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### Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782 – Embracing Outreach

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of family visits to my Nana and Poppy's apartment on Francisco Avenue, two blocks down from Devon. Nowadays, Devon might feel a bit like a trip to India, but when I was growing up it was pretty much a Jewish ghetto. I have clear memories of walking along the sidewalk with my Nana, stopping in the kosher butcher, and then picking out a cookie in the bakery where she'd buy challah. While there was a Jewish presence in Skokie where we lived, it seemed like Devon Avenue was the hub where Judaism emanated from.

My first trip to Israel came about 15 years later during my junior year of college when I lived on a kibbutz and studied in Jerusalem. The first month or so we acclimated to life on the kibbutz. We woke up around 4 a.m. and headed out to the fields where we worked till 1:00. Then we came back to the Heder Ochel – the dining room for lunch. Although my Hebrew was poor, communication wasn't much of a problem, as the majority of kibbutzniks came from South Africa and spoke English. And while I was satisfied with what I was doing, it felt more like life on a farm, than it did like living in Israel.

The first time we left the kibbutz was to travel to Jerusalem to learn about the classes we'd be taking. While I was curious to see the school, I was even more excited by the thought that I would finally experience a taste of "Israel."

The kibbutz was west of the city, so the majority of the drive was uphill. We entered Jerusalem from the west, near the central bus station, and as we drove down Jaffa Road toward the Old City, I kept my eyes peeled, searching for something that might look familiar – something that looked like Devon Avenue. But nothing really did.

While Jerusalem didn't look the way I expected, I figured that the food would make me feel at home. But once again I was disappointed. Israeli food, as you know, is more Middle Eastern than "Jewish." And when I did find a restaurant serving deli, not only was it way more expensive than I could afford; it was also pretty awful. Back then Israel was a far cry from the foodie paradise it is today.

While that first year in Israel was quickly followed by two more on my road to becoming a rabbi, it was also a wake-up call. The Jewish country that I'd imagined would look, taste, smell, sound and feel like my Ashkenazi Jewish home didn't exist. Rather than a country that reminded me of Devon Avenue, Israel was a place unto itself, filled with people from all parts of the world who looked different than me. It was an unfamiliar place, punctuated by sites I recognized from the posters on my Hebrew School classroom walls, but very different than what I expected.

It's been 40 years since that first trip, and today there are even more Jews who look different than me; Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews whose families came from countries like Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt and Iran, as well as Jews from Ethiopia, India and South America. Of course, there are also Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, the Former Soviet Union and here (the U.S.), but we are decidedly the minority. In fact, it's a bit ironic that many of those who look more "familiar" to us, like recent immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, are often not accepted as Jews.

Take one of Israel's recent Olympic gold medalists, Artem Dol-gó-pyat, a Ukrainian born gymnast, who returned from Tokyo to a hero's welcome, but is unable to marry his fiancé because only his father is Jewish.

I know that many of you are familiar with the issue of marriage in Israel. It's nothing new. It started in the '80's and 90's when large numbers of Jews from the Former Soviet Union immigrated. Since then, there are tens of thousands of Israeli citizens who are denied the right to marry. It's a bizarre situation for many reasons, including the fact that, for a people which is small in numbers to begin with, how does it make sense to alienate immigrants who are welcomed as citizens, who serve in the army, represent their country to the rest of the world, and have a Jewish lineage? It seems absurd to push away people who want to be counted among us.

Yet if we're honest, we could make this same point about *our* Jewish community. According to the 2020 Pew survey, in America today, some 42 percent of the Jewish population is intermarried, and these numbers continue to grow. Are we doing enough to welcome these families and embrace their children? Are we reaching out to those who are Jewish adjacent – who share a home with someone who is Jewish? Are we doing what we *should* to open our door to those who may wish to engage with our traditions and values? If not, then we're not acting differently than Israel. We're leaving out those who may want to be numbered among us; or at the very least, we're not welcoming them in.

Several years ago, when I took part in the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative at the Hartman Institute, we looked at this issue. While our focus was more on intermarriage, the biblical texts we studied are equally relevant here, for they deal broadly with the question of: Who is a Jew.

Now everyone knows that in Judaism, if a mother is Jewish, so is the child. But we found that there's an earlier tradition; that in the beginning, Jewish identity was passed on by the father, not the mother.

I'll share a couple of quick examples. Jacob (of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,) had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. Those sons were born to four women. Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, bore eight of them. And their handmaidens, Bilhah and Zilpah, bore the other four. While Rachel and Leah had direct ties to Abraham's family, their handmaidens came from outside the clan. Yet the Torah does not differentiate between the lineage of any of these children. It takes for granted that all twelve are members of the tribe - a status that has never been questioned.

Example number two: The sons of Moses. Moses was living apart from our community in the land of Midian when he married Tziporah, a Midianite priest's daughter. His boys grew up in her family's home which was unfamiliar with the customs or culture of Israel. And yet, according to the Talmud, Moses' sons Gershom and Eliezer, and their descendants, were all accepted as part of our people.

A final example from the book of Ruth, which tells the story of a Midianite woman who immigrated to Israel, where she married an Israelite man named Boaz. Near the end of Ruth's story, she bore a son, The book concludes by tracing the lineage of her family four generations forward, ending with the name of Ruth's great-grandson David. Despite the fact that the family line begins with a marriage between a Midianite woman and an Israelite father, no one has ever questioned whether David Melekh Yisrael – David, King of Israel is a Jew.

