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What Does It Mean To Be A Jew?

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What does it mean to be a Jew? It's an astoundingly simple question, without an easy answer. For thousands of years, Jews could be identified by where we lived and how we behaved. Since we were not accepted into Christian society, we lived by ourselves, in separate communities, where the norms of life were less a matter of piety than they were the customs of our society. We kept kosher because the family recipes handed down from our mothers did not mix milk and meat. We observed Shabbat because it was our community's day of rest. We supported our communal institutions because they were integral to our lives.

Back then, it was simple to know what it meant to be a Jew. We were defined by where we lived and how we behaved.

But the dawn of modernity marked a moment of transition. Jews were no longer excluded from society by virtue of our ancestry. Doors were opened and we were grudgingly allowed to participate in the larger world. With the arrival of the Enlightenment Jews left the ghetto – and in some instances abandoned Judaism. But for many who chose to remain, the old traditions no longer suited their way of life. They wanted to be a part of the larger world, and needed a new form of Judaism to take with them.

It was from this need that Reform Judaism emerged. No longer was a Jew defined by the culture and customs of his community. Instead, he was a citizen of the world, whose religion became a personal, private set of customs and beliefs that were observed as he wished, in the privacy of his own home.

One of the most enduring ideas of the Enlightenment is the concept of the “sovereign self,” that each of us has “autonomy” – the RIGHT to choose our own path – to shape our own destiny. We Jews understood the power of this idea. And not only did we embrace it; we gave it a central role in defining our new form of Judaism.

Thus, at a moment in history when Jews wanted to explore the greater world, but still had a strong identity from growing up in places where observing Jewish laws and customs (the halacha), studying the Torah, keeping a Jewish home, and supporting the community were normative behaviors, Reform Judaism's embrace of “autonomy” enabled one to practice the rituals that still brought meaning to life, while freeing one from a multitude of observances that no longer seemed relevant.

Reform Judaism and autonomy continue to speak to the modern Jew. But in our age its viability faces a serious challenge. For when an individual has grown up in a secular society where Jewish customs and traditions are not an integral part of their life; when a Jew has little experience of the joy of Shabbat, or the beauty of keeping a Jewish home; when one hasn't experienced the intellectual curiosity and ethical development that's spurred from studying Jewish texts; or the sense of pride and connection that comes from supporting the community; when living a Jewish life has become little more than ornamentation to a secular lifestyle, requiring no serious commitment; in this type of environment: What does it mean to be a Jew?

Now don't despair. For hundreds of years we've lived with this question and developed an answer. For even when our lifestyle was not materially different than our non-Jewish neighbors, we maintained our unique identity through marriage. Our partners were Jewish. How did we answer the question: What does it mean to be a Jew? In the modern era our answer has been: Genealogy. As long as you were born a Jew, you are a Jew. How you behave – whether or not you actually practice Judaism is incidental, and has no impact on your status among our people.

Unfortunately this genealogical identity is breaking. It's breaking, and I want to be very clear here, this break has nothing to do with intermarriage. Within the Jewish world – indeed, within this congregation, there are many intermarried families who have made a commitment to raising Jewish children. They appreciate Jewish traditions and values and have created homes where their children can be fully engaged in a Jewish world. We are truly blessed by those members of our community who've made a commitment to reach beyond their own upbringing, sometimes even beyond their comfort zone to be here with us. I hope you all, non-Jewish spouses, and partners, as well as grandparents, I hope you all know how grateful we are for the commitment you have made, and that you also know that if you should ever desire, our door is open to you as well. So again, in our world, even though intermarriage is a convenient, easy scapegoat, it is not to blame for the break in our chain of tradition. So what is? A couple of months ago I read an article in the book section of the Chicago Tribune, where Jodi Picoult (Peek-oh) was interviewed about her excellent new book, The Storyteller, which takes a moral dilemma from the Holocaust into a present day context. In the article the interviewer states: "You grew up Jewish, though your family wasn't very observant," whereupon Picoult stops the interview and corrects him. She says: "I was raised by Jewish parents who were not practicing Jews, really, and I wouldn't define myself as a Jew. I would say I'm an agnostic."

A couple of weeks later I read another article in the Trib about Philosophy Professor John Martin Fischer, who received a five million dollar grant from the Templeton Foundation to apply scientific standards to researching ideas of an afterlife. After reviewing the difficult task that lies ahead, to apply scientific criteria to study a concept that most see as a matter of faith that is unprovable by science, the article goes on to describe Fischer's background. It states: "Fischer, 60, grew up in a Jewish family in San Jose and struggled as a teenager to comprehend his grandfather's murder by the Nazis during the Holocaust." However, when Fisher describes himself, he states that he is an atheist (who, by the way, considers the afterlife unlikely).

