

What it means to be a Jew

Yom Kippur 2017

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Well, it took 108 years, and a lot of Yom Kippur sermons, but we lived to see the Chicago Cubs win a World Series. I feel like our whole congregation was a part of this journey, and I thank you for it. I trust there will be more Torah to learn from the Cubs in years ahead, but for tonight, let me just say, Go Cubs Go.

Of course, the Cubs were not the only surprise of this year gone by. It has been a year of much change and upheaval in our country and in our world. And I feel us, collectively, eager for a Yom Kippur, a day to turn inward, and reconnect - with our souls, with our community, with God.

What guidance can Judaism give us in this world of 2017, or 5778?

What guidance can it give you and me?

And what guidance can it give our children? Growing up in this age where kids “hang out” on electronic devices, rather than face to face with their friends. Growing up in this place of such affluence and achievement. Growing up in this country when every issue seems to drive us further apart.

This year, my oldest daughter, Eliana, will become bat mitzvah. I tell her what I tell all of our b’nai mitzvah students and parents. That Bat Mitzvah means becoming responsible for your own actions. It means becoming a person who does mitzvot. But I’ve been feeling these answers are not enough.

There are vital commands in our vast and sometimes confusing body of mitzvot. And this year I’ve been on a quest to hear them. To hear what God and our tradition are asking of me, and of all of us, in this time and place.

To my amazement, I feel I've actually received answers.

Looking back over my year, I now hear 3 clear commands, each one received in a most unexpected place.

The first was AT&T park.

Perhaps you're wondering, what was a die-hard Cub fan like me doing at AT&T park? The answer is blowing the shofar, on home plate!

It was Jewish Heritage Night for the Giants, and the organizers wanted to put a little more Jewish into it this year. So they invited 3 rabbis to come blow shofar on the field, before the National Anthem. It was Rabbi Langer, the Chabad rabbi of San Francisco, Rabbi Ryan Bauer of Temple Emanuel, and me. And LewSeal, the Giants' mascot, blew shofar with us as well. I've got to say, it was pretty cool! And I'm happy to report, I held my own with the shofar.

Most interesting though was the conversation I had after my moment on the jumbotron, as a young guy named Rocky, from the Giants' front office, escorted me through various secret hallways to get to my seat. Rocky's job, for the Giants, is organizing special events, including at least a dozen other "heritage" nights at the ballpark, along with their corresponding bobbleheads or other giveaways. He told me that Jewish Heritage Night is different from all other heritage nights. Why? Because no matter what, Jews show up.

"Take this night," he explained. "It's a Monday night, after 3 weekend games at home, and the start of the school year. The visiting team has no local fan base. And you know, we're not having the best of seasons. But for Jewish Heritage Night, it doesn't matter. I still sell 2200 tickets. This is not true for Irish Heritage Night, or Korean Heritage Night, or Italian Heritage Night, or any of the other heritage nights. Jews are different. Jews show up.

This was my first revelation. Rocky offered it as an observation. But I heard it as a command. God is asking us to show up. Show up for your family. Show up for your friends. Show up for people in your community when they are in need.

It's one of the first messages in the Jewish prayerbook. Every morning, we thank God for a new day, and then we're supposed to study this teaching from the Talmud:

These are the deeds whose fruits we eat in this world, but whose full reward awaits us in the World to Come:
honoring your father and your mother,
acts of loving kindness,
arriving early at the study and prayer hall, morning and evening,
welcoming guests,
visiting the sick,
helping the [needy] bride,
attending to the dead and their loved ones,
probing the meaning of prayer,
making peace between one person and another,
And the study of Torah is equal to them all, or some would say, leads to them all.

It's quite a full list of mitzvot, I know. And each one could be a whole sermon. The theme that I now see flowing through them all, is presence, showing up. Being there when our parents need us. Being there when someone needs a listening ear, a ride, a meal, a minyan. Judaism commands us to put aside whatever else we're doing, and show up.

Two Sundays ago, 20 middle school kids showed up. They came to Kol Emeth and made honey cakes and Rosh Hashanah packages that they and their families then delivered to twenty seniors in our congregation. I

can't tell you how many thank yous Jeff Schwarz and I received for organizing this, many from the recipients of the packages, but even more from the families who visited. One mother told me this was a reminder of why they joined Kol Emeth. So that her kids would feel connected with people of all different ages, and now they have an adopted grandpa to look for on shabbat.

