

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778  
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Syracuse, New York  
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## All of Israel is Called Together

L'shana Tova and Good Evening.

Last January Melissa and I participated in a rabbis and spouses trip to Eastern and Central Europe. During that trip, standing on the banks of the Danube, I understood two Jewish ideas which had vexed me for all of my adult life. The first was community, and the second, chosenness.

The group of us, nearly 30 people, spent Shabbat afternoon on a walk around the city. It was a cold winter day, much colder than a typical winter day here. We were bundled up, moving briskly, enjoying the opportunity to explore.

We stopped at a memorial built on the banks of the Danube River, in the shadow of the parliament building. The memorial, stark in its simplicity, a set of shoes made out of steel, stood on an otherwise blank platform at water's edge. The installation is called Shoes on the Danube, and it is a memorial to the Jews of Hungary killed during the Shoa.

The Jews of Hungary largely survived the Shoa until late in 1944. In November of that year, Jews began to be rounded up, and a local Hungarian militia began taking groups of Jews to the Danube River. They would have the Jews take their shoes off, line up on the banks of the Danube, then shoot the entire group, bodies falling into the river. The shoes would be collected, because in the sick minds of the tormentors, the shoes still had value.

And then another group would be lined up and the whole scene would repeat itself. Thousands and thousands of Jews lost their lives in November and December of 1944 and January of 1945 in this horrible violence. By the end of the war, Hungary had lost somewhere between 650,000 and 800,000 Jews.

Today Budapest has about 100,000 Jews, and the Jewish community sparkles with growth and celebration and joy.

As our group stood at the monument, we decided to say kaddish for the thousands of our cousins who had been killed. And as we stood saying those sacred words, a young man in his late teens or early twenties, wearing a black leather jacket, walked by and gave the Nazi salute. We were momentarily stunned. But then, simultaneously, we raised our voices, and as we finished kaddish we broke into singing Am Yisrael Chai—the people of Israel lives.

We jumped and sang and clapped and cried as we all tried to comprehend what we had experienced. We were alive, Jews praying and singing in a place where earlier others had tried to

destroy us. And even with the evil actions of the passerby, still we stood together, our micro community united as never before. At that moment I began to understand the concept of community.

Community comes together in times of challenge. When outside sources threaten, the community stands strong, locking arms, forgetting differences, embracing all. The community could be a small group of rabbis on a cold January day in Budapest or the members of a particular synagogue in Syracuse or any other kind of gathering. Sometimes the community chooses us; sometimes communities force us to choose.

Community also comes together to build and educate and promote growth among its members. Community celebrates survival and success, even on a frigid day in Budapest. Community happens when souls see that the similarities far outweigh the differences.

Here in Syracuse, we Jews have united to strengthen each other, to join together to celebrate and prosper together. For more than 180 years Jews have called these parts home. Jews have been welcomed here, have flourished here, have found educational, business, and personal successes here. Jews have endured difficulties here too—living through world wars and other challenges.

Our Jewish community in Central New York grew steadily from its roots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, reaching a zenith in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At one time, nearly 15,000 Jews called the Syracuse area home, and one could find more than a dozen synagogues, multiple kosher bakeries and butchers and grocers, and prominent businesses owned by Jews.

Times have changed, and today our community has four synagogues, one kosher bakery, no butchers, and a total Jewish population somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 Jews—a bit more than a third of the total when our community was at its largest.

Don't let the numbers get you down. We also have a JCC, Day School, nursing home, senior living center, Jewish Federation and more. Our community continues to change and grow. Cooperation among institutions in the Jewish community is at an all-time high. Jews are welcome in more parts of the general community than ever before.

The values and beliefs which serve as a foundation for a strong community remain visible here today.

When we see beyond ourselves, and recognize that we need others, whether in good times or bad, then our community blossoms.

When we see Jews joining together to learn and celebrate, looking for new ways to collaborate, then community thrives.

When we are attacked from the outside, as we were this past year with bomb threats, then community, with dogged determination, emerges.

When we want to teach and nurture our children, and we find ways to do so together, bringing more opportunities for learning and connection, then community prospers.

Each of these has helped strengthen our Central New York Jewish community this year, and tonight we enter a new year more determined than ever to unite and elevate our entire community.

I.

For us as Jews, community means a shared set of values and practices. We might disagree or even argue about the particulars of how or why we do this or that, but we all agree that Jewish communities are built on the foundation of belief in God, covenant with God and each other, and some degree of practice which reflects the sacred spark in each of us.

But a nagging question has pursued us Jews as we have wrestled with community. Do we choose to be a part of a community, or are we chosen? If we choose, then what are our motivations? And if we are chosen, who does the choosing, why were we chosen and why were others not chosen?

In the ethical teachings of Talmud, Pirke Avot, we learn in section 14 of chapter 3:

Rabbi Akiva would also say: Beloved is humanity, for we are created in the image [of God]; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known that we were created in the image, as it is says, "For in the image of God, humans were made" ([Genesis 9:6](#)). Beloved are Israel, for they are called children of God; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to them that they are called children of God, as it is stated: "You are children of the Lord your God" ([Deuteronomy 14:1](#)). Beloved are Israel, for they were given a precious article; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to them that they were given a precious article, as it is stated: "I have given you a good doctrine; My Torah, do not forsake it" ([Proverbs 4:2](#)).

Rabbi Akiva teaches us that not only are all of us as humans created in God's image, but we Jews were chosen for a special role as God's beloved. In Akiva's mind, we are chosen by God, and our communities are one way for us to fulfill our special mission.

