The other day, I was at the Giant at the corner of River and Falls– you know the one– having a very intent look at a pile of squash. It was a Sunday afternoon, I was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and sandals, no makeup, no kippah, and I was planning my meals for the week. Like all of the shoppers around me, I was going about my business, not really chatting or making eye contact with anyone, just focused on my grocery list.

I was trying to decide if I wanted butternut or acorn squash for dinner when I heard someone call "RABBI!" from across the produce section. For a second, to be honest, my brain didn't realize that the word was directed towards me– my brain forgot that I was RABBI– I literally glanced around, first, looking for "the Rabbi" before realizing that there was the loving face of a congregant walking straight towards me past the tomatoes– right, right, I am Rabbi, I remembered, chuckling to myself– and then we had a friendly, short conversation, and both went on our way.

The funny thing is, there are probably quite few of you in this room wondering if you are the person I'm talking about here, because I've bumped into so many of you while out and about. I've run into congregants

while hiking on the C & O canal, filling up my car, picking up prescriptions at Walgreens, standing in line at Whole Foods – and I want you to rest assured that it always warms my heart, and brightens my day, to see you, to say hello to you, and to have those brief moments of connections.

It just takes me a second, in those moments when we bump into each other outside of these walls, for me to switch back into "rabbi mode". Of course, I am always a rabbi, wherever I go– but if I'm not actively doing rabbinic work, there is a different version of me on display for the general public.

And to be honest, I kinda wonder what went through the heads of my fellow shoppers, when they heard me called "Rabbi". Were they surprised? Were they curious? What assumptions had they made about me before hearing me called "Rabbi", and how did that change what they thought of me?

At the grocery store, the version of me is one that is relatively anonymous– I can disappear into the crowd. The act of literally taking my "rabbi hat" off makes it so that the world makes different assumptions about me when they see me, and allow me to blend in. And yet, both the version of me that is here right now, in my Shabbat clothes giving a sermon, and the version

of me in jeans and no kippah at the grocery store, are legitimate parts of who I am. But I let them out at different times, for different reasons.

This is called “code switching”, and it’s something that all of us do. Originally, “code switching” was a linguistic term coined by Lucy Shepard Freeland, to describe how people who are multilingual or who speak multiple dialects of one language switch back and forth depending on their audience. However, “code switching” can also apply to any aspect of how we act or present ourselves socially. For example, some Jews will wear a baseball cap when they are out in public instead of a kippah. Or for, for someone like me who is a woman who wears a kippah, I might switch to a scarf if I am in an Orthodox space.

Code switching of any kind is something we do all day, every day, depending on who we interact with. Sometimes we code switch to establish friendship, or to feel safer, or to blend in. Sometimes, we do it strategically, and sometimes, we aren’t aware we’re doing it at all.

“All the world’s a stage”, wrote Shakespeare. “And each man in his own time plays many parts.”

In other words, we are all used to having many versions of ourselves, to in a way living multiple lives all at once. This is part of being a social creature. And, it's also part of navigating the world as a Jew.

In Hebrew, the words for life is: Chaim. Chaim, like Mayim (water), or Shamayim (heaven), is a word where even though the English translation is in the singular, the Hebrew word is actually in the plural. So, if I say I have life– yesh li chaim– I'm actually saying, "I have lives". Sometimes, grammatically, the plural word Chaim morphs into other forms, one of which we see in the opening line of this week's Torah Portion.

This week's Torah portion, Chayei Sarah, is often translated to mean "The Life of Sarah". But literally, it means "The Lives of Sarah." It begins this way:

וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה׃

This is generally translated something like:

“The span of Sarah’s life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.”

However, a literal translation says that it wasn’t Sarah’s LIFE that had such a span– it was, in fact, Sarah’s LIVES. Lives, plural.

Because just like you and me, our matriarch Sarah lived many lives. Sarah, too, learned to code switch. She was a daughter, a sister, a mother, a wife. She was a caring person, aching to be a parent, who struggled with infertility. We know she had a sense of humor and liked to laugh– sometimes getting herself into trouble. She was a cook. She was a romantic rival, and she was also a fierce protector of her child. She was beautiful and desirable, loyal, and spiritual.

She was all of these things and more, and yet, she was not all of these things at once. When Avimelech desired her, she hid her status as Abraham’s wife. Sometimes, she obediently followed directions from her husband and from God, but at other times, she argued and advocated passionately for what she believed in. I guarantee you that there were

aspects of her life that only Abraham was privy to, or only Hagar was privy to, or, only God.

Those were some of Chayei Sarah, some of the lives of Sarah. Sarah was a nuanced, complicated person, and different people knew her in different ways.

And the same is true of you and me: Each of us lives many lives.

You may be surprised to know that I am not just Rabbi Simmons, your Associate Rabbi. I'm also Wabbi Wachel, the silly tall person in a hat who tells stories to the preschoolers; and to my parents, I am their youngest, their baby; to my siblings, I am a lifelong source of annoyance and inside jokes and shared history. To my friends in other countries, I'm a multilingual backpacker. To the little kids next door I'm just the short-haired lady who brings out her friendly cat for them to pet whenever they ask. I'm even more to others: I'm a proud double military brat, to others I am a poet, a painter, a protester, a student, the list goes on and on.

Different people in my life see different versions of me. And the same is true for all of us: we all live many lives, all at once. Think about it: how are you seen at work? How about in your neighborhood or at the gym? Who gets to see your silly side? Who gets to see your intellectual side?

