Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Sermon 5781 | September 2020
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Can You Identify as Jewish?

Shanah Tovah.

Ayeka? Where are you? This is God’s first question to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Every year on the high holidays, we take stock of where we are, how we got here, and where we are going. But this year, this question may also bring us pain. For many of us, we’ve been in the very same physical space since March.

This year I want to suggest that we ask a different question. Instead of “Where am I?” I think we need to begin asking “Who am I?” And while this shift of questions is inspired by the reality of our coronavirus world, there are many reasons why we should be asking who we are.

In our modern world, as evidenced by the way I’m delivering this sermon, where we are – our physical location – matters less than it used to. In the ancient world, where you were, likely told me a great deal about you. I could guess with great accuracy what language or languages you spoke, what God or gods you worshiped, what foods you ate, and what clothing you wore. As my teacher Dr. Elsie Stern used to tell us, “If you woke up an ancient Israelite in the middle of the night and asked, ‘Quick, what’s your life all about?’ They’d likely answer, ‘God, Torah, and Israel.’” And they likely would have answered the question in Hebrew or Aramaic.

But where I am is no longer as indicative of who I am. This fact came into the limelight in a town in Montana, in 2018. One evening, a Border Patrol Agent detained Martha Hernandez and Ana Suda, and asked to see their identification because they were speaking Spanish.

Speaking Spanish, in his words, “is very unheard of up here.”

Both women were born in the United States and are thus, by the law of our land, United States citizens. This incident was a reminder that location, even if that location is our home, is no longer such a sure predictor of the languages we speak.
If you walked into a synagogue in ancient Israel and spoke with the worshippers, you would likely find uniformity regarding where the worshippers were directing their prayers. They would be directing them to the God of Israel.

Flash forward to today and that isn’t the case. In a 2013 Pew Study, it was determined that 68% of Jews believe that not believing in God is compatible with Judaism.

This means it could be the case that more than half of us listening to this sermon are likely praying, “To whom it may concern…” today, instead of directly to the God of Israel.

And if you were to take a snapshot of our dinner plates, without context, just before we began to dig in, it would be no indication of where we were in the world. Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Mediterranean, Mexican, Deli – all of these styles of food can be on our plate on any given night here in Philadelphia.

Being in Philly does not mean that every night we eat soft pretzels and cheese steaks. With kosher steak and non-dairy cheese, of course.

Our location also used to be able to tell us where we belonged. In the ancient world, to be kicked out of the community, or to be thrown out of the camp, meant almost certain death. There would be nowhere to go and there would be a high likelihood that if you did find another nation or tribe, you’d live out your life there as a servant at best. Today, our location no longer necessarily determines with whom we associate or where we belong. Perhaps the best representation comes in the form of a joke –

Mr. Cohen was a man stranded alone on an island. When finally rescued, the rescuers toured the island and asked about the three structures the man built on the island. Mr. Cohen explained, that one’s my home.

But there were two other structures built in addition to his home, one right next to the other. “That one’s my synagogue” – Mr. Cohen said. “And the building next door, that one’s my old synagogue. No one goes there anymore.”

Today, even being stranded on an island doesn’t prohibit us from choosing our own affiliations.

For all these reasons and more, the question of Ayeka – “where are you” says much less about us than it used to.

That is why it is time for us to begin asking the question...
Who are you?

In the ancient world, there was very little room to question who you were. The world answered that for you. You were born into an economic and social class, you were born into a gender, and in some cases, you were betrothed before the age when modern kids would start kindergarten.

But somewhere along the centuries, that began to change. And in the past century this revolution has really picked up steam. Think of the stories we as a Jewish People have been telling ourselves for over a generation now. Think of Barbara Streisand in Yentl – a woman born into a traditional Jewish household who wanted to study Torah but was forbidden from studying in the yeshivah because of her gender, so she dressed as a man and studied. Even in Fiddler On the Roof – Tevye – the very man who sings all day about the tradition he was born into, and his lot in life that was given to him from on high...