The details of that unique relationship remain murky. Most of us do not really believe that we are any better or more precious because we are Jews. Yet we never fully abandon the notion of chosen-ness. We who love history struggle to understand how a special beloved people could endure such sadness and destruction. But for others, the idea of our chosen-ness remains real.

Rabbi Richard Levy had a profound influence on my life, though we have never been close. As a senior in college I attended a program for Jewish young adults at the Brandeis Bardin Institute in California. Rabbi Levy, who was then the Hillel director for all of Los Angeles, was on the faculty. He was a different kind of Reform rabbi that I had never experienced. Intellectual, erudite, warm, kind. Instantly he became a model for the kind of rabbi I wanted (and still want) to be.

He told a story of being at a rabbinic convention in 1964. While at the convention he and others received a telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the telegram Dr. King asked the rabbis to join in a protest to integrate a hotel swimming pool in St. Augustine, Florida, which at the time was celebrating its heritage as one of the oldest cities in the United States.

A group of rabbis boarded greyhound busses and traveled to St. Augustine, and met up with Dr. King at a local church, or as Rabbi Levy put it, a Black Synagogue. As the rabbis entered the sanctuary, Dr. King, who was preaching, looked up and said, "Here come Moses' children!"

Dr. King believed that we Jews were in fact chosen, that we hold a special place for God, that we have a unique relationship with God. Dr. King believed that the Jewish people are a chosen people, and that our chosen-ness provides a special role and status.

## II.

What if we are not chosen? What if we must choose to be a part of this sacred brit, the covenant we share with the Almighty? On some level, every one of us here tonight is a Jew by choice. Each of us somewhere along the way decided that being a part of the Jewish community, and more specifically the Temple Concord community, gave added meaning to our lives. I made that choice when I arrived nearly 8 and a half years ago and you made that choice when you joined our community. Whether we realize it or not, all of us made that choice when we entered this sanctuary this evening.

During the bomb threats this past winter and spring at JCCs and Day Schools all over the United States, people made fascinating choices. Here in Syracuse, after being evacuated to a safe space, the children of the day school, including my two sons and the cantor's daughter and son, continued their Jewish education. Jewish songs were sung in unusual places, as the leaders and teachers of the school made a conscious choice to embrace Judaism even when under threat.

A similar scene took place at a Day School in Florida when a student took the torah as the school was evacuated, and continued the torah reading on the trunk of a car in a parking lot, not letting the cowardly threats of a terrorist stop Jewish learning and prayer. Those students and teachers and leaders chose to embrace Judaism just as ours did. And their choice stands as a shining example for us as we begin a new year.

Each of us made a choice to be a part of this community. Every one of us here consciously chooses daily how we will live our lives. And for us, being a part of this Jewish community represents an affirmative decision. We choose to believe in a progressive, ever evolving understanding of Judaism which began at Sinai but continues here tonight on the corner of Madison and University.

The choices we make have profound power. When we decide to join a congregation and support the holy work of a house of worship we state clearly that we believe in covenant, that we believe in our responsibility to do Tikkun Olam, the work of healing our world.

When we choose to live Jewish lives we embrace the struggles of our ancestors and at the same time make their optimism our own.

When we choose to live Jewish lives, ideas of shared fortunes, of K'lal Yisrael, the oneness not just of God but of the People of Israel becomes one of our core tenets.

When we choose to be a part of a Temple community we recognize that relationships enhance our lives, that sharing our Jewish journeys with others enriches us and makes the world more whole.

### III.

Can it be that we both choose and are chosen? Some of us at some times feel chosen while others of us at other times actively make choices, not feeling any sense of chosen-ness. Maybe the real answer lies in some sort of synthesis between the two. Perhaps the real secret to Jewish survival is one part chosen-ness and one part choosing!

Here in our Syracuse Jewish community, and especially in our congregation, we are choosing to embrace change. Creating new organizations and buildings defined American Judaism for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Collaboration and mergers are defining 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish life in America. Once we were expanding wildly, going it alone because we could. Now we are finding ways to build bridges because we must.

In our Temple alone we have increased our outreach to younger families, to the LGBTQ community, and to the interfaith community. We are choosing to embrace all—and we are accepting the idea that we have been chosen for this sacred work.

In our community we have come together to create first a community Jewish high school program and more recently a community Hebrew School. In both cases we chose to join together with our sister congregations in Syracuse, and in both cases, we have been chosen to build a more connected Jewish community for all in Central New York.

In our community we are on the cusp of greater interaction than ever imagined. Thanks to the leaders of the many organizations and synagogues in our community, a new congress of leaders has emerged. The COJO group—the Council of Jewish Organizations now meets monthly to find ways to work together. We share calendars, we share ideas, and we are together working to strengthen our Jewish community. We have chosen this path to build the Jewish community we all desire. And we have been chosen by our times and our individual organizations to put aside past differences and instead look to building a more interconnected Jewish community for all of us.

The New Year arrives with a clean slate. Each of us will listen for the call. Some of us may hear it, others not. And at some point in the coming year, each of us will make a choice to engage or to disengage, to reach out or to withdraw. Jewish history overflows with such episodes.

The New Year offers unknowable opportunities. I pray that each of us feels chosen to help build the future. And I hope we all choose to do a little more than we did in the year just ending. Our community needs us. We need each other. God needs us all.

Feel chosen. And choose to be a part of our shared future.