one of the worst-handled things I've ever seen" because the stock only climbed just over 0.6 percent in its opening. Others disagreed, arguing that the successful launch of a stock that is now just starting to be publicly traded is not determined by how much the stock rises in the first few days but by how it does over the long term. As a rabbi, I am not equipped to discuss the pros and cons of what constitutes a successful IPO.

What I am qualified to comment on is how we should act in various given situations. Religion is not just something that we should do in synagogue. It is not even something that we should do primarily in our homes. Rather, Judaism should guide us in our actions every moment of every day. This is a difficult concept to implement, especially for Reform Jews such as myself who do not see the halachah as binding. Without rules that we need to follow, how are we to put this concept into practice?

Much of our ethical teachings may seem visionary and inspiring, but frequently are theoretical and not easy to apply in many of the situations that we are most likely to face. The historical precedents that we can draw upon are also not always helpful because the historical circumstances that our ancestors faced — even as recently as 50 years ago — were in such a different context that they seem antiquarian.

That is why Saverin's decision to renounce his U.S. citizenship is an opportunity to look at how we might — and perhaps should — behave under a given set of circumstances. Granted, we are unlikely to face this particular set of circumstances. Saverin was one of the four co-founders of Facebook along with Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. Although he owns slightly less than 5 percent of Facebook, his net worth is still about \$2 billion. But while we are not likely to be in his exact financial situation, the principle involved is universally applicable.

What loyalty do we, as Jews, owe to our country? Saverin — full name Eduardo Luiz Saverin — was not born in the United States. In the 1990s, again according to press accounts, Saverin's family discovered that their son Eduardo was on a list of potential kidnapping victims. During this period, gangs throughout Central and South America were kidnapping the children of rich families for ransom. The Saverins, not wishing to risk their son's life, moved to Miami. Shortly thereafter, Saverin became an American citizen.

It may be necessary to remind ourselves that the concept of giving citizenship to Jews is a relatively new idea. In the Renaissance period, Jews were forced to live in a particular area, which was called a ghetto. The term was originally used in Venice to describe where the Jews were forced to live in that city. Jews in various parts of Europe were not granted citizenship and were only allowed to reside in a given city or region on the agreement of the local nobility. This agreement could, however be rescinded at any moment, and it was, with Jews being expelled from England in 1290, France in 1306 and again in 1394, and various other localities with depressing regularity.

In 1781, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, a German political writer who was influenced by Moses Mendelsson, wrote a three-volume work titled, “On the Civil Improvement of the Jews,” which argued for Jewish political and civil rights on humanitarian grounds. This began a debate, which sometimes became quite bitter, over whether the Jews deserved to be emancipated. In 1791, France became the first Western nation to emancipate its Jews. When Napoleon conquered other European countries, he brought emancipation with him, literally breaking down ghetto walls.

Unfortunately, when France withdrew, this new legal status was withdrawn as well. Central European Jews had to struggle for many decades to try to achieve the civil and political status that we take for granted today. Which brings us back to the admittedly unusual case of Eduardo Luiz Saverin. A Jewish boy from a foreign country, he arrives in our country to escape physical threats and the possibility of being murdered. He attends a top, private school in South Florida and is accepted into Harvard University, one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the United States.

After studying and working in our country for a number of years as a citizen, he makes a fortune and, according to press reports, moves to Singapore in 2009. Two years later, he files the papers to renounce his U.S. citizenship. Possibly his accountant advised him to do so. Maybe he felt that since he was not living in the United States anyway, holding American citizenship was a financial liability that would not serve his interests. Is he not free to act in his own best interests, financial or otherwise?

I would argue that while he is capable of doing so, renouncing his U.S. citizenship is contrary to his obligations as an American Jew. We need to be loyal to our country and we also need to give the appearance of being loyal to our country. While it is wonderful that anti-Semitism has declined to such low levels that identifiable Jews can do terrible things without generating any discernible hostility toward us as a group, that does not excuse us from our obligation to be loyal citizens to the country that we are either born in or that we embrace. Saverin voluntarily accepted our citizenship, and he should not abandon it just because it is convenient to do so.

While we Jews tend to be rather cosmopolitan, meaning that we feel at home in many different parts of the world, we need to balance that characteristic with a rooted loyalty to our host country. Taking and returning citizenships like greeting cards is, at the very least, a form of *maarat ayim* — the appearance of impropriety. This concept, infrequently mentioned outside of Orthodox circles, is the concept that we should avoid doing things that may look like we are doing something wrong, whether or not we are actually doing something wrong.

When Mark Cuban Tweets that “This pisses me off: Just in Time For A Facebook IPO Tax Break, Eduardo Saverin Renounces U.S. Citizenship,” Ilyse Hogue titles her commentary on this issue “Lessons in Disloyalty,” and Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) calls it “outrageous,” Saverin should have realized this is a step that is not good for his personal reputation and not good for the potential influence that it may have on others, particularly young people. As Jews, we have an obligation to try to set a good example. This means not only trying not to do bad things but also trying to avoid doing things that might be perceived that way.