

Message to Confirmation Class of 2011  
*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*  
*June 4, 2011*

For a number of reasons I always consider this to be one of the most important sermons I give the entire year. I think about the message I want to share with the children who are being confirmed and reflect upon what is the wisdom I want to impart to them. Recognizing that their participation is not a given, or something that is mandatory or can be assumed, I do not take their presence for granted. I appreciate and take very seriously the choice to be here, for I know that there are many other forces competing for their time and attention. So having spent this year which represents the culmination of their formal religious school education studying Jewish texts together, what do I want them to take with them and to remember from their studies at B'nai Tzedek? What do I want you to know about this thing called Judaism, and about what it means to be Jewish in an increasingly secular age?

As Edmund Fleg wrote over 100 years ago, in the early 1900's, "Judaism is both the oldest and newest religion in the world." I love the paradox and the contrast of opposites he presents, a theme I find often emphasized in Judaism. I love what he says and think he is right. Judaism is an ancient religion, with a proud heritage and history. It is truly remarkable to see how it absorbed the ideas of surrounding cultures and civilizations and would modify or adapt those perspectives. The ability to absorb, to improve, to bend without breaking, to make these approaches more human and more Godly, more consistent with our outlook and what we believe to be God's purpose as well as our hopes for humanity is why we are both the oldest and newest of religions. It is constantly being reinvented, while remaining faithful to our origins.

While the Jewish religion is the foundation and essence of what we are, forming our very customs and practices, being a Jew is more than just being a part of a religion. It means being a part of a people. This is one of the unique aspects of being Jewish. Abba Hillel Silver in his classic book, "Where Judaism Differed" asserts that unlike other religions, the Jewish people and the Jewish religion are synonymous with each other, bursting onto the world stage at the same time. This contrasts for example, with Christianity, which spread later to the Roman world, after it was founded, or Islam, which spread and was later adopted by Arab tribes. Consequently not all Arabs are Moslem, nor are all Moslems Arab. Yet all Jews are members of the Jewish people.

So I want you to remember that you are members of the Jewish people. If you take it to heart, it will influence a number of your decisions. For one, there is the 10% rule I have told you: If you go to college, I want you to attend one where the Jewish population is at least 10%. The reason is quite simple: so you will be a part of a Jewish community and so you will have Jewish friends. Socially the decisions you make, including where you live, which I hope will be amidst other Jews, the organizations you join, who you hang out with, all will have an impact on the Jewish people, beyond yourselves. As you have heard me say before, the decisions you make are consequential. We cannot afford to lose a single Jew to the Jewish people. We are too small of a people. As a small minority of the world's population, our survival depends on each and every one of you. Since Judaism has so much to offer you and the world it is incumbent upon each and every one of you to carry on our religion. This pertains to who you marry, and it also means having children, Jewish children, lots of them, at least 3. Forgive me if I sound a bit preachy, I usually try not to. It must be an occupational hazard.

One of the reasons I think it is so important to actively participate in the Jewish community is because I believe with all my heart that Jewish identity is part of your genetic makeup. I do not mean this as some

kind of racial definition, for Judaism is open to conversion. This year we in our synagogue have celebrated and warmly embraced a number of individuals who have become Jews by choice. Jewish identity has to do with taking pride in the accomplishments of our fellow Jews, just as you would be proud of a member of your family. It refers to the ethnic part of our composition as well, in terms of our sense of humor, our outlook and perspective, our unique beliefs and philosophy, and how that affects how we relate to and interact with the world around us. It should influence your moral and ethical choices and help to form your values and perspective on worldly matters.

As a Jew I feel that I am never alone. I am never alone, because I am a part of a people. When I was recently in Italy I made a point of visiting the synagogues and Jewish community, of celebrating Shabbat with my people, people I did not know, but with whom I have so much in common, for we share a common fate and destiny as well as a shared past. Two of my sons, Ezra and Noam just celebrated Passover in the homes of Italian Jews, people they did not know. They were welcomed with open arms, as *mishpoche*, as family, as they found so much in common and shared such similar experiences with people they had just met.

I am never alone, because I walk with God, a God who places demands and expectations upon me, who sets limits and guidelines for my behavior and actions, rules which are known as *minhag* (custom) and *halacha*, Jewish law. As Abraham Joshua Heschel proclaimed, a Jew is never alone when performing a mitzvah, for that is where man and God meet. The conscious performance of mitzvot puts me in touch with God, as well as my fellow Jews – those who came before me, those who are alive today, and future generations of those not yet born.

