

Rosh Hashanah 5767  
Rabbi David Lerner  
“Why Be Jewish?”

Shanah Tovah.

I remember thinking to myself “How hard can Poker be?” I am pretty good at Blackjack and War and used to love playing Casino with my grandmother.

A few years ago, Sharon, Talya and I were visiting Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for two weeks, while I served as rabbi-in-residence.

Some rabbis and Jewish educators there egged me on: “Come on, David, we’ll play for dimes and quarters – it’ll be fun. No one can lose a lot of money.”

A few hours and \$80 later, I did not think it was that much fun.

I was a bit embarrassed, and what was I going to tell Sharon: I lost our spending money to a bunch of rabbis playing Poker?!

I learned a good lesson: Don’t gamble with rabbis!

But I learned something about myself – I am not a good Poker player. I wear my emotions on my sleeve, or more accurately, on my face.

In any case, my poker mates could tell when I was bluffing and would quickly fold when I was pretending I did not have any good cards. That and the fact that I could not remember that three of a kind beats two pair contributed to my downfall.

All of this remains true – I am not good at hiding things, and so today, I will put my cards on the table and tell you the goal of this Rosh Hashanah sermon right up front.

I want you to love being Jewish. I want us all to leave shul today on such a Jewish high, that we cannot think of any greater blessing than our identities as Jews. Jewish pride and enthusiasm – those are my aces.

Now, you might want to stop me – especially, if this sermon were interactive – and you might ask: So why be Jewish?

The same question is raised in a recent book entitled: *I am Jewish*, a book born out of the tragedy of the murder of Daniel Pearl, a Jewish reporter working for the Wall Street Journal. Just before Muslim terrorists murdered him on February 21, 2002, they asked if he was Jewish. He replied: “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.”

In the book, a wide range of Jews – rabbis, scholars, politicians, entertainers and students – share their thoughts on what being Jewish means to them.

As I read through this book, it hit me: the medium is the message. Interesting though they may be, the substance of these answers is not the point. The point is to inspire us to discover what it means to be Jewish for ourselves.

So, why be Jewish? This is actually a new question. As I researched the topic, I could barely find any biblical, rabbinic, or medieval sources that spoke to this question. For the most of our history, Jewish identity was a given.

As Daniel Pearl said so simply: “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.”

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, we are all Jews-by-choice. Whether we were born to a Jewish mother or parents or not, whether we were raised in a Jewish home or not, we all choose if and how we remain Jewish. And so, while I suspect that Judaism is important to all of you (or else, you would not be here), the question is: WHY?

Why be Jewish? This is the burning question for us as modern Jews. Isn't it better to be simply a citizen of the world, an ethical person? Who needs all this particularism? Doesn't religion just lead to wars?

“Why be Jewish?” is a question that must be answered personally by each of us. What about being Jewish speaks to us? We should think about this issue and spend time writing down our thoughts on this to clarify it for ourselves, to inspire others and to share with our friends, children and grandchildren, maybe even with me.

Rabbis are supposed to lead by example, so, here we go.

Like Daniel Pearl, I am Jewish because I was born Jewish. I was blessed to be born to two loving parents who raised me with a love of Judaism – they taught me about our history – from the ancient wonders to the modern miracle of Israel and our own survival against all odds, from our extraordinary customs that help us celebrate the joys of life and nurture us during difficult times. They raised me on the rhythms of Jewish living that encourage us to sanctify each moment and they taught me our texts that inspire us to be moral and ethical human beings.

But, it's more than the way I was raised, I am Jewish because I love the Jewish people.

I am Jewish because I remember my Zayde, my father's father, who having arrived on these shores as a teenager from Pilyava in the Ukraine, always retained his Yiddish accent. When he spoke for Israel Bonds in the 1970s, he inspired me and others to play a part of the modern saga of the Jewish people. A survivor of World War I and many pogroms, my Zayde told me the following story. Followers of Petliura, a Ukrainian leader known for his anti-Semitic tendencies, perpetrated pogroms that killed tens of thousands of Jews. Once, some of Petliura's followers came to attack Pilyava – my Zayde's town. His father and some other Jewish merchants ransomed the town for a large sum of money. As my great-grandfather said, "Better that I should give up my money than one Jew should be lost."

This notion of unbreakable Jewish ties was part of my childhood. Each year in my school on *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day, an Israeli general who fought in the Six Day War or the Yom Kippur War would move me with his narrative. By the time we rose to sing the *Hatikvah*, my eyes would well up with tears. There is something so visceral in the closeness I feel to every Jew – whether from Ethiopia, Iran, Israel or next door.

I am Jewish because I love being a part of the Jewish people.

For many Jews, being part of the Jewish people is the most irreducible element of their Judaism. Converts, those who come to join the Jewish people, without having been raised with the notion of Jewish people-hood, are all the more inspiring. That is why we bind them directly to our earliest ancestors and name them as children of Abraham and Sarah.

