

“Je me souviens: I Remember Who I Am”
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When you drive north from here, one way to know that you’ve crossed the border into Canada is that the license plates have a French slogan on them: *Je Me Souviens*.

That’s the motto of Quebec Province; a simple translation of which is, “I remember,” or, “I remember who I am.” It’s an assertive slogan. What’s it mean?

This past August, I spent some very rainy days on vacation in Quebec, much of it in Quebec City. Given the weather, I think I saw the inside of almost every museum there, and one after another had exhibits on the history of French settlement in the New World. It soon became clear to me why the Quebecois are obsessed with memory.

Two centuries ago, there were major struggles between the French and the English settlers on this continent. We know how those struggles resolved themselves. The United States became an English-speaking nation, and so did Canada—at least officially. But there did remain pockets of French speakers and French culture, and despite sometimes intense opposition, French-speaking Canadians in Quebec strongly asserted their right to speak French, to raise their children speaking French and for French to be, essentially, their national language. And they’ve succeeded.

Why then the motto? For many years, French-speaking Canadians felt that their culture wasn’t as valued as the majority, Anglo culture, and was in fact put down. There is now an effort to retrieve the cultural memories that were suppressed, to bring them to full consciousness, so that the Quebecois can fully express their pride and their delight in their heritage. There was an exhibit at one of museums I visited called, “Je Me Souviens.” It was filled with memorabilia from the last few centuries. It sought to capture the authentic French Canadian folk cultural milieu of those days. Clearly, although the political struggles may have been fought and won, the cultural struggle continues.



Today is *Yom HaZikkaron*—“Memory Day” in our tradition. It’s the season when we pray that God should remember us, and it is the season when we too need to remember who we are as individuals, and who we are as members of the Jewish People, as we stand before God on this day.

As American Jews, we’re very lucky, and we may feel that we have nothing left to worry about. The struggle for equality, the struggle for acceptance has, to a great extent, been won. We have “made it” in this country. Jews are not currently in serious danger of being persecuted in this country. There is even, as I’m sure we are all aware, a Jewish candidate for president in one of the major political parties in our country. There is another one whose father was Jewish, and others whose wives are Jewish or who have Jewish ancestry—but who’s counting? There are also undoubtedly a few Jewish candidates running for governor of California—which isn’t, however, saying very much. Our political struggles continue—the ADL and the AJC still have work to do—but we have much less to worry about, in this regard, than we ever did.

And yet, that doesn’t mean that our challenge as Jews does not exist. On the contrary, we are freer than ever before to ... well, to forget what it means to be a Jew. It is easier than it ever was to ignore Jewish teachings and to abandon Jewish practice.

There’s a poignant scene in a recent episode of a popular TV comedy series. A woman who has embraced Judaism as an adult in order to pursue her relationship with a Jewish man is lighting Shabbat candles when she realizes that he can’t tear himself away from a ballgame on TV. “I gave up my religion for you, and you can’t give up the Mets!” she snaps. In our open society, it is easy for a Jew to grow up not realizing how precious our heritage is. A certain amount of collective forgetting has already, apparently, taken place.

We may not feel ourselves at risk, but our culture remains threatened. Not so much by persecution as by freedom. For, having made it in this country, we are now free to do what only free Jewish communities can do: forget who we are.

This has always been a possibility, for we Jews have always been outsiders. If we were to read the very next chapter of Genesis after the section we read today, we would read of the death of Sarah. Immediately thereafter, Abraham goes to his neighbors, the local townsmen to purchase a burial plot. And he begins by saying, “*Ger v’toshav anochi*”—“I am a resident alien among you.” In other words,

Abraham is saying, I have a dual identity: I am a *toshav*—I live among you, but I am also a *ger*, a stranger.

During most of Jewish history we have lived as *gerim*, as strangers, in the midst of other nations. Whether we were living in Babylonia or North Africa or Spain or Medieval Ashkenaz, we struggled to maintain not only our safety, not only our lives, but also our unique culture in the face of competing cultural forces. Given how high the barriers were between cultures in traditional societies, for the most part, we succeeded.

Today, however, we have to work harder. Since the enlightenment, there have been many opportunities and as many reasons for individual Jews to assimilate into the larger culture. We have seen many personal advantages—and not too many disadvantages—in doing so.

But our remarkable acceptance into the free and open dominant society has rendered our unique culture vulnerable. And in the global mass media culture in which we live today, no place is free from the cultural forces in the world around us.

That movie, “The Matrix”—not the sequel, the original—was on to something. We are, indeed, caught up in a web. We learn how we are supposed to act, what we are supposed to wear, who we are supposed to be, from the rather empty and mindless mass media culture we inhabit. It takes effort to remember and to be committed to the very different, counter-cultural messages from our tradition that implore us to behave differently.

Despite how difficult this is, there are Jews doing just that—at least to a certain extent. Everyone in this room is doing that—at least today.

The recent Jewish Population Study is a fascinating document. I encourage you to read it. (It’s available on-line at www.ujc.org.) It’s somewhat controversial, but still, there is much we can learn from it.

One conclusion that some Jewish sociologists (e.g., Steven M. Cohen) have drawn is that the Jewish People in America is rapidly becoming two distinct communities. On the one hand, The Affiliated, and on the other hand, The Unaffiliated. According to this perspective, all affiliated Jews, whatever their religious perspective—all such Jews have much more in common with one another than with Jews who are not affiliated with any Jewish organization. And the groups are of comparable size. What that suggests is that while many Jews are walking out the

door and falling off the demographic map, there are others who are maintaining and others who are reclaiming their heritage.