Shabbat is another time I see the power of showing up. I tell our b'nai mitzvah students: You're thinking about all the people you've invited to come to your bar/bat mitzvah. But there are other people you don't even know, who are looking forward to it, who want to get to know you, and celebrate with you, as you become the newest link in the chain of our people. They will be there for your bar mitzvah and they will be there the next week and the next week as well. They will be there for you at this happy time. And they will be there for you in harder times too.

This is what it means to be a Jew.

I go into this Yom Kippur with some regret in the realm of showing up. My Uncle Maurie, in Maryland, was sick for the last year. I kept intending to call, to tell him and my aunt and cousins, who I felt close to growing up, that I was thinking of them all. But something always got in the way. Three weeks ago, I finally picked up the phone and reached my aunt. She was on a walk while my uncle was sleeping. We didn't speak long, but hearing her voice brought back a flood of fond memories. I thought maybe I'd call back later and talk to my uncle. That afternoon, my uncle died.

"Show up," God is saying to us, through this treasury of mitzvot we've been given. Show up when someone is sick. Show up when someone needs to talk. Show up to the minyan, even if you don't know anyone saying kaddish. Show up to your loved ones, before it's too late.

Show up. This is the first command I heard this year.

The second command, I had to travel a bit further to receive.
This one I heard in Greece. It began here though, with a phone call.

One Sunday afternoon in January, I got a call from Rabbi Marv Goodman, asking if I would like to join a group of Bay Area rabbis and Muslim leaders on a trip to Greece, with IsraAid. This was not a pleasure trip, nor a volunteering trip. This was a fact-finding trip, to see the refugee situation up close, and to see what IsraAid, an Israeli humanitarian aid NGO, was doing to help. My initial response was no. I didn't want to leave my family for 8 days, and it seemed kind of scary, going to refugee camps in Greece. But something made me stay on the phone.

It was the opportunity to get past my protective walls and learn.

There are so many enormous problems in our world today. And I know that every situation is complicated. Sometimes our best-intended efforts to help even cause more harm. So my instinct is to stay out of it, focus on the needs of our community that I understand, and steer clear of involvement in the world, because what do I know about world problems?

Marv's phone call somehow broke through that wall. I told Scott and the girls this was something I needed to do. Rabbi Booth told me this was something Kol Emeth needed me to do. And so, I went to Greece. I went to the tiny island of Lesbos and saw the aftermath of a million refugees squeezing onto shoddy rafts to cross the sea from Turkey to Greece, hoping to find refuge in Europe. And I visited refugee camps, where I heard harrowing stories of fleeing the Taliban in Afganistan, fleeing ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and fleeing pervasive violence against women in Sudan.

The most powerful experience, however, was unquestionably Yom HaShoah.

We spent Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, in Thessaloniki, or Salonica, a city that was once so Jewish, David Ben Gurion came to visit it, to see what a Jewish state could look like. That was 1911, when there were 150,000 people living in Salonica. 110,000 were Jews, mostly speaking Ladino. In 1943, the Nazis reached Salonica, and within 2 months, a thriving 500-year-old Jewish civilization was wiped out. Our group of 9 rabbis, 3 Muslims, and 3 IsraAid staff spent several hours touring the Jewish sites of this beautiful coastal city - synagogues, cemeteries, businesses with Jewish names, proof of the Jewish souls that once filled the streets of Salonica, snuffed out in unspeakable acts of genocide.

Then, we got on our bus, drove for 40 minutes, and spent the afternoon hearing the stories of 4 Yazidi men, whose people's genocide is going on now. The Yazidis, much like the Jews, are an ancient people with their own religion, and they too have endured persecution throughout the centuries. They live primarily in Nineveh Province in Northern Iraq, and since 2014, they have been continually brutalized by ISIS. We sat and listened as these 4 survivors told us gruesome stories of ISIS fighters entering their community, slaughtering men and children, and taking their girls as slaves and wives. One of them knew the agonizing details of his daughter's enslavement, because she called him periodically, from her cell phone!

All of us were in tears, as we absorbed these horrifying stories, in Salonica, on Yom HaShoah. But there was also something inspiring in this experience, and that was the IsraAid part. Who was it that was translating the Yazidis' stories for us, from Arabic? Israelis. One Arab Israeli, two Jewish Israelis, a small IsraAid team who are drawing on Jewish lessons from the Holocaust to help these refugees tell their stories, document what they've been through, and try to find hope again. Another IsraAid team of psychological professionals is working in Germany with Yazidi girls who have escaped from ISIS or whose families have managed to buy them

back. They're helping them work through immense shame and trauma, and try to begin a new life.

