

Of course you've heard of the Wright Brothers before, but does the name Samuel Pierpoint Langley sound familiar? No? Had history gone the way that most at the time thought it would, the only name any of us would know would be Langley's!

You see, it was the early twentieth century, and world leaders around the globe were in the early phases of what would eventually evolve to be the space race with the hopes that their respective nation would be the first to create what we now call the airplane. In the United States, there was one clear person for the job: Samuel Pierpoint Langley, one of, if not the most renowned astrophysicists in the country. The Department of Defense contributed \$50,000 for the effort and the Smithsonian Institution, of which Pierpoint Langley was the head, contributed another \$20,000 - a truly astronomical sum for the time. He and his team spent countless hours in their physics lab, primarily focused on the concept of propulsion, and, ultimately, to the thrill of the government, the press, and really the entire country at the time, Langley and his team revealed their creation: the Great Aerodrome.

And on its inaugural launch day, the Great Aerodrome was catapulted into the air over the Potomac river from a houseboat upon which Langley was seated. As everyone watched with anticipation, they observed the unmanned Great Aerodrome jettison upwards, forwards for a few seconds, but then plummet into the river - it was a spectacular failure.

Now, unbeknownst to everyone at the time, there were two unknown brothers who owned a bicycle store from Dayton, Ohio, named Orville and Wilbur Wright, who were interested in the idea of manned flight. With only \$2000 of their own funds and physics knowledge limited to their understanding of bicycles, the Wright brothers went to work, designing and building their own creation. From their bicycle knowledge, Orville and Wilbur had a sense that, rather than propulsion, the real key to manned flight was going to be balance and equilibrium, so they focused their attention there - specifically on the wings. And then, after the production of many prototypes which were always flown personally by one brother or the other, Orville and Wilbur ultimately created what came to be known as the Wright Flyer. And on December 17, 1903, the Wright brothers became the first in history to successfully launch a sustained, power and pilot driven air machine into flight.

For the Wright Brothers, it turns out that their conscious choice of focusing on the right problems - balance and equilibrium - in the right way by being on the plane led to their success, in stark contrast to Langley's focus on the wrong problem - propulsion - from a distance - he never even got on the plane.¹

¹ See: Habeeb, Lee. "The Improbable Story of How the Wright Brothers Changed World History." *Newsweek*. December 16, 2022
"115 Years Ago: Wright Brothers Make History at Kitty Hawk." *Nasa History*. December 17, 2018

I've been thinking a lot about this idea. When faced with a multi-faceted situation, how do we discern where our primary focus should be? How do we decide where to invest ourselves and our energies?

And I'd like to invite us to consider these questions together today, the first day of the Jewish New Year. Why? Because I believe we, members of the Jewish community, are at a crossroads that is tempting us to direct the majority of our focus towards the wrong problem, rather than the right one.

Now antisemitism is undoubtedly the most significant concern of and for the Jewish community today. You are surely aware of the precipitous increase in outward antisemitic incidents across our country and our world, whether from the far right or the far left, online, at cocktail parties, from the halls of our government, to the streets in our towns. In fact, the acclaimed *Sapir Journal*, "a quarterly journal of ideas for a thriving Jewish future," dedicated the entirety of its recent issue to antisemitism. Filled with thought-provoking articles from a diverse swath of today's top Jewish thinkers, the article that stood out to me was from *Sapir's* editor - Brett Stephens, entitled "Three Falsehoods about Antisemitism and One Truth."²

In his first three points, Stephens notes a few key observations about antisemitism. First, that antisemitism is a concrete conspiracy theory or set of them, that despite being ridiculous, are still real ideas and therefore need to be taken seriously. Second, Stephens highlights that antisemitism stems from feelings of envy and inferiority, where Jews are unjustly portrayed as superior, as differentiated from other forms of bigotry which typically see their subjects as inherently inferior. And third, he asserts that alone, education about antisemitism cannot eradicate the problem of antisemitism. All important understandings.