And I am never alone because as a Jew I am always accompanied by a magnificent heritage. I have a tremendous sense of pride in our tenacity and in the intellectual power of the ideas, creativity, ingenuity and creations of the Jewish people. Its teachings guide and instruct me in almost all that I do.

It is impossible to know all there is to know about Judaism, which is why I constantly study and continue to seek to learn more about our precious legacy. I try to expand my knowledge by teaching texts I have not previously studied in depth precisely so I can learn something I did not previously know. Judaism is like a flower, with many layers that can be uncovered and discovered, each one more beautiful than the next. Judaism is intellectually fascinating and deep, filled with profound debates and finely tuned arguments about refined points which sharpen our thinking and lift us to new heights. The more you study Jewish texts, the more you will appreciate the wisdom of our sages. The more you study Jewish history, the more you will appreciate the tenacity of the Jewish people and wonder how they held onto their faith in the face of so much cruel oppression. The more you study Jewish practice and observances the more you will appreciate the logic of these ancient ways. The more you encounter Jewish ethics and teachings the more inspired you will be to aspire to live a more moral life. As stated in the prayer I wrote and which you each recited on the occasion of your bar or bat mitzvah when you stood before the congregation and the open ark, you should continue to study Jewish teachings so that it will influence and guide the decisions you make.

Our sense of peoplehood and identity means we have a collective responsibility for the world and its well-being, for we are stewards of God's creation. As our rabbis remind us we are God's partners, and therefore have a unique responsibility to care for the world, meaning the earth and the environment. We have obligations to those who are not Jewish as well. It is one of the reasons why Jews consistently are among the most philanthropic and most generous contributors to all kinds of causes and support many important communal and educational institutions. But we dare not overlook our obligation to our

own people, to support Jewish institutions and organizations and to care for our fellow Jews. This is all part of what we call *tikun olam*, completing the world, healing it and working to make it a better place. It is part of what God demands of us.

I look to you as being my partners, as working with me for Jewish causes, to work to perpetuate Judaism, to agonize and strategize with me and others over the future of the Jewish people. Did I mention that you should have Jewish babies, lots of them?

As you know, this year was not an easy one for me. Somehow, with God's blessing, I have come through my treatments and feel stronger, and better than ever. You may recall that I made a point of coming to class, even on those days when I came straight from the hospital after receiving an infusion of several hours of chemotherapy. First of all, I thought it would be the ultimate guilt trip. As I said to you at the time, if I am here right after getting chemo, you better have a good excuse when you miss class. But beyond that, I came because I want you to know how seriously I take the privilege of being your rabbi and your teacher, how much I care about each of you, how seriously I take Judaism, and because I want to share and impart to you my love and passion for this precious heritage.

It is exciting to be Jewish. I often marvel when I read the newspaper at how many stories there are about Jews, Judaism, the Jewish people, Israel, or other issues that pertain to such a tiny minority, less than .2 % of the world's population. I am proud to be a part of such an important people, who matter so much to the rest of the world. Despite all that we have experienced, we do not turn our backs on the world, and are not bitter, but inspire by hoping and working for its redemption by continuing to make positive contributions. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to devote my life to keeping Judaism alive.

There is an active debate going on in the Jewish community today about the parameters of our community: who is in and who is out, what kind of internal criticism and critique is permissible, and what is beyond the parameters of what should be tolerated. It has to do with what is best for the State of Israel, and what is the role of Jews living in the Diaspora in the conversation. The debate is over what approach will best procure the security and well being of the Jewish state. In many respects it parallels some of the controversies that faced rabbis, sages and leaders of the Talmudic era and other periods of Jewish history. I want you to know, you can and should be a part of the vibrant, exciting discussion of what it means to be a Jew, to partake in the ongoing debates about Jewish literature, Jewish essence, identity and other issues.

In a post Emancipation world you are free to be a part of the Jewish world, or not. In a post Enlightenment world you are free to decide how to engage in being Jewish. I hope you choose to continue to be engaged, for in a post Holocaust world you are not free to desist from working to see to it that *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people will continue to live on, and to thrive!

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