Beyond the answer of Jewish people-hood, I am Jewish because of the Torah and the mitzvot. I believe that on some level all people are religious, yearning for purpose and order in their lives. For me, Judaism is the most powerful, purposeful lifestyle. Let me unpack that a bit.

During my senior year of college, I lived on the sixth floor of a dorm named Furnald, in room 613 to be exact. (No, it was not a coincidence – I chose it on purpose; as president of the Hillel, I thought it would be cute to live in a room whose number equaled the number of mitzvot. You can make fun of me later.)

I remember thinking that my floor-mates were all religious; they simply were religious in diverse ways. There was the crew team rower: he was awake at 5 AM and began his (davening or) training on the East River just as the sun rose; his religion was crew, but his devotion to his practice was no different than one who was more traditionally religious.

A woman a few doors down was an aspiring actress – beyond working out and voice lessons, she spent hours on her appearance.

The truth is that all human beings are religious in the sense that we need order and structure and purpose in our lives. I see this so clearly in my own children who crave a daily routine and patterns; they thrive when they have structure.

My search for meaning and purpose leads me to Judaism's structure: mitzvot, God's commandments and a life governed by halakhah, Jewish law or more literally: walking the Jewish way. It is a way that allows me to transcend myself and leads me a higher purpose.

I am Jewish because our tradition brings me joy. When we sit down to our Rosh Hashanah lunches in a few minutes, we will dip the *hallah* and apples in honey – Judaism makes life sweet, it makes us joyful. There is something about our melodies, our song and our dance that is so vital and vibrant. Being a Jew is humming a *niggun*, a melody without words as I walk to shul. It's watching a father bring his son to minyan to say Kaddish for his father and being filled with deep feeling and joy at our values being passed down. To me, being Jewish is as much about dancing with the Torah on *Simhat Torah* and celebrating on Purim as it is about these more introspective days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Being Jewish fills me with joy.

While Jewish people-hood, Torah and mitzvot and joy are why I am a Jew, there is so much more. Perhaps the best way I can explain why I am Jewish is through the words of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah records God's call to the Jewish people: "*Atem eidai* – you are My witnesses." (Isaiah 43:10, 12)

When I was first taught that phrase by my father as a youngster and when I encountered it in school, it confused me. What does it mean to be witnesses for God? Do we simply look around for God and take notes if we happen to stumble across the Almighty?

Now, I realize that for me this is the essence of being a Jew. First, *Atem Eidai*, it is in the plural – witnessing God is done with others, in community. Second, to be a witness for God means not only experiencing God, but also living out God's message: it is the rhythm of Jewish living, which, in turn, reminds us that we can all have a personal relationship with God – however we understand the divine.

We are also charged with an awesome responsibility: as God's witnesses, we spread God's teachings by crying out against injustice and testifying to God's works. As Isaiah states, we are supposed to be an *or goyim* – a light unto the nations, to bring God and God's teaching to the world. By living up to the high standards of our Torah and fulfilling mitzvot, we lift ourselves up and inspire all of

humanity to do the same, moving the world closer and closer to the messianic age.

We are God's witnesses – an awesome task.

In the Midrash (Sifrei Deut. 346) Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai utilizes an analogy to explain this phrase: a man fastened two ships together and built a palace above them. As long as the ships stay together, the palace stands; but once the ships separate, the palace will not stand. And with Israel: when they (Israel, the first ship) follow God's will (the second ship), the palace stands; but if we do not remain fastened to the tradition, it all collapses. His proof text is this same verse from Isaiah: "*Atem eidai* – you are My witnesses says Adonai and I am God." Thus, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai concludes: "When you are My witnesses, I am God, but when you are not My witnesses, I am not God." (!)

This Midrash has God's very existence predicated upon our fulfillment of mitzvot and Torah. God exists in our world only when we bring God into our realm. Our task as Jews is to bring God into this world! When we fulfill a commandment, we are testifying to God's power, and, even more, we are bringing God into this world. Without the Jewish people actively carrying out mitzvot, somehow God is not fully God.

An example: sometimes, I am the tenth. There is a great feeling I have in being the tenth, in making the minyan. I am not only fulfilling the mitzvah of prayer, of opening my eyes to the wonder of the universe, filling myself with awe, gratitude, and humility and, hopefully, inspiring me to live ethically throughout the day, but I am also helping our community. With the tenth, we make a minyan, the quorum needed to recite prayers like the Mourner's Kaddish. Being the tenth in the minyan lets others praise God by reciting the Kaddish and allows me to fulfill the mitzvah of comforting mourners. All of this takes place in this caring community we are building.

These words of Isaiah: "*Atem Eidai* – you are My witnesses," are read as part of the haftarah each year on Shabbat *Bereshit*, the Shabbat after *Simḥat Torah*. When we read of creation, the rabbis chose a haftarah that discusses God with both universalistic and particularistic elements. It teaches us to be an *or goyim* – a light for the nations and *Eidei Adonai* – God's witnesses. The tradition does a careful balancing act between the universal and the particular. It never lets us sway too far to one side – neither to be so caught up in the larger world that we forget our own family, nor to see only ourselves.