Now these are two people who have found success in the world, thoughtful individuals, respected by their peers and by society at large, living at a time when saying "I'm Jewish" contains no social stigma whatsoever. These are two people who were raised by clearly identifiable Jewish parents, two people – an author and a philosopher – for whom words are very important, and ideas matter. The way they described themselves, the words they spoke were not careless or accidental – they were intentional and deliberate.

Their decision to publicly leave "Jewish" out of their self-descriptions was jarring to me. It was a clear sign that Jewish identity can no longer be taken for granted. The child of two Jewish parents, even a child who lives in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago and had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, that child will not automatically identify him or herself as a Jew.

"But Rabbi," you say, "You've only given two examples. You can't make a case based on two instances alone." You're right. They are just two examples, but statistics support my claim. In the 2012 Jewish Community Demographics Study of New York, researchers found that over the last 10 years, the Conservative and Reform movements each lost 40,000 members in the New York Metropolitan area alone, and that the only stream of Judaism that grew was Orthodoxy – in particular, the very religious.

At a time when it should be easy to identify oneself as a Jew, our liberal Jewish community is shrinking. And what's more: When researchers asked: Do you feel that being Jewish is very important? Only 57 percent of the respondents answered yes, down from 65 percent when the survey was done in 2002, down almost 10 percent in 10 years time.

Now these findings, as stark as they are, are actually not surprising. Indeed, they are very much in line with the way religion is viewed across the board in America. Recent surveys by the Pew Institute indicate that the fastest growing religious group in America is the 'Nones', as in "none of the above." As Dr. Ron Wolfson writes in his book Relational Judaism: "The 'Nones' report that they have no religious preference, they belong to no spiritual community. They also feel no particular loyalty to a political party or ideology. In a world of unlimited choice, they are choosing the sidelines. Despite all attempts at engagement... more and more people, both young and old, are opting out."

So if it makes you feel any better, it's not just Liberal Judaism that's on the decline, it's all religions. Our children have grown up in a secular world, which makes little time and places little value on religious pursuits. And often times the religious moments they experience leave them lacking. Instead of enriching their life, Judaism pulls them away from where they want to be, from what is most important to them – and seemingly most important to their parents. Even the most significant Jewish moment in a child's life – their Bar or Bat Mitzvah; no matter how meaningful it might be for a child to stand in front of the ark and receive the Torah through a chain of tradition that symbolically stretches back hundreds of generations and thousands of years, far too often it is the DJ at their party who creates their most lasting memory. Friends, I wish it weren't so, but statistics don't lie. Our Jewish chain is breaking.

The other day I was listening to Terri Gross interview comedian and talk show host Jimmy Fallon on NPR. She was asking him about his childhood – had he always wanted to be in show business? Fallon said no, that as a child he had never considered it. He was, however, an altar boy in his church, and had thought about becoming a member of the clergy. Terri Gross was intrigued by this comment and suggested that there was actually a great deal of similarity between the stage and the Church (or the synagogue). After all, she said, they are both places that are separated from reality – distinct from the real world. Fallon agreed – and their conversation continued on.

Friends, although these words were spoken without malice, merely as an observation, they are nonetheless a harsh critique of the place of religion in our world. Before the Enlightenment, Judaism spoke to our way of life – it was integrated into our culture and it thrived. However, when Judaism (or religious experience as a whole) is outside the norm of our "real" world, when its customs have become little more than check points or pit stops on our journey, then how long will it be until those destinations lose their value and are replaced by new destinations that better reflect our way of life? Route 66 is fine for a nostalgic tour of the United States, but it's not the road you choose if you need to get somewhere. You take the highway, and leave nostalgia behind.

Friends, unfortunately I am not worrying about a potential challenge that we may face one day in the future. I am describing the world as it is today. A world in which a parent calls the Temple the week after their child's Bar Mitzvah and thanks the congregation for helping their family celebrate a beautiful moment in their child's life, and at the same time informs the congregation that they will not be continuing their membership. They are grateful for the experience, happy customers who got what they came for. But why would they keep paying a bill for a service they've already received?

Friends, if Judaism is nothing more than a stage for nostalgic life-cycle events, then our days are numbered – and rightly so. No one needs to spend the kind of money we charge in dues to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah. They can go over to Chabad – I hear they offer a very good deal – or look online and find

a rabbi who will do the tutoring and lead the service at a hotel. If the only reason to belong to a temple is have a Bar Mitzvah, then it's time to shutter our doors, because we can't compete.

