

Rosh Hashanah 5772: Being Jewish Is Doing Jewish
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There is an old story about a rabbi in Warsaw leaving synagogue just after the Shofar was blown upon the conclusion of Yom Kippur. On his way home he was astonished to see Yankel, a member of his congregation, sitting in a *treife* restaurant and eating a big meal. The rabbi was furious. He waited for Yankel to finish, take out his wallet, and pay for the meal, and when Yankel finally came outside, the rabbi accosted him: "Yankel! What are you doing? I just saw you eating *treif* on Yom Kippur. Can you explain yourself?" Yankel replied, "Oy. Rabbi. I am so sorry. But I just forgot."

The rabbi couldn't believe his ears. "What do you mean you just forgot? Did you forget that today was Yom Kippur?" "No," answered Yankel. "Did you forget that it is forbidden by the Torah to eat or drink on Yom Kippur?" "No." "So what was it? Did you forget that it is forbidden to eat pork or any food that is cooked on Shabbat?" "No." "Did you forget that it is forbidden to use money on Shabbat and certainly Yom Kippur?" Again, "No."

"So Yankele, what did you forget?"

"Rabbi, for a moment, I forgot I was a Jew."

As a rabbi, as a parent, as a passionate Jew, I sometimes wonder: could it be? Would it be possible to forget something so important?

In high school, a USY leadership program talked about "the last Jew":

The year is 2124, the place is the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. I am in this museum, in a cage on exhibit. On the walls are the remnants of a Jewish culture; a talit, a Torah, the books of the Talmud. Each day, as I sit here watching the people pass and point and stare, I wonder to myself how my people could have possibly vanished. I recall my father telling me how successful and prosperous the Jew in America was. And about a land called Israel. And yet, all this has vanished--all this has disappeared.

Now the 20th century historian Simon Rawidowicz pointed out in his essay "Israel – The Ever-Dying People" that "There was hardly a generation in the Diaspora that did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain." Worrying about the future is a Jewish pastime and we are still here. I'm not overly concerned that there won't be any Jews in another 120 years. But I do wonder about what Judaism will *mean* for my children and grandchildren and about my role in affecting that.

At Selichot last weekend, some of us watched a video discussion with Rabbis Brad Artson and Ed Feinstein and Dr. Wendy Mogel about the gifts one generation gives another. And Rabbi Feinstein told a story about the frustration he used to feel when his kids were little and he was trying to put them to sleep and the kids were being kids and he got that exhausted feeling of "This is never going to end!" I am listening to him and, believe me, I know exactly what he is talking about. "But," he continued, "It ended. They grew up." His kids moved out and he realized that the 18 years he had with them was really not all that long, especially considering that for a number of years they really wanted nothing to do with him anyway.

So we have a responsibility to teach our children, to impart our values and beliefs, to explain to

our children what it means to be Jewish. And we have to do it pretty quickly and pretty forcefully – above the noise of the media and the internet and everything else that is grabbing their attention and telling them what is important.

You see, just *being* Jewish, just telling our kids they are Jewish is not enough.

In a particularly provocative passage in his book *The Vanishing American Jew*, Alan Dershowitz describes a dinner party he hosted with five intermarried couples. Each of the Jews in these relationships had asked the non-Jews to raise children as Jews, and the non-Jewish spouses agreed. But upon reflection, the spouses came to feel that they were, in his words, “striking a bargain that seemed unfair. They were giving up their Christianity but they were not getting any positive Judaism in return.” The Jewish partners knew that they wanted to be Jewish and they wanted their children to be Jewish, but they were short on specifics.

They wanted them to be identified with Jewish causes (but perhaps not too identified); they wanted them to live Jewish lives (but not too Jewish); they wanted them to support Israel, be charitable, and concerned with human rights (without becoming extremists).” In short, they wanted them to be Jewish like they were.

The truth is that this is not about intermarriage. We have not done a great service by pretending that intermarriage is the greatest threat facing our community. The greater threat is something we all face, intermarried or inmarried or single. We should worry – not about whether anyone in the next generation will *be* Jewish – but about whether enough Jews will be able to articulate what being Jewish *means*.

Dr. Charles Spezzano gives the example of medical students he taught. Lots of people want to *be* doctors but don't want to *do the* actual hard work of studying and practicing medicine. It's the same with parenthood or marriage: “Marriage is not a noun; it's a verb. It isn't something you get. It's something you do.” The Bible is filled with passages that compare God to a parent or a spouse, to emphasize responsibilities connected to those relationships. The metaphors are about *doing* as opposed to just *being*.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I want to talk about what it means to *do* Jewish. What is the authentically Jewish life that we want to pass to our children and grandchildren? And if you want to sum it up in one word, it's about responsibility.

