

Why Be Jewish

Erev Rosh Hashanah/5778

In 2013, the Pew Research Center released its *Portraits of Jewish Americans* study that explored the changing nature of Jewish identity in America. The study found that American Jews are overwhelmingly proud to be Jewish, but their Jewish expression is more diverse than ever before. No longer is being Jewish solely a matter of religiosity – we all have neighbors, friends, and even family members who have largely left the institution of Judaism behind. They don't belong to a synagogue, they may have abandoned most Jewish practices, and they are not attending services this evening. However, they do gather together every Rosh Hashanah to get a taste of Grandma Betty's brisket, light the Chanukah menorah, and even bring out the Maxwell House Haggadah for Passover. Regardless of one's Jewish practice, one's connection to Judaism remains deep rooted and founded by a sense of community and belonging¹.

While this study is now five years old, what is clear is that 21st century Judaism is one in which every element of our Jewish identity is a choice, and that choice is a blessing. It means that when we choose to embrace Judaism, to associate ourselves with the Jewish people, it is a personal commitment and not one forced on us. Identity is more fluid, people want more customization, and there is a strong sense that being Jewish is not necessarily synonymous with affiliation².

Our ancestors likely had little choice in the matter of being Jewish. Their Jewishness was shaped by the ties of history, living in ghettos, and anti-Semitism. The

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

² <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/a-new-model-for-jewish-identity/>

concepts of survival and Jewish survival were one in the same³. As a result, our ancestors felt bound by a sense of obligation and “commandedness.” In doing so, they could hold on to the traditions, customs, and practices that guided them during times of trial and tribulation. In doing so, our ancestors could be resilient.

What I am sharing with you this evening is not new, nor is it surprising. But it tells us something about the nature of the age-old “Why be Jewish?” question: we are able to articulate the varied degrees of *what* Judaism means to people, and we are able to even identify *how* Judaism plays a role in one’s life. What is lacking is the answer to the *why*.

The challenge of finding our “why” of our Jewish identities is similar to that of organizations or our careers. We all know *what* we do – the products we sell; the services we offer or the jobs that we do. And we even are able to express *how* we do it – the things that we think make us different or stand out from the crowd. But very few of us can clearly articulate *why* we do what we do⁴.

At least this is the premise of Simon Sinek’s book, *Start with Why*. He asserts that it is difficult to define *why* because *why* challenges us to understand more deeply and more thoughtfully what motivates and inspires us. It is the purpose, cause or belief that drives every organization and every person’s career. It answers *why* the

³ David J. Wolpe, *Why be Jewish?*, Holt Publishing, New York: 1995, p. 45-52

⁴ Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Penguin Books, New York: 2009, p. 39

companies we work for exist, *why* we get out to bed each morning, and *why* should anyone care⁵.

So, too, our Judaism. Us simply being here on this Rosh Hashanah evening suggests that we have stake in the game of being Jewish, but *why*? Tonight, we are all Jews by choice, and are brought here because Judaism brings something essential to our lives, something that animates and drives and comforts us. Perhaps we are here because our parents or grandparents brought us here when we were younger. Perhaps we are here because we want to hear the familiar music and prayers at this time of year. Perhaps we are here because the message of these Days of Awe resonate with us. But is not a question about *what* Judaism can do for us – we know these answers. It can bring us community, a connection with God, and give us meaning and purpose. But *why* do these things matter to us?

To some the *why* refers to how we define ourselves in the most basic sense. To others, it is our heritage – the traditions of our people and our culture. For some people, their *why* is about their religious faith, or about charity, humanity, and social justice. And to others it refers to our relationship with the world, our responsibilities as a people to the lives around us⁶.

The *why* of being Jewish, then, is about the feelings that are evoked *because* we choose to embrace our Jewish identity, regardless of what that identity may look like. When we gather together during our Passover Seders and retell the story of the

⁵ Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Penguin Books, New York: 2009, p. 137-138

⁶ David J. Wolpe, *Why be Jewish?*, Holt Publishing, New York: 1995, p. 92-93

Exodus, do we feel a sense of connection? When we sing *Shehecheyanu* together during times of celebration, do we feel a sense of joy? When we are in pain, mourning the loss of a loved one, experiencing our own illness, do we feel a sense of comfort and solace knowing that we are not alone? When we witness the suffering of others, do we feel a sense of commitment to them and are compelled to act on their behalf?

Discovering our *why* is about finding meaning and purpose in something greater than ourselves, something that transcends time.

As Reform Jews, we know that even the ancient teachings of our tradition on the surface can offer something for each of us if we choose for it to. As I tell my 7th graders in preparation for their B'nei Mitzvah, becoming a Jewish adult is not about asking how Torah can relate to us today, but making the decision that it can relate to us today and determine *why* it does. Discovering our *why*, then, is about making the choice to expand our comfort zones, our sense of awareness of ourselves and others, and take a leap of faith.