But it is Stephens' final point about antisemitism that proves most noteworthy to me. Antisemitism, he says, is not our problem, and it is not on us, the Jews, to solve it. As Stephens says: "*The real question [for us], then, isn't how to solve antisemitism. It's how to thrive in the face of it.*"³

Don't get me wrong: I'm not suggesting we ignore antisemitism. We must do our part to normalize the stigmatization of antisemitism. And, of course, we have to continue to invest in our security. This terribly sad reflection of the reality of our time is something we cannot afford *not* to pay. BUT we Jews will not be the ones to solve antisemitism, if

Kindy, David. "This Odd Early Flying Machine Made History But Didn't Have the Right Stuff."
Smithsonian Magazine. May 5, 2021

² Stephens, Brett. "Three Falsehoods About Antisemitism and One Truth." *Sapir Journal: The Issue on Antisemitism*. Volume 10. Summer 2023.

³ Ibid

it can be solved at all. Antisemitism does not belong to us. Do you know what does? Judaism. But, unfortunately, many of us have come to conflate the two.

Consider that the latest Pew survey of the American Jewish population reveals that we Jews care most about remembering the Holocaust & antisemitism, in stark contrast to the percentages of people who identify outwardly as Jewish through things like synagogue affiliation, Jewish charitable giving, observance of Jewish rituals or Jewish practice being reported at all-time lows.⁴ In other words, today, what binds us is *not* our shared tradition, but our upset at others' hatred towards us.

Just like Samuel Pierpoint Langley who focused on the wrong problem even though it seemed like the right one, we, the Jewish collective, are being drawn into the same mistake. With all our attention on the external forces that loom, we risk ignoring the part that really matters and over which we actually do have control: how we will keep Judaism not only alive, but vibrant and thriving, for now and for the future.

Perhaps you have heard me share this common occurrence when we clergy meet with B'nei Mitzvah families. At some point along the preparation process, the student will inevitably turn to the parent and say: "I don't want to do this!" To which the parent will respond, "You are doing this whether you like it or not!" To which the child will then retort, "But why? Why does it matter?" "Because it does. It's just what we do." Such an exchange tends to leave parents frustrated that their children don't just *get* it and children, in turn, frustrated that their parents seem unable to explain why they care.

It's not that people don't care. They do! According to every Jewish population study, the percentages of people who say they feel proud to be Jewish are higher than ever.⁵ The issue is that we don't talk about it. We don't have language for it. Or we have the language and are not comfortable with it. And then either way, we don't often have the actions that support our sentiments.

In truth, many of us who identify as Reform Jews may find ourselves more comfortable sharing the kind of Jews we are not and the kind of Jewish things we do not do, rather than the kind of Jews we are and the Jewish things we choose to do. I'm Jewish, but I don't go to synagogue. I'm Jewish, but I don't keep Kosher. I'm Jewish, but I'm not religious. These narratives do nothing more than keep us at a distance from so much that is rightly ours - our inheritance, our tradition, our personal invitation for belonging and purpose. What if we define a religious Jew as one who chooses to use the majesty of our Jewish tradition to live a more moral and meaningful existence? Why would any of us who claim Judaism for ourselves distance ourselves from that?

⁴ "Jewish Americans in 2020." *Pew Research Center*. May 11, 2021

⁵ See 2020 Pew as above or "Jewish Chicago: Who Are We: A 2020 Population Study" JUF Chicago, 2021 as examples

Why do we care about Judaism? Why are we proud to be Jewish? And **how** then do we make that real in the world?

Of course, Judaism can be personal, but it is not private. There is nothing else of significance in our lives we would leave pent up in our hearts, as if the personal conviction relieves us of the responsibility to do something about it in the world. Have you ever heard someone say to their kid, “Your dance recital or hockey game is important to me in my heart, but I won’t be telling you why, and I also won’t be going to your show or tournament.” Of course not! But we do this with Judaism all the time. If we are going to suggest that Judaism is something about which we care, whose practices give us meaning, then we need to be able to say why it matters, and we need to show it and show up for it.