Once upon a time I was at a leadership workshop for rabbis where we were asked to cite our favorite biblical verse. I didn't have a verse prepared, but as we went around the room I settled on one, and over the years since, I have become more and more confident that I selected the right one. It's from the end of Leviticus:

כי לי בני ישראל עבדים, עבדי הם אשר הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים, אני ה' אלהיכם
the Israelites are servants. They are my servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt. I
the Lord your God.

The verse is part of what literary scholars call an *inclusio* – it bookends 35 chapters of commandments that began with the first of the Ten Commandments: אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt from the House of servitude.” All of Torah harkens back to the experience in Egypt, from where God freed us. But leaving

the harsh, unjust, back-breaking servitude to Pharaoh did not make us free. Freedom was only earned when the people accepted the duties and responsibilities of God's service.

It begins with awareness. One of the tasks of the servant – says an old *midrash* – is to carry a lantern, to help the master to see and also to illuminate the master and to make him look good. When the Israelites first left Egypt, they were still disorganized and unsophisticated. God carried their lantern, as God travelled before the people “in a pillar of fire to give them light.”

As we became truly free – meaning responsible – we became entrusted with the task of carrying the lantern, shining light on God's Presence. When we recite blessings expressing gratitude for the basic elements of nature and life and our experience of the world, those words ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, Praised are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe – those words make the point that we are aware of a Force more powerful and bigger than ourselves.

This is the meaning of *kippah*. The word *yarmulke* comes from the talmudic phrase ירא מלכא, awe for the king. With the *kippah* on our heads, we are shining a light on a Higher being and directing ourselves towards a higher purpose. Similarly, the *tzitzit* are “*lemaan tizkeru*, so that you will remember” and be aware that our purpose is to serve. **In a world that stresses the importance of the individual and our personal needs and desires, Judaism insists that there is a Service that transcends the importance of the self and we are the ones to deliver that message.**

Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that not all words are self-sufficient. Some words imply relationship – words like wife, parent, leader, friend. You cannot just be a wife, you have to be “somebody's” wife. You need children to be a parent; followers to be a leader; you can't be a friend by yourself. And so it is with God. For God to be real, God has to be *somebody's* God. God is only God when we affirm Him and serve Him. Without our commitment to God's commandments, God is like a “general” with no army.

It's like the Hassidic story about the man who came home one day to find his young daughter crying bitterly. When he was finally able to calm her down, she told him what was wrong. She had been playing a game of hide-and-seek and she had managed to hide so well that her friends just gave up and began playing a different game without her. As the man comforted his daughter, he reflected: “I wonder if this is how God feels. I wonder if God has managed to hide from us so successfully that we have given up looking and have gone off in other directions.”

כי לי בני ישראל עבדים, For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants. They are my servants. When we are aware when we serve God, we make God's Presence real.

Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary on this verse, turns the focus of servitude to our responsibilities towards other people: Just as God redeemed our people from Egypt, we must do the same when our brothers and sisters find themselves in danger or enslaved.

Judaism teaches that helping people in need is not just a good deed. It is a responsibility. A good deed is something voluntary; it begins on the inside, usually because I know that it will make me feel good. A *mitzvah*, however, is literally a commandment. It begins on the outside, with a sense of obligation. It may make me feel good, but I am doing it because it is a commandment.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, we would often visit family in Florida, and from time to time we

would stop to see my 90 year old great-grandmother Bubba. I should probably be embarrassed to admit this, but I hated it. It was boring. The house was hot, and she asked the same question over and over again. I remember once being in a particularly whiny mood and asking my mother why we had to go visit Bubba. And she told me we had to go because it was a *mitzvah*. It wasn't a choice. It was a responsibility and I had to do it.

Now, building on that experience, I often ask my students: which is better? Is it better that I should be a completely sovereign self and decide that I want to visit my great-grandmother? Or is it better to feel obligated, to act from a sense of responsibility even if I'm not particularly in the mood? Most students insist that it's better to go because it's a good deed, because your motives seem more pure. But the Rabbis said the opposite. They teach in the Talmud: " גדול המצווה ועושה ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה, One who is *commanded* to act and acts is greater than one who is not commanded to act and still acts."