But friends, Judaism wasn't created to celebrate B'nai Mitzvah. Our people have faced enmity and hatred, pogroms and mass killings. We've struggled through crisis and trauma and somehow found the will to survive. Today, we find ourselves at a moment in history when the future is truly in our own hands. There is no Hitler threatening to wipe us out. We live in a country where we are safe, secure, and appreciated, in a world where there is a second major Jewish community that's also in control of its destiny. Today, there is nothing that stands in our way except ourselves.

Judaism has been around for 3500 years because it creates meaning and purpose, belonging and blessing. But, like everything else in life, we only get back what we are willing to put in. Now the truth is, I believe that for far too long our synagogues have had the wrong focus and become part of the problem. Our focus, it seems, has been more on dollars and cents, than on relationships and feelings. It is us – the synagogue, that made “Bar Mitzvah” into the phenomenon it is. We used “Bar Mitzvahs” to create religious school programs, to drive temple membership, and to sustain our budgets. In truth, our issues go beyond Bar Mitzvah. Even during these High Holidays there will be too much time spent talking about money (which we need), than on nurturing our spirit and caring for our soul.

Why has Judaism survived persecution and trials when it would have been so much easier to assimilate and fade away? Because for countless generations, we've seen that the traditions and rituals of Jewish life brought beauty and even holiness into a soul-less world. Our heritage of learning, of asking questions, of challenging accepted beliefs, of holding high the values of justice, fairness, kindness, love, caring for the weak, nurturing our children, and building a better world – these values have raised up generations who saw themselves in the image of God.

Judaism has created a spirit in each future generation, given them the ability and desire to tackle the most difficult challenges, and create new solutions to the world's most pressing problems in fields like medicine, science, engineering, and technology. It has inspired generations of men and women to fight injustice, to believe in the ideals of Western society – in freedom and democracy – because they are a part of the foundational experience of our people.

We Jews have been successful in the world, not because God promised Abraham that he would change our DNA, but because we practiced rituals and traditions that reinforced our values and beliefs. We sanctified family, and created the opportunity for each of us to feel joy and celebration – to be satisfied with our lot at least once a week BY OBSERVING SHABBAT. We were thoughtful about our consumption, remembered that there should be limits on what we take, and that all life should be treated with dignity and respect BY KEEPING KOSHER. Not content with a mindless culture of fame and excess – we dedicated time to becoming thoughtful, engaged citizens of the world, applying our tradition's timeless values to new issues facing our lives. Not only did we educate our children – we EDUCATED OURSELVES. And finally, we BOUND OURSELVES TO COMMUNITY – not at the expense of the outside world, but as a starting point for our engagement with others. We supported the poor, cared for the environment, celebrated our joys, comforted those in pain, and built up our communal institutions.

We practiced these four – not 613 – not even ten commandments – but four *mitzvot*: we kept Shabbat, created a Jewish home, engaged in Jewish study, and participated as members of our Jewish community. And the outcome? Just turn on your computer and Google “the Jewish People” and you'll see a detailed record of our unrivaled historic success in the world.

Friends, we live in a world that is increasingly isolated. Did you know that there are more people living alone in this country today than at any other point in history? We may live in a “wired,” connected world, we may be able to share our lives and keep in touch online. But while those connections can help us pass the hours, they can’t replace a real community of support and care. They can’t hear a laugh or see a tear. They can’t reach out in warmth and love, or comprehend words that are unspoken. Technology is a wonderful tool to use to build a stronger community. But it’s not a replacement for human contact and love.

And so, I’ll ask again the question that I began with: What does it mean to be a Jew? The Torah gives us an answer. It says that God spoke to Abraham and called him to go on a journey, to leave his world behind and travel to a distant land. And God gave Abraham a promise. God said: If you listen to my words, if you follow my path, I will give you descendants who will keep your name alive, so you will know that your journey was not in vain. But most important of all, if you listen to my words, if you follow my path, I promise that you will have a life of dignity, purpose and meaning – that you, and those who come after you will be a blessing in this world.

Friends, this is what it means to be a Jew. This is why our ancestors struggled to survive. This is what our traditions continue to offer us – not just a life of meaning and purpose, but the opportunity to be a blessing. And this is the promise that our congregation has to offer you – not just during these High Holidays, but throughout the days and years of our lives.

Friends, as we enter this New Year, join with me, and this holy community, as we strive to transform ourselves, enrich our families and community, and bring the blessings of our heritage into the world. Amen.