Edmund Fleg was born in Geneva to an observant family. Overtime, he drifted away from Jewish practice. Speaking of his childhood, he explained that religion was so much part of his life that he could not differentiate between what was religion and what was simply being a human being. Like any adolescent, he began to criticize his upbringing and distanced himself from his Jewish identity. However, his connection to Judaism increased as he watched Alfred Dreyfuss be convinced of espionage and sent to prison⁷.

⁷ <http://100books.shirhadash.org/43-why-i-am-a-jew/>

In 1927, Fleg wrote his now famous “I Am a Jew” for his soon-to-be grandchild, wanting to ensure that his Judaism could be passed down to future generations. His words are now codified within our prayer book, *Mishkan Tefillah* and are read to supplement the morning blessings⁸:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because then faith of Israel requires all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because Israel’s promise is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel, the world is not completed; we are completing it.

I am a Jew because for Israel, humanity is not created; we are creating it.

I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above the nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

The affirmations that Fleg wrote for his future grandchild perhaps echo the *why* for many of us this evening. Judaism deepens our lives in some way, inspires us to improve the world, encourages us to find joy in our lives, and demands of us personal growth. The reason, though, that the *what* and *how* of Judaism is easier to articulate is

⁸ *Mishkan Tefillah*, p. 41

because to be Jewish means to confront the ideas of our rich tradition and choose whether or not they resonate with us today.

Judaism must speak to us as individuals. We can say that Judaism can teach us how to deepen our lives and to improve the world. We can say that Judaism can teach us enduring values and, a way of living that promotes ethical action. But, as Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk reminds us, “The Torah was given to everyone in equal measure, but everyone chooses to receive it according to their wisdom and their capacity to understand.”

As such, in the end, each of us must find our own truth and our own *why*. To be Jewish inherently means to ask questions. Our collective name *Yisrael*, literally means “one who struggles with God.” Each of us has the right to eternally argue and grapple with ideas and questions. If we are unable to get the answers we seek, we are encouraged to ask again. We are called to not be afraid to challenge status quo, and our willingness to ask is a very Jewish thing to do.

Why be Jewish? It is a question that I often ask myself, and I often struggle with discovering my own answers. There are moments in which I know that I am Jewish because it enriches my life and provides a framework for how I live. There are also moments in which I, too, feel distant from Judaism, unsure whether or not tradition, practice, ritual fulfill my own need to *feel* something. Yes, discovering my *why*, like yours, begins with what we feel in our *kishkes*. It is through our *why* that we can act, that we can identify the *how*, that we can experience a deepened connection with each other and even God.

I am Jewish because Judaism allows for my answer to “Why be Jewish?” to be incomplete. Just as our sages taught us that we are not required to complete the work of creation and wholeness in our world alone, but we are also not permitted to abstain from it, as so long as we strive for completion and strive for discovering our answers to *why*, we are participating in a chain of tradition that has been passed down to us⁹.

I am Jewish because I want to be another link in a chain that spans hundreds of generations, because I believe that to be Jewish means to bridge the past and future, a bridge over which all of us can pass.

I am Jewish because we are a tradition of action rather than belief. My Judaism is defined not by my beliefs, but by my relationships, the connections I make with others, the everlasting bonds that are formed, and the gift of seeing a world full of wonder.

I am Jewish because we are a people proud to be an outsider, a people taught to identify with the stranger, widow, and orphan. We are a people taught to embrace what is unique and different in each of us, taught to believe that each of us share divine sparks within, because each of us were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

I am Jewish because its values are universal values. Its values provide a blueprint for how I live, and represent a curriculum of sorts that I have the honor of sharing with others. I am Jewish because a fundamental value is that we are not to journey on our lives alone, that our lives can be transformed into sacred moments and sacred opportunities, and guide us when we are lost.

⁹ Kerry M. Olitzky, *Playlist Judaism: Making Choices for a Vital Future*, Alban Institute, Herndon, VA: 2013, p. 98-99 (Why be Jewish), p. 101-103

I am Jewish because to be Jewish is a gift that I have been given directly from my parents, who were given it by their parents, who were given it by their parents, and so on. Judaism is a gift that cannot be returned, but always comes with the warranty that as long as it is well cared for, it can last lifetimes.

As Rabbi Alan Lucas wrote, “It is just not good enough to be Jewish out of stubbornness, sentiment, or fear. We must be Jews out of knowledge, commitment, faith, and love.” You need your own answers to *why*. If you don’t feel that your answers are good enough, if you feel that they are somehow inadequate, I can think of no better way of spending these High Holy Days, these hours of introspection, than formulating the answers to *why* yourself¹⁰.

To be Jewish is a choice we all make – a choice to live proudly, passionately, and joyfully as a Jew, in a variety of different expressions. This is what we seek to achieve today and in the year ahead.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it ever be so.

¹⁰ Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, *Why I Am a Jew*, Rosh Hashanah, 2010.
https://pasyn.org/resources/sermons/%5bfield_dateline-date%5d-27