

## **Rosh Hashanah 5780**

### **Proud Jews**

In the past year, some ideas about being Jewish that we might have thought had vanished from history have once again resurfaced. At their most extreme we have Pittsburgh and Poway. But there are multiple other examples of a significant uptick in antisemitism, from muggings in Brooklyn to swastikas and graffiti on gravestones, on campuses and - very close to home - on the walls of the Northshore Jewish Congregation.

In the light of all of that, it's very easy for us to fall into fear. And that's a natural response. But this is also a season in which we take time to reflect and consider - so let us take some time today to do that.

Last night I spoke about approaching the process of *teshuvah*, return and change, by starting with the positive - the aspects of ourselves we wish to retain and build upon in the coming year. We can do the same with our Jewish identity. The writer Bari Weiss recently published a piece entitled, "To fight antisemitism, be a proud Jew."

*I am Jewish.*

On February 21 2002, the journalist Daniel Pearl uttered those words, moments before his life was cruelly ended.

Out of this tragedy came a book. Edited by Daniel Pearl's father Yehudah. It contains contributions from Jews from all walks of life in answer to the question, "What does being Jewish mean to you?" We used it as the basis for our teen learning curriculum last year.

Today we ask: What *does* being Jewish mean to us?

Before we begin, though, we must acknowledge the people in this room who are not Jewish. You are our allies, you are our friends, you are our family. Perhaps some of you are taking steps in your own Jewish journeys - and perhaps you have no intention of traveling in that direction. Your presence and commitment is its own message of support and defiance. These words include you and I invite you to ponder on how they speak to your own relationship with Judaism, because you are - and have always been - part of our past and our future.

So, to the book. "I am Jewish" is divided into five sections. Each represents a major unifying theme that emerged from the respondents' answers. Today I'd like us to ask: if we ourselves had been approached to participate in this project, which category would our answer have fallen into?

I suspect that we might each find that more than one category speaks to us. But I want to ask that we each pick one: the one that most immediately speaks to our deepest selves *today*, the one that says, 'yep, that's us' - just like we did at the start of every teen learning session last year.

These are the five categories.

The first is called, **identity**. It is for those whose answer to the question 'What does being Jewish mean to you?' is inextricably bound to their own self-definition. Natan Sharansky observed, *A person who has his Jewish identity is not enslaved. He is free even if they throw him in prison, even if they torture him.* He would know.

Many of the contributors to this category tell us their Jewishness is at the very core of their being, dictating their every response to the world around them.

Does your answer today to 'What does being Jewish mean to you?' belong in the category of identity?

The second category is about **heritage**. Here is the author Cynthia Ozick:

*To be a Jew is to be old in history, but not only that; to be a Jew is to be a member of a distinct civilization expressed through an oceanic culture in possession of a multitude of texts and attitudes...*

If we are drawn towards this category, the past exerts a powerful pull on us. We might not be much concerned with God (Richard Dreyfuss, whose response appears here, describes himself as *a passionate Jewish agnostic*): rather, our continued life and expression comes from a sense that we are part of a living tree, capable of tracing back along our past to find our most ancient roots, deeply buried in time.

Does your answer today to ‘What does being Jewish mean to you?’ belong in the category of heritage?

The third category is **Covenant, chosenness and faith**. The writers here have a more religious approach. The actor Shia LeBoeuf writes, *Judaism is the name of the telephone in my heart that allows me to speak to God*. And Jonah, whose story we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon, belongs here too - when the sailors ask him who he is, he replies, *I am a Hebrew and I fear Adonai, the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land*.

If we feel drawn to Category Three we might also feel that the Jews are God’s messengers to mankind; the *light to the nations* mentioned by the prophets, the ones who have given the world a God-based morality which supersedes man-made law.

Does your answer today to ‘What does being Jewish mean to you?’ belong in the category of covenant, chosenness and faith?

There are two more categories.

The fourth, which the book calls **humanity and ethnicity**, coalesces around the idea which I believe was articulated by Rabbi Leo Baeck, that *every people is a question God addresses to the world*. As distinct from the ideas of chosenness in the third category, the writers here, who include Elie Wiesel, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Rabbi Harold Schulweis, all locate their particular Jewishness within a wider human framework. It is our task to be the best 'us' that we can be. As author Anne Roiphe puts it, *the color of my humanity is Jewish*.

And let me add at this point: when we express our humanity and our ideals in the wider arenas of the world, being Jewish humans and supporters and idealists does not make us "disloyal" in any way.

Would your answer to *What does being Jewish mean to you* be published here?

And so we come to the final category, **Tikkun Olam and Justice**. Here we find the folk who observe, as the journalist Jonathan Freedland does, that *wherever there is a revolutionary political movement, you will usually find Jews involved in it: we are raised to believe the world can be made better*. Here we find activists like Ruth Messinger of American Jewish World Service, whose Jewish identity is the spark which fires them to serve the needs of the world. And here is Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the walls of whose office are decorated with a plaque that reads, in Hebrew, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof - Justice, justice shall you pursue*.

Do you stand with Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, who writes that to be Jewish means to *light one candle for those who are suffering pain we learned so long ago*?

Let me summarize.

I am Jewish because it is the core of my identity.

I am Jewish because it is the precious heritage of my people.

I am Jewish because I am part of an ongoing covenant my ancestors made - and I make - with God.

I am Jewish because it is the way I convey my message to humanity.

I am Jewish because it is my sacred task to repair the broken world.

And now, please turn to a person you don't know, sitting in front of you or behind you. Please introduce yourself and wish them Shanah Tovah. Then share a category that spoke to you, or a reason that drew you here today. Your task is then to help each other identify one step that you will take over the course of this year to explore more deeply what you have been thinking - and for your partner to do the same thing.

## DISCUSSION

As I say in every class I teach: please forgive me for interrupting your conversations. Please forgive the fact that we need to continue the service! Please keep talking about this over lunch...

Let me conclude by returning to the words of Bari Weiss. She writes: *the long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are.*

On this day, when our tradition teaches that the books of life and death stand open, I am asking that we each commit to cherishing and furthering the conversation we just began. Because affirming and expressing and consolidating our connection to Judaism can give us the inner strength we need to continue to stand proudly in a world where it is being misrepresented, misunderstood and worse.

I wish us all a good and sweet new year: a year in which we nurture our promises to ourselves: a year in which we can find new dimensions in the words, *I am Jewish*: and a year in which we stand proud.

Shanah tovah.