The fact is, in the ancient world a child's identity, inheritance and status was passed down from their father, as is still the case today. A child whose father is a Kohen is a Kohen; whose father is a Levite is a Levi; and whose father is from Yisrael is Yisrael. A child's status is based on the tribe of their father. And, of course, it would make no sense for children to be part of a tribe, if they were *also* part of a people.

Each of these examples makes the same point, that our earliest tradition tied the status of a child to their *father's* identity. Hundreds of years later, after we were exiled from our land and lived in foreign nations with different laws, customs and traditions, this system

no longer worked. A non-Israelite wife, living with her family in her homeland would raise her children according to the customs of *her* family, regardless of the identity of the father. This was a reality that was breaking our chain of tradition and is why our ancestors innovated and *changed* our tradition. The world had changed, and our old customs no longer made sense. And frankly, if we hadn't moved away from the patriarchal system, our line would have gone the way of the ten lost tribes. We would have been erased from history. Indeed, the true genius of our people was recognizing that when the world changed, we needed to change with it.

Friends, is there any doubt that our world is a different place than that of our grandparents? Today, social norms that stood for thousands of years have dissolved. Where once it was considered a *shanda*, a disgrace, to marry outside of your religion or tribe, whether you were a Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian, or Jew; in today's world, it cannot be assumed that the ethnicity, traditions, beliefs or practices of one's mother *or* father will leave a lasting imprint on their children.

Our world is the one described in that Pew Report which states that 42 percent of Jews are intermarried, information that could provoke fear for the future of our people except for the fact that since 1990, America's Jewish population has *grown* by 36 percent, up to 7.5 million – not in spite of intermarriage, but because of it. Rather than dilute our people, changing attitudes on the part of rabbis and Jewish leaders have enabled us to be enriched instead.

And as you might imagine, with so many Jews intermarried, there are more adjacent Jews – those who come from families, or live in homes, where Judaism is practiced but are not Jewish themselves. And I want to take a moment to let you know that we appreciate you and are grateful for your presence. I want you to know that we are enriched by your family *and by you*, and to whatever extent you are interested in sharing this Jewish journey, the door is open. For those families who made the decision to raise children as Jews, thank you for allowing us to share our heritage, values, and ideals with your family; for giving us the opportunity to sustain and enrich our people.

I also want to acknowledge those who have chosen to make Judaism your religion – both Jews who were born into a Jewish family and affirm their identity, and those who have chosen to come to Judaism from another religious upbringing. In today's world of fluidity, where nothing is pre-ordained, we appreciate that you have made our tradition your own.

Perhaps you remember that I began tonight speaking about the challenges Israel has in defining Jewish identity. I began with Israel because the question of Jewish identity is

not particular to American Jews. It is an issue of modernity. And just as we are opening our doors to welcome those who wish to join us, I am certain that sooner or later, Israel will reach the same conclusion – that we are stronger when we include, when we welcome, than when we exclude.

But there's a second reason I started by speaking about Israel. It's because, whether they realize it or not, Israel is already an example of inclusion. In America, it's still easy to imagine that Judaism looks like us – like white Ashkenazi Jews, even though there are more and more Jews of color all around us. In America, Jews of color are still somewhat of a surprise. But when you visit Israel, the image we grew up with, that Jews are white Ashkenazim, it's shattered.

In Israel, you can't help but see that Jews come from all corners of the globe. We are different races, ethnicities, and nationalities. It's a reminder that for centuries Judaism has welcomed those who sought to join our family, regardless of their place of origin. And in the years to come, this beautiful diversity will become more and more evident in our American Jewish community as well.

Friends, there is more than enough to worry about in our world today. So, for a night, let us allow ourselves to feel uplifted that our Jewish people, who just yesterday seemed to be fading away is on the brink of a renewal. Let us seize this news, let us celebrate it. Let us open the doors of Abraham's tent and share the beauty and holiness of our tradition with those who are already among us, and those seeking to join. Let us give thanks for those of different faiths whose families are helping to grow our people and let them know our home is theirs as well.

May this new year 5782 be a year of health and blessing. May we and our people continue to grow from strength to strength. And let us say: Amen.

### **Notes from 2020 Pew Survey Summary Presentation**

"7.5 million identify their religion as Jewish or consider themselves Jewish and have Jewish parentage. Also includes children being raised as Jews either "religiously" or "culturally." The number DOES NOT include almost 3 million adults of Jewish background who have Jewish parents but do not consider themselves Jewish, but would be eligible to make Aliyah to Israel as Jews.

The American Jewish Community is comprised of two major groups – Jews by Religion, and Jews NOT by religion – but still "proud to be Jewish."

Reform is largest movement, but the “nones” are a close second. Large proportion of young adults (18-29) are “nones.” And as of now, at least, they don’t fit within traditional denominational models.

Prior to 1989, a Jew who intermarried “turned in their Jewish passport” and no longer identified as a Jew. Today, intermarrieds are maintaining their Jewish identity.

Education of the next generation is incredibly important – 60% are raising their children as Jews, 12% as somewhat Jewish, 30% as not Jewish at all.

Half of 18-29 year olds have two Jewish parents, other half have one.

Challenge – educating the next generation AND Welcoming them in. While the Reform movement is the largest denomination in America by far, only 37% of those who say they are Reform belong to a congregation (63% do not).

What is having the biggest impact on drawing people in? Chabad – about 25% of people from every movement participate in Chabad in some way. Chabads theology may not speak to them, but its embrace and welcome, its ability to share substance – Jewish values, teachings, way of life – help bring meaning to the everyday are draws.