Remember the Wright brothers and their practical, hands-on approach to the airplane, in contrast to Langley’s theoretical view? We need to be like the Wright Brothers, in a practical and practiced relationship with our Judaism, rather than keeping it only as a principle at arm’s length.

Consider the following story.⁶ In an attempt to usurp Moses’ leadership position, a power-seeking man named Korach asks Moses a trick question: “Does a house full of holy books still require a mezuzah on the door?” Moses answers that yes, it does. Korach laughs and cynically comments that the tiny mezuzah contains only the *shema* - a small excerpt from Torah, but a house filled with books contains the entire Torah plus much more. Essentially, Korach believes that the inside is the only part that matters. But Moses asserts the value of both! Can you guess who was right? Not so different from Wright and Langley, Moses is for most of us a household name, but Korach? Not so much.

Here is the truth: Judaism is, at its heart, internal and external; it is an inside and outside practice. There is a place for the internal and the self. But at the end of the day, all the self-care and me-time in the world won’t bring us the deeper fulfillment for which each of us yearns. To attain that, we have to be a part of something bigger; we have to be in service of a purpose outside of ourselves. Being of service in this way is never a privatized endeavor; rather, it beckons us to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, to bring more healing and wholeness, to create more justice, hope, love and peace - each and every component of which is a particular goal of *Jewish* living.

Here’s my Jewish why - not Rabbi Geffen’s Jewish why - but my, Wendi’s, Jewish why: Judaism matters to me because my heart races faster with the electric pulse of Jewish

⁶*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:3

wisdom and practice. Whether I am studying the Talmud or building my sukkah, those acts connect me as a link in the chain with the generations of old and those yet to be,

enabling me to see myself as a stakeholder of a particular practice that calls me to do my part to heal the sick, clothe the naked, help the poor, pursue peace, love the neighbor and the stranger, to animate the Divine in all people, so together we can transform the world from the way it is to the way it can yet be.

What if, on the first day of this new Jewish year, we each asked ourselves: what is my particular Jewish Why - why does Judaism matter to me? And then, we committed to making our Jewish Whys manifest outwardly in our lives.

When families receive their child's B'nei Mitzvah date in the fourth grade, we invite them to pick one particular aspect of Judaism to which they want to commit, to make their own and do with regularity. This is an invitation for each of us, for all of us, on this first day of the new Jewish year. Maybe it's lighting Shabbat candles, or baking challah, or coming to services once a month, or volunteering with our Feed the Homeless program, or giving tzedakah, or deciding to join the oldest running weekly book club, just to mention a few options - and as we actually do so, we speak about our Jewish Why's, and connect them to our Jewish actions. For example, one could say: "When I light Shabbat candles each week, it allows me to remember the sources of light in my life, and that enables me to not only feel more grateful, but be more grateful too." Or: "When I volunteer once a month with Feed the Homeless, I take seriously the Jewish commandment that no one needs to be hungry. I am doing my part to make that Jewish ideal real in the world." Doing this enables us not only to build a shared Jewish vocabulary, but also a shared Jewish experience that is uniquely our own, that is not just theory, that belongs to us, and to which we belong in return. Regardless of what anyone on the outside thinks or believes. *That* is Jewish thriving.

Interestingly, a focus on Jewish thriving strengthens and bolsters the active place of Judaism in the world and our own sense of who we are. And ultimately, *that* is what real, abiding *security* is actually about: if we know who we are, we cannot be shaken. In the words of Stephens at the end of his article: "We are still here, better and stronger than ever' is always a fine reply to antisemitism."

Turns out, when we want to really thrive, focusing our energies on matters of sustained flight ultimately addresses the matter of propulsion too. Put more simply, when we make our particular Jewish identity manifest in a way that includes both word and deed, this is what gives us wings. And with our priorities in the right place, up close and personally invested, that's when we can truly soar.

Focusing on the Right Problem
Rosh Hashanah 5784
Rabbi Wendi Geffen

Shabbat Shalom. Shanah Tovah.