Tevye has children who reject being told who and what they have to be. His children go on to decide for themselves who they are and how they will live their lives.

In our times, we form who we are. We form our identity. We choose the food we eat, where we live, our clothing, our gender expression, and who we love.

Our lives, in many ways, are spent answering the question, “Who am I?”

So here comes the big question. Does Judaism now belong in the category of identity? And if yes, if we are the sole masters of how we identify, who gets to decide who is Jewish?

Can a person who was not born into a Jewish family wake up one morning and decide, “I am now Jewish?”

Can a person born to a Jewish family wake up one morning and decide, “I am no longer Jewish?”

The answer from the Jewish religious tradition is “no.” Being Jewish is not a matter of individual choice without taking proper steps.

But lived experience shows us that it’s more complicated than that.

For millennia, the Jewish authorities have argued over Jewish status and the criteria has changed over the years. In Biblical times, to be born a Jew depended on who your father was. And in
the Hebrew Bible, a conversion was as simple as uttering the words, as Ruth did, “Where you go I will go, where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

That all shifted in Talmudic times. Being born into the Jewish people was based on who your mother was. And suddenly there were far more requirements for those who wanted to join our people through means of conversion.

Today, different movements of Judaism give different answers to questions of Jewish status. The Israeli Rabbinate, for example, won’t even recognize many American Orthodox conversions, let alone the more religiously progressive conversions.

While I said just a few moments ago that people don’t get to decide for themselves who is Jewish and who is not, the current situation does put a great deal of agency in the hands of individuals to identify as they wish – perhaps more than ever before. A person who claims Judaism as their own upon waking up one morning may not be recognized as Jewish, but that person does get to choose how they would convert. So in the eyes of Israel’s Orthodox rabbinate, converting under Reform auspices is pretty much the same as waking up one morning and deciding to be Jewish.

So who is a Jew? And who gets to decide? The bottom line is that it is a messy business trying to figure that out. And nobody’s story shows just how complicated these issues of identity are, than Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen.

In 1922 Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen was born into a Jewish family in Poland. He grew up as a part of a Zionist youth movement.

In 1941, now in his late teens, he came to the town of Mir with false papers and worked as a translator in the local police department. During his time there, Rufeisen informed the Jews of Mir about what would soon happen – that the Nazis were coming. Rufeisen helped hundreds of Jews escape the town – many fled into the woods, and others joined resistance groups - before the catastrophic events perpetrated by the Nazis hit their town. Rufeisen continued his work until eventually, his actions were discovered. Knowing that the Nazis were looking for him, Rufeisen hid at a local convent - The Convent of the Sisters of the Resurrection.

While in hiding and living with the sisters of the convent in secret, Rufeisen discovered, and converted, to Christianity. After the war he became a Carmelite Friar, and eventually a Catholic Priest. He took on the name “Brother Daniel.”
In the early 1950’s, Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen, born to a Jewish family in Poland, applied for citizenship in the State of Israel under Israel’s law of return, which allows Jews to return to their ancestral homeland. But he was not hiding anything. He was upfront about the fact that he was now known as “Brother Daniel,” a Catholic Priest from Poland.

Brother Daniel argued that although his religion was Catholicism, he still identified as Jewish. He said, “My ethnic origin is and always will be Jewish. I have no other nationality. If I am not a Jew, what am I? I did not accept Christianity to leave my people. I added it to my Judaism. I feel as a Jew.”

Israel denied his request to return under the law of return. He appealed that decision to the Supreme Court of Israel. The court upheld the ruling that Brother Daniel could not receive citizenship under the law of return.

The story has a happy ending for Brother Daniel. Although he couldn’t return under the law of return, he did move to Israel and eventually became a naturalized citizen. He lived in Haifa at the Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery.