These teams are tiny in the sea of hurt in our world. But their impact is great, and a lesson to me.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem, says our Torah. You are not allowed to hide - when you see suffering, when you see mistreatment.

Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa. You may not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. You must stand up. This is the command I heard in Greece. Don't just show up. Stand up. Find something you can do, and do it. That's what it means to be a Jew. That's what it means to be from the Jewish state. And that's why there's now an IsraAid team in Houston and Mexico and Puerto Rico. This is what Jews do. They stand up and act.

I saw an amazing photo the other day of the IsraAid team in Houston. There were 6 men cleaning out the flooded kitchen of an elderly couple. Four of them were Jews. Two of them were Yazidis, now living in Houston. They wanted to come join the IsraAid team. So there they all were, smiling proudly, wearing navy IsraAid T-shirts with the Jewish star of the Israeli flag.

There is much more I could say about the work IsraAid is doing, now in 20 different countries, bringing Israeli water expertise to Africa and medical teams to other disaster zones, but it's not for tonight. If you'd like to learn more, the head of IsraAid, Yotam Polizer will be with us for dinner and a program in the Kol Emeth sukkah, next Sunday night, October 8. This year's bnai mitzvah families are cooking the dinner. We invite you to sign up on the Kol Emeth website and join us.

You don't need to go to Greece to find a way to stand up. There are problems and injustices everywhere - at work, at school, in our cities, in our

country, all over the world. You can't do everything. But you're commanded to do something. Find the things you can do.

Stand up. This is the second command I heard this year.

Finally, the third. This one didn't come to me at the ball park, or in Greece. This one came to me, at of all places, the dentist!

As you probably do too, I schedule dentist appointments 6 months in advance, especially when I want 3 kids to go at the same time. So, half a year ago, I scheduled my daughters' dentist appointments for the last day before school started, Monday, August 21, at 10:10am. It simply never occurred to me in February that that exact date and that exact time would be the highpoint of the eclipse.

By the time I realized it, I couldn't get another appointment. And so, reluctantly, I took the pinhole box viewer that Scott had made us, and a pair of eclipse glasses that Rabbi Booth had given us, and I took my kids to the dentist.

As we drove down Welch Road we saw something unusual. All these people standing outside, looking **up**. We're so used to seeing people outside looking down these days, at their phones. This was the opposite!

When we got to the dentist's office, I asked if anyone wanted to come outside and borrow our glasses. Our Filipino hygienist jumped at the chance to go out and get a look at the disappearing sun. Then came our Indian doctor. Then came some other patients. Then came the African secretary, who fell in love with the pinhole box. It reminded her of when she was a girl in Kenya and she and her friends watched an eclipse in a bucket of water. She was so tickled by the pinhole box that I let her keep it, and then she was so delighted, she called her sister, from work, to tell her

about it. My girls and the dentist and hygienist went back to their appointments. But I stayed outside and shared our one pair of glasses with a whole other medical office, and then with the mailman, and with the parking attendant. It was there in the weird light of the eclipse, in the parking lot on Welch Road, that I heard my third command. Look Up.

Or, as God says to Abraham, *Sa na einecha, ur'eh*. Lift up your eyes, and see.”

Look up from your phone, from your work, from your routine, from your problems. And see the beauty of this world. The different shades of green in the trees. The mysteries of the stars. The face of the person right in front of you.

This is the reason for so many of our mitzvot. This is why we pray and say blessings. This is why we have shabbat and holidays. To get us to look up and see - the gift of good food, the gift of nature, the gift of time with those we love.

We spend so much of our time looking down at our devices, and focusing on the things that divide us. Our tradition is commanding us literally to lift up our heads, look up at the sky, and see what unites us - Democrats and Republicans, Muslims and Jews, Yazidis and Israelis, young and old.

We Jews are taught to recite one statement, from when we are little to the hour of our death. *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*.

Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

We don't repeat this morning and night because we might forget that God is One.

We repeat this morning and night because we need to see that **we** are one. All humanity is one. All creation is one. And oneness is God.

Look up, and see that you are a tiny speck in a vast, magnificent universe.
Then, look up and see that you are blessed - to live, and to love, and to do
something with the days you've been given.

Show up.

Stand up.

Look up, and see.

That's what it means to be a Jew.

Gmar Chatima Tova.