Merely by virtue of being here today, everyone here has placed a foot in the camp of the affiliated. And that's a very important step.

But it would be foolish to be complacent. Because the cultural forces that threaten our continuity remain very strong. There is much that even we, who have voted with our feet this morning, must do. And we also have to care about those who are not here with us this morning, those who do not feel the pull to be together with the Jewish community on Rosh HaShanah. Let's not forget about them either.

What does it mean, as a Jew, to say, "I remember," "I remember who I am"?

Remembering who we are means remembering that not all languages were created equal. Think of that slogan, "*Je me souviens*." That couldn't have been expressed in English; that would have been self-defeating for the Quebecois. Similarly, we have to rekindle our love of the Hebrew language and share that love with our children. Shouldn't they be spending at least as much time studying Hebrew as they spend studying French or Spanish or some other foreign language? Shouldn't we want them to?

Remembering who we are means that we have to remember that saying of Hillel: "*D'lah mosif, yasuf!*"—"Unless we learn, we begin to forget." Learning is vital to avoiding cultural amnesia.

It's not difficult to start learning. I'm sure that everyone is aware of that popular series of books for, quote-unquote, "dummies." One of those books is called *Judaism for Dummies*. It happens to be written by a distant relative of mine. It's not easy to present Judaism in a simplistic fashion, mainly because Judaism is not simplistic, but that author has done a good job.

If you read that book, you learn one reason why learning is so important, namely, because Judaism is lived through a set of obligations—*mitzvot*. There are many of them. Hundreds of them. If one doesn't know what they are, how can one fully understand our heritage?

One mitzvah that I'm sure is known to many of us is that of wearing a tallit with four fringes. Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, can't remember why we are supposed to wear a tallit, but the Bible tells us explicitly: "*u'reitem oto uzchartem. . . va-asitem*"—"looking upon it, you will remember, and you will do all of God's

commandments.” We are to wear the tallit so that we can look upon the tzitzit so that we can remember to fulfill the mitzvot. As the Talmud says, “*r’iyah m’via li’dai z’chirah; z’chirah m’viah lidei asiya*”—“Seeing leads to remembering; remembering leads to doing.” (B.Menachot 43b)

Remembering what it means to be a Jew then naturally leads us to want to practice Judaism as well as to acquire academic learning.

Remembering who we are leads us to want to perform mitzvot—wherever we happen to find ourselves. I remember a conversation I once had with someone who was about to depart on a business trip to China. “What am I going to do?” he asked. “I am going to be deep in the heart of the country. They’re going to be serving me all kinds of food. I don’t keep strictly kosher at home, but I don’t see how I can avoid eating some serious treyf on this trip!” I remember what I was thinking: if you’re thinking about what it’s going to mean to be a Jew in the heart of China, if you’re thinking and worrying about that before your trip has even begun—that’s the right first step. You can figure out how to take the proper precautions.

Remembering to distinguish between permitted and forbidden foods as best we can is a wonderful reminder that one is Jewish. It works in China—and it can also, incidentally, work here at home. It can work in Roche Brothers and Sudbury Farms as well. Why should you have to go half-way around the world to remember that you are a Jew?

There are other mitzvot that are understood to be aids to memory. The mezuzah on our doorposts, the tefillin that we wear on weekdays: all of these are in a sense like those Quebec license plates, reminding us to remember, reminding us to fulfill *mitzvot*.

Remembering who we are means remembering that we have sacred days, and sacred seasons. That life isn’t to be lived as one long, monotonous continuum. “*Zachor et yom ha-shabbat l’kodsho*”: once a week we are to pause, (not to shop, but) to remember the Sabbath, in order to keep it holy. It says so in the Ten Commandments. Yes, it’s easy to forget. Perhaps that’s why we are bidden to remember. We have to remember when the Jewish holidays come and rejoice on them as well.

Why are we supposed to remember, again and again, the Exodus from Egypt? Maybe because we are supposed to remember that we were once strangers in a

strange land, and we have to reach out to and protect the strangers in whatever land we find ourselves living in. Have we forgotten that lesson?

Finally, we have to remember that we Jews take care of one another. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*. That we have a noble tradition of *tsedakah*, of acts of lovingkindness. That we don't just ignore or discard those who are down and out; we try to raise them up. We include them in the community. And we reach out beyond the Jewish community as well. For wherever Jews have lived we have also prayed for the peace and the welfare of those among whom we've lived.

Leonard Fein recently wrote that Jewish identity is being connected to the Jewish people "then and now and then again." In other words, to have a Jewish identity means to identify with Jewish history—to see it as one's own; it means to be connected with Jews throughout the world, by sharing in their joys, their accomplishments, as well as their burdens; and finally, he says, "of all of the things that Jews are meant to remember, the single most important is tomorrow."

We have to remember what we're striving for. And there's no better place to find that out than in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, the liturgy of our Yom HaZikaron, our Day of Remembrance, which puts it so well. What are the Jewish hopes and dreams for the New Year that our *mahzor* strives to remind us of?

U'vchen ten pachdcha adonai eloheinu al kol ma'asecha—May the whole world be united in pursuit of God's will;

U'vchen ten kavod l'amecha—may the Jewish People find respite, safety, respect and joy in our homeland and throughout the world; and

U'v'chen tsadikim yiru v'yismachu—may goodness so fill the world that good people will rejoice and be glad.

Je me souviens! Let us continue to remember where we've come from and who we are, and may we especially remember where we are striving to go.

Amen.