

# ***Why Be Jewish?***

**High Holy Days 5778/2017**

**Rabbi Michael S. Friedman**

Why are we here? For many of us, the answer is simple: it's Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur; where else would I be? Perhaps we are here because our parents or grandparents brought us when we were young. Perhaps we come to services because we want to hear the familiar music and prayers at this time of year. Perhaps we are here to affirm the values of our tradition, or be with those who are most important to us. Perhaps we are here because the message of these holidays resonates with us: we know it's time to consider our deeds and resolve to do better.

At the same time, some of us cannot quite identify why we come to services. We're a bit uncomfortable with the Hebrew, and truth be told the English sometimes sounds uncomfortable too. We wonder, What am I getting out of this? Why am I committed to this?

We could expand that question to refer not just to attending a High Holy Day service. Today it applies to the entire enterprise of Jewish life.

We all have neighbors, friends and even family members who have largely left Judaism behind. They don't belong to a synagogue, they haven't raised their children with Jewish practice, and they aren't sitting in shul right now. And they are still good people. They seem to live satisfying, fulfilling lives. So why are we still here?

If you have trouble answering the questions I'm posing this morning, don't fret. It's not your fault. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.<sup>1</sup>

Given this description, why do we actively *choose* Judaism, year after year?

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. Page 3.

Let us recognize that this is a relatively new question. Our ancestors probably had little choice in the matter. Their identity was fixed, unchangeable. Ghetto walls and social intolerance confined them. Today we are blessed to live in a society that exalts personal freedom. And with freedom comes options. Each of us is free to opt out of Jewish life.

Yet our being here – together, in such great numbers – is a powerful affirmation of our Jewish identity. So this morning I want us to consider what the choice to live a Jewish life really means. Because I fear that we lack concrete, compelling answers.

I recall the father who inquired, “Rabbi, what should I tell my son when he asks, ‘Why do I have to go to Hebrew school?’” I think of the daughter, still shocked of the news of her mother’s death, who asked, “Rabbi, why should I sit shiva?” Each was asking, in their own way, *Why should I bother to be Jewish, to act Jewish, to live a Jewish life?*

If pressed to articulate what Judaism means to us, we often speak of family gatherings on holidays and of a general affinity for ethics. Now, both of those are important, but if our Judaism is synonymous only with family get-togethers and “being a good person” then we might as well close up shop.

By all odds, we should have disappeared long ago as many other peoples did: the ancient Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans. It is utterly miraculous that the Jewish people still thrives! We have survived pogrom and plague, missiles and murder, “remembering and advancing at one and the same time.”<sup>2</sup> Our very existence magnifies the extraordinary possibilities of humanity even as we remember its unfathomable cruelty.

Even despite our history, prior generations cared enough safeguard the gifts of Torah and pass them down to us. What is so precious in Jewish life that we can’t let it go? This Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur, think about why being Jewish matters to you. And when you have your own answers, share them with your children or grandchildren. Raising a Jewish child is not something that happens on the morning of her bat mitzvah; it is a daily commitment. So on these High Holy Days, let’s speak about why we bother to be Jewish, and why we care so deeply about passing it down to our children and grandchildren.

Tradition and heritage are enriching, but they are not enough. Bubbie and Zaydie, Holocaust and Israel simply are not compelling enough reasons to live a Jewish life today.

First, we should be Jewish because **Judaism helps us live a better life**. We gather at the end of a hectic week, using Shabbat to re-focus ourselves on what’s most important. The mitzvah of tzedakah prompts us toward generosity. Kindling Chanukah candles

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<sup>2</sup> Shimon Peres, quoted in *I Am Jewish*. Page 49.

impels us to bring light to the dark corners of our world. These High Holy Days are a much-needed annual jolt – time set apart to consider our lives, and pledge to do better.

Judaism can “shape your values and the quality of your life and the kind of person you want to be after much else has faded.”<sup>3</sup> I know from personal experience that Judaism can help guide a teen through the confusing years of adolescence. Being part of our youth program *anchors* and *enhances* busy lives, even when time is scarce, even when we have homework to do and extra-curriculars to get us into college!

Yes, Judaism makes a difference for each of us.

Second, **Judaism helps us improve the world.** Our story leads us to identify as “*Am kadosh*, a holy people set apart by meaning and mission.”<sup>4</sup> We are a people commanded to follow the just, never the multitude. We are a people proud to be the outsider, taught to identify with the stranger, widow and orphan. *Tikkun olam*, the Jewish duty to repair our broken world, arises from the Jewish mindset that the world is fundamentally out of order; that everything is NOT okay.

As we sit here today, we hardly need the reminder. Despite their pervasiveness corruption, inequality and violence is each a divine injustice; a serious breach in the way God intended things. Our mission is to repair or restore society to the way God wants it to be. Rabbi Jonah Pesner puts it this way: “Our purpose is nothing less than redemption of the world.” Yes, we are still here because in every generation there have been Jews who believed that our existence as a people and what we bring to the world *matters*.

Most of what I have said up to this point could apply to any Jewish community, at virtually any point in history. However *we* live in a particular time and place. In fact, I believe we need Judaism *here* in Westport, Connecticut, and *now*, in September 2017, more than ever.