This balance can be found on Rosh Hashanah as we celebrate the creation of all humanity along with our unique identity as Jews. The rabbis selected Torah readings that stress our particular narrative: the story of Avraham and Sarah being given a son – the beginning of the Jewish people. In this morning's haftarah we also find this theme: after Hannah prays to God she has a

son, Samuel, whom she dedicates to the service of the Almighty. As the text states: “*V’gam anokhi heeshilteehu lAdonai kol ha-yamim asher hayah hu sha’ul lAdonai* – therefore I have dedicated him to Adonai, as long as he lives, he is lent to God.” (Samuel 1:28)

This is similar to Isaiah’s phrase – we are all supposed to be devoted to God’s service, as was Samuel.

I am Jewish because of this sacred task – I want to be a partner with God in bringing God’s message into the world.

We are given the template of how to be *Eidei Adonai*. We are to perform *tikkun ha-nefesh* and *tikkun ha-olam* – repairing ourselves and then the world. The former we accomplish by cultivating a life of the spirit – balancing attentiveness to our mind and body through study, exercise, and eating with inculcating a sense of wonder and gratitude through prayer and spiritual mitzvot. Once we have renewed ourselves, we can focus on our task of repairing the world.

A simple prayer is to thank God for each new day we are alive. My 94-year-old great aunt in Westwood told me that she gets up every morning and thanks God that she is alive. This notion is found in the one-line prayer traditionally recited upon arising: *Modeh Ani Lefanekha Melekh Hai V’Kayam she’hehezarti bi nishmati b’hemlah rabah emunatekha* – I thank You, living, enduring Sovereign for returning my soul to me in compassion, great is Your faithfulness.

But this prayer is supposed to inspire us to reach out to others. As it also states in our Siddur immediately thereafter: “Behold, I accept the basic commandment of our Creator: *V’ahavta L’rei’akha kamokha* – you shall love your kinsman as you love yourself.” We need to take care of ourselves and others.

The phrase: *tikkun ha-olam* – healing and repairing the world – so central to Judaism was coined in a prayer written for Rosh Hashanah. About two millennia ago, Jewish mystics composed the *Aleinu* as an introduction to the *Malkhuyot* section of the Musaf Amidah. In a few minutes, we will recite the year’s most unusual Amidah. Normally, the Amidah on holidays has one blessing describing the meaning of the day. But the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah has three blessings: *Malkhuyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* – sections describing God’s kingship, how God remembers us, and how the *Shofar* reminds us of God’s revelation and redemption.

*Aleinu* was the “Why Be Jewish” of thousands of years ago, and it was so successful and so popular that some 700 years ago, it was incorporated as the coda to every service. Its lens pans widely: “*Aleinu leshabei’ah la’adon hakol* –

it is incumbent upon us to praise the owner of all – *lateit gedulah l'yotzeir breisheet* – to ascribe greatness to the Creator of everything.”

Written for Rosh Hashanah – this day on which we celebrate creation, *Aleinu* begins with a universal theme. It views God as Creator of everything, and then, suddenly, it turns our attention inward, reminding us of our special obligations as Jews, the moral maxims we must fulfill and our covenant with God. From there, we approach God with a physical action – bowing. In ancient times, it was always complete prostration, but, with time, it became a standing bow during the year, with complete kneeling reserved for today and Yom Kippur.

It is in its second section, however, where the prayer reaches its apex: “*Al kein nekaveh* – Adonai our God, we therefore hope to see your majestic glory; to remove idols from the earth, so that the false gods will be destroyed; *letakein olam b'malkhut Shaddai* – to perfect the world under the Almighty's kingdom, so that all will call on your name. ...”

We hope for a time when God's message will replace the idols people worship, when a perfected world will be established. The great Kabbalist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Isaac Luria, transformed this phrase: *tikkun ha-olam*. It was not only God who could reshape the world, but human beings. As Jews, we have the responsibility to heal the world – *b'malkhut Shaddai* – we must heal the world into achieving its potential as the kingdom of God. If we perform the mitzvot, like visiting the sick, for example, we can fix the brokenness of the world, remaking it in the image of God.

To me, this is what it means to be a Jew. It is to have our rich history, our narrative, our texts and traditions, and to have them serve as a goad to me. I am a Jew because I cannot think of a better way to live my life; I am given an impetus to do good and a roadmap of how to do so. Through it, I try to heal myself and the world.

Well, those were my cards – they're on the table.

I look forward to seeing yours.

I am a Jew because I love being Jewish. I am a Jew because I love the Jewish people. I am Jew because I love the mitzvot and they bring me joy. I am a Jew because Judaism is the way I make sense of this complex world.

I yearn for community, structure and meaning ... and this is our best, continually evolving attempt at just that. Judaism is the lens through which I try to understand my existence.

I am a Jew because I am charged to serve as a witness for God.

In the coming year, may we all seek opportunities to serve as *Eidei Adonai*  
– as witnesses for God, and in doing so heal ourselves and the world.

Shanah Tovah.