And lately, especially– who gets to see your vulnerable side?
Your scared side?
Your grieving side?

Speaking for myself, these last few weeks, one of the only versions of me that actually feels safe– is the one that is here, right now, with all of you, in this space.

And I don't think I'm alone in that feeling.

I'd be willing to bet that for many of us here today, we feel a palpable difference right now between when we are inside these walls, with this congregation, and what we feel most other places. The specifics of the many lives we each lead might be different, but there is a common anchor, here, in the Jewish communal life that we have built together.

Here, just being in the presence of other Jews–

Here, inside these solid walls, built with Jewish love and vision–

Here, where we do not have to defend or explain our right to be who we are openly, and proudly, and without caveat–

Here, where we are surrounded by others who know, when Antisemitism veers its ugly head, that we will have each others' backs, no matter what, and that love and support are things we will never take for granted.

Here, *shevet achim gam yachad*. Here, we are all family, sitting together, bound by a common fate and purpose.

This life, among all of our lives that we live, is more important than ever.

In a time when it feels like so many others in the world are not able to hold space for the trauma and grief the Jewish people are experiencing– or

worse, when some are denying us dignity, and denying us safety– it makes sense that entering this building might feel like a sigh of relief, or like finally getting to relax a little, after walking around on eggshells in the outside world.

Navigating the boundary between the Jewish life we live publicly and the JEwish life we live privately has always been a delicate balance, but it has gotten even more challenging since October 7.

Many of you have approached us, and each other, these past weeks with concerns about safety, for yourself and for your kids. And you are not alone. For some of us, being more visibly and outwardly Jewish right now as an act of protest and love has been a central coping mechanism during this crisis. For others, the opposite is true– it hasn't felt safe, for some of us, to wear outwardly Jewish symbols or to put up signs. The version of us that we show outside of this space is one that isn't immediately identifiable as Jewish.

This isn't the first time we Jews have felt such concerns. Historically, there have been numerous situations over the centuries where being visibly

outwardly identifiable as Jewish was dangerous or stressful. Generations of Jews before us have also found themselves having to make difficult decisions about kippot, mezuzot, menorot, and other visible Jewish identifiers.

In fact, as we approach the Hanukkah season, which is one of our most visibly externally "Jewish" parts of the year, we can find guidance and support from how our ancestors wrestled with similar tensions.

In celebrating Hanukkah, we light a menorah. But how publicly should we display it, the rabbis ask? Do we put the menorah where everyone can see it, loud and proud? Or do we keep it inside where it's less obvious and perhaps safer? And the answer is:

Yes. The answer is, yes, either of these options is valid, depending on the circumstances and depending on safety.

Because of course, of COURSE, it's a mitzvah to be proudly Jewish. But, says the Shulchan Aruch:

ובשעת הסכנה שאינו רשאי לקים המצוה מניחו על שלחנו ודיו

In an hour of danger, when you can't fulfill the mitzvah (by putting the menorah outside), place it on the table inside and that is enough.

Enough. Sometimes, what we have to offer is just what is ENOUGH, and that is OK.

The last thing we need to be doing is beating ourselves up for being Jewish in a way that makes us comfortable, or for taking care of our very real concerns about safety in a world where antisemitism is again on the rise.

The level of comfort each of us feels in being publicly Jewish right now is going to vary based on a wide variety of factors. The face we are showing to the rest of the world is going to vary widely. But our tradition is big enough and wise enough to reassure is that this is OK, and that we don't need to beat ourselves up for taking the route of safety in extenuating circumstances.

It's OK– As long as, within this communal Jewish life we share, our commitment to each other remains strong, and our support of each other does not waiver.

It's OK, to prioritize self-care and not fight every single individual fight that is out there with every single individual wrong person on your Facebook Feed,

As long as, within this communal Jewish life we share, we are clear that our health and safety as Jews are non-negotiable, and that we will donate whatever resources we can to supporting Am Yisrael around the world.

Interestingly, Har Shalom has a public and a private life, too– publicly, we are known as one of many religious institutions in Montgomery County. In a way, we fit in with these other institutions: we take part in multifaith events, we host speakers and politicians and authors, and we raise money for charity, just like lots of churches and mosques and other temples.

But the world at large, the world outside, doesn't get to see and feel the private life of Har Shalom. The outside world doesn't get to share in the

same safety and Jewish solidarity that we feel when we are together, that same sigh of relief when we come through those doors. They aren't privy to the vulnerable, emotional conversations that have been happening since October 7, or to the uniquely Jewish pain that we feel when faced with antisemitic chants and publications and graffiti.

They don't get to feel the same primal power of dancing with Torah scrolls, of immersing in the mikveh, of the sweet smell of b'samim.

That life, that life we live together, is ours.
And it's more important than ever.

I say to each of us here today, myself included: No matter how many lives you live. No matter how many versions of you exist in the world, now is the time to make sure they are all grounded in a deep love of your Judaism, of your Jewish identity, and in the support you find among other Jews when it feels like the rest of the world just doesn't get it.
Look at the people around you,
And let yourself believe that
We aren't going anywhere.

We will have each others' backs, no matter how long and bumpy this road is.

This past week, Yehuda Kurtzer, the President of Shalom Hartman Institutes of North America, wrote beautifully about what is sustaining him during this crisis. "I'm hanging by a thread", he wrote, "and that thread is a lot of you."

I think that rings true for us and our community, too.

This life, that we live, here, together, is one of the most precious of all.

Shabbat shalom.