We are among the most fortunate human beings on earth. This is a proud community of educated, successful individuals. We are focused on our families. We aim for excellence in all we do. We are secure. We have satisfied many of our needs. We seem to have it all because our calendars are booked and our resumes are long. Nonetheless we ache for things that money cannot possibly buy, but which are essential to living a worthwhile life. Fortunately, **Judaism brings purpose, gratitude, wonder and awe to a life of busyness and accomplishment.** Judaism can make our busy lives full.

No matter our struggles or successes Judaism asserts that at the end of the day what we do with our time on earth matters. Judaism helps us understand that possessions and

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<sup>3</sup> “Building a Bridge,” by Peter J. Rubinstein, Rosh Hashanah sermon 5758.

<sup>4</sup> “On Becoming a Rabbi,” by Jerry Davidson, May 1997.

popularity are fleeting but that purpose is everything. Saying a blessing inspires us to move from focusing on what we lack toward true gratitude for what we have. We appreciate our good fortune when we gather around the seder table to tell our unique story of the exodus from Egypt. We revel in the life-affirming wonder of dancing a whirling hora at a wedding.

We sing familiar prayers and feel a rare unity. Awe makes our hearts soar in ways that everyday life simply cannot. We pass our Torah scroll into the arms of a 13 year-old boy or girl and feel a visceral link to generations long gone. These acts make our hearts soar in ways that everyday life simply cannot. That, my friends, is awe.

Most importantly, Judaism insists that we are not the end-all, be-all of creation. Judaism helps us understand that there is something larger than us in the universe, whether you call that nature, justice, truth, wisdom, or God. That, too, is awe.

At the same time we know that for many in our community the image of perfection is nothing more than a façade. Make no mistake: there is real heartbreak and disappointment and need and loneliness within our congregation. Each of us has friends and neighbors struggling with an unexplained illness, a recent devastating loss, a difficult career setback, an unhappy home life.

Fortunately, **Judaism brings hope to a world of tumult and uncertainty.** We gather at times of personal or communal crisis, lending comfort and strength through adversity. As one member of our Board of Trustees recently said, “Synagogue feels like home in an increasingly disconnected world.” We live in an era that is increasingly violent, chaotic, scary. The era of Charlottesville, of open racism, of anti-immigrant backlash, of rising global anti-Semitism, of terrorism without borders, of catastrophic hurricanes.

*Here and now*, each of us desperately needs the gifts Judaism offers. And our world desperately needs the moral clarity that Judaism offers.

I am proud that Temple Israel is a beacon of moral clarity at this time of dislocation and confusion. We combat a climate of hate and intolerance with tangible acts of justice and compassion. In the past few months alone our congregation has resettled a Syrian refugee family, successfully fought on behalf of immigrants unfairly targeted for deportation, and supported Dreamers whose status here is now uncertain. We have launched a hurricane relief and rebuilding effort. We have designated a restroom as “all-gender” to ensure that *everyone* will feel comfortable here in our communal home.

As you heard our president say earlier this morning, our board has been considering the purpose of our congregation. One trustee said, “We all come here hoping to find rewards we never could have anticipated.”

Temple Israel contradicts Rabbi Heschel's critique, which I quoted earlier, in many ways. Right here, we are building a Judaism that is not irrelevant but compelling, not dull but invigorating, not oppressive but liberating. We are about creativity over creed, joy over discipline, originality over habit. This is a place where heirlooms are respected, and reinvigorated. This is a place of action, not defeat. That is why we are Jewish, why we are committed to this congregation, and to the life of our people.

Here we are today. The richness of Jewish life is rightfully ours. And in fact, many of us live Jewishly without even recognizing it. We give time, money and energy to philanthropies and charities of every stripe. We have taken on positions of leadership for the betterment of our civic community. Our motivation comes from a sense of Jewish obligation. Let us name that, and teach that to our children.

Several years ago I had the pleasure of traveling to Amsterdam on a study trip with Jewish teens. As we entered the Anne Frank Haus, we were confronted with an excerpt from Anne's writings:

Who knows, maybe our religion will teach the world and all the people in it about goodness, and that's the reason, the only reason, we have to suffer. We can never just be Dutch, or just English, or whatever; we will always be Jews as well. And we'll have to keep on being Jews, but then, we'll want to be.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, at the end of the day each of us has said, in one way or another, "I want to be another link in a chain that stretches back a hundred generations." We need that grounding, that direction now more than ever. My childhood rabbi, Rabbi Jerry Davidson, wrote, "[We are] a people that have endured, [and], in spite of everything, have never failed to hope and to dream."<sup>6</sup>

We are people of accomplishment and success, living in a world of tumult and uncertainty. We desperately yearn to be more grateful, more compassionate, more generous. We hunger for hope and we nourish dreams of a world repaired. But then again, we already know this in our hearts. That's why we're here.

*Ken yehi ratzon*, May it be so.

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<sup>5</sup> Quote found on wall of Anne Frank Haus.

<sup>6</sup> Excerpted from *Temple Beth-El of Great Neck Bulletin*, by Jerry Davidson, September, 1988.