Here is a part of the story that both fascinates me and keeps me awake at night. Despite the Israeli government’s decision, and despite the Supreme Court upholding the ruling, that didn’t change the fact that Brother Daniel, a Catholic Priest, identified as a Jew. And even more remarkably, listen to the words of Yehuda Packer, a holocaust survivor who made Aliyah to Israel. Rufeisen – now Brother Daniel – had a role in saving the man’s life.

Packer spoke the following words in 1991 at the Mir Immigrant’s Gathering in Israel. This quote can be found on the website of Yad Vashem Israel’s Holocaust memorial and museum:

“The destruction of the Jews in our ghetto was no different from the fate of all the other Jewish communities, great and small, across Nazified Europe. We, the sons and daughters of the town of Mir, remember the man and the phenomenon named Oswald, thanks to whom we fled, whoever fled, by the skin of our teeth. ... You, Shmuel, belong to us alone, to the survivors and to those who died from the Mir ghetto. You belong to the Jews and above all, to the Jews of Mir, Dearest Shmuel!

And forgive me that I find it hard to call you – Brother Daniel.” (Yehuda Packer at the Mir Immigrant’s Gathering, 1991)

Not only did Brother Daniel identify as Jewish, but Yehuda Packer said that he will always belong.
What wasn’t said, but I believe is implied here is, “You’ll always belong, no matter what the Israeli Supreme Court says, and no matter what you believe.”

Regardless of where you stand on the controversial Brother Daniel case, it highlights a trend about Judaism in the 20th and 21st centuries. Judaism is becoming an identity. Are our Jewish institutions ready for this? Honestly, I don’t think so.

But even if we are not ready for this shift, and even if we want to hold against it, one thing is certain – it’s time for us to start teaching Judaism in terms of identity.

Because the language of identity is the language that we, and especially our young people, understand.

Like so many new ideas, “Judaism as identity” not only presents challenges to the status quo. It also brings great opportunity.

Many professionals who earn titles like “Doctor” “Your Honor” or even “Rabbi” or “Cantor” – in their first few days or even months at work, often feel a sense of not really deserving the title, or just feeling uncomfortable being called by their title until they adjust to it.

It’s not because they haven’t earned it. It’s because identity is something that takes time, and practice, and ritual, to form inside of us. That’s why doctors and lawyers and CPA’s have graduations. Even after years of study, they need a ritual to tell them, yes, you really deserve the title you earned.

Identity is something we feel inside, and something we can share with the world in spoken and unspoken ways. We wrestle with our identity and we examine it. An identity is crafted through years of practice and it is ultimately the answer to the question, “Who are you?”

Our Judaism, and the Judaism of our young people, is at risk of being relegated to the box we check on a questionnaire under the headline “Religion.”

But if we seek to understand and teach Judaism as an identity, it may inspire us to live out our Jewish values, and engage with Jewish ritual on a regular basis.

So if you identify as Jewish, what will that look like for you? The rabbis of old would tell you that crafting Jewish identity begins with your Jewish status, with prayer 3 times a day, with blessings before pretty much everything, keeping kosher, regular text study, the list goes on.
And I want to be clear – I’m not discouraging these things. We at Beth Or are happy to help you explore any and all of these practices.

But seeing Judaism as an identity blows the doors wide open with possibility. Watch an Israeli show on Netflix this year. Learn 10 Modern Hebrew phrases. Make 12 posts on social media that are relevant to the Jewish People. Read a Philip Roth novel or read a Poem by Yehuda Amichai – many of which you’ll find in your High Holiday prayer books, by the way.

Judaism is very much a religion. But we American Jews are far more fluent in the language of identity than we are in the language of religion. So make Judaism your identity also. Make it something that is a part of you.

Ayeka – “where are you” – is a tough question this year. Many of us are home and limited in our ability to do the things we used to do before the coronavirus hit our world.

But “Who are you?” Is a question we can answer every single day, every single moment, wherever we may find ourselves.

Shanah Tovah.