It sounds counter-intuitive. But I think the Rabbis had a point. When we do *mitzvot*, it is appropriate to act with a cheerful face and we should feel good. But when it comes to the decision of whether to act, we should remember the true meaning of *mitzvah*. It's not really voluntary. We have a responsibility and an obligation as servants of God.

That's how I feel about my commitment to Israel. It's not about fear or anti-Semitism or politics or even morality. My commitment is rooted in history and responsibility. When we pray we face east – a two-thousand year old tradition that directs our gaze outward towards our homeland. We have a responsibility to build the land, to visit the land, to connect to friends and relatives who live in the land, to invest in the land, to consider owning property in the land or even making *aliyah* ourselves.

We have an obligation to support other Jews wherever they are, as the Talmud teaches, " כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, All of Israel is joined together; all of Israel is responsible for one another." And this responsibility extends to all people in need, Jewish or not. The injustices in the world – hunger, poverty, inequality – these are not problems that we can occasionally volunteer to help out with. **The biggest problems will only be solved when those of us who live lives of relative privilege accept our responsibility – in a real, sometimes uncomfortable way – to support and protect the ones who cannot support and protect themselves.** Judaism teaches that I am more than a friend. I am my brother's keeper.

Doing Jewish means accepting the responsibility to serve God by serving other people: כי לי בני מצרים, For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants. They are my servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt.

And we dare not discount the importance of those uniquely Jewish rituals and obligations that are directed the other way, towards God. These are the *mitzvot* for which we praise God " אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו, Who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us" – to light Shabbat candles, sit in a *sukkah*, shake a *lulav*, wash our hands before eating bread, eat *matzah*, affix the *mezuzah*, wear *tefillin*, study Torah and – although we don't say a specific blessing for it – I add eat kosher food. These rituals make the ordinary experiences of life extraordinary by linking them to God and service.

The key to making these activities meaningful is education. Taking a class or reading a Jewish

book is an opportunity for personal growth and spiritual fulfillment. But it is greater than that. Torah education is a mitzvah, a commandment, a responsibility.

Too often, parents my age tell me how they feel cheated about the Jewish education they received as children. It was inadequate or boring or negative and they felt forced to endure it; and believe me, I could share plenty of negative stories about my own religious education. We understandably want to be very careful about choosing the right school for our children.

But we must recognize that the challenge is much bigger than the school. We all share the responsibility. I signed my son up for T-ball this past spring with the hope that he would learn the game that I love. Right on the application, the organization made it clear that the Sunday evenings were only one facet of the experience. They were going to introduce skills and parents were expected to practice those skills with their children. And it didn't matter if the parents were particularly skilled; the kids needed the practice. And when Ethan wasn't that into it, I took him to a couple of games and invited him to watch baseball on TV so he could see and better appreciate the game (and it is still a work in progress).

Of course baseball isn't Torah, and baseball isn't a commandment. But the point is that like baseball, **the commandment to teach our children and the responsibility to pass on our tradition does not end when we enroll them in class.** We have to support the values of the classroom in the home. We have to model learning ourselves. **We have to practice *doing Jewish*.** The concrete activities that Jews *do* define what being Jewish means.

כי לי בני ישראל עבדים, For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants.

The Zohar – the quintessential work of Jewish mysticism – describes our relationship to God כעבד דאשתדל בתר מאריה בכל מה דאצטרך, as a servant who ingratiates himself towards his master by any means necessary. We have a whole range of necessary means, a whole set of vehicles for expressing our sense of responsibility and obligation.

- We can serve God through study, by joining the conversation in which centuries of Jews have tried to interpret the tradition and better understand their relationships to God.
- We can serve God by serving people in need in our community, in Israel, in Africa – Jews and non-Jews alike.
- We can intensify our awareness of God's role in our experience with blessings, or Shabbat, or by sanctifying eating through Kashrut.

Judaism has survived the millenia because our ancestors stood at Sinai and affirmed: "*Naaseh V'Nishma*, we will do and we will listen." And it will continue to survive, because we continue to affirm and cherish our responsibility. We may not perform every *mitzvah* perfectly, but on Rosh Hashanah, the day of new beginnings, we recommit ourselves to *doing Jewish*, to enabling Judaism to impact our lives and the generations that follow. Today I pray that each of us will have the strength and courage to re-accept that responsibility, indeed that obligation to serve:

כִּי לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants. They are my servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt. I the Lord your God.

May this New year be one of fulfillment, health and peace for all of us. Shanah Tovah.