

Many years ago, I was on a *bet din*, a rabbinic "court" that welcomed a complete family – both parents and three children – into the Jewish people. Never before nor since have I had a family all together seek to become Jews. As they spoke, it became clear the reason for this special situation. Originally from Central America, they were descendants of Jews from Spain who converted to Catholicism in 1492 rather than face exile or death. Over hundreds of years they secretly maintained a vestige of Jewish practice and identity. Through tears, the mother explained, "All we had of Judaism over the centuries was lighting candles on Friday evening. It was a subtle reminder that we were Jews. But we knew we should not tell anyone." The floodgates opened and we three rabbis listened to a powerful story of a family who was not coming to Judaism so much as they were coming back to it. As they wept, saying how overjoyed they were to be able to be openly Jewish, I felt tears on my cheek. "After 500 years," I said, "It's good to have you home."

Whether we say it openly or not, most of us somehow know that Yom Kippur is our time to return home, for how else explain why we come out in such numbers on this day? There are plenty of other great holidays – Purim, Simchat Torah, Chanukah – and *this* day, for fasting and atonement, is the day we show up?! Sure, for some it may be a sense of commandment or duty; maybe guilt, seeking absolution, family pressure. But I suggest that just as the family I met years ago waited for generations to return, Yom Kippur serves as a kind of spiritual "homing device" to us all, a tug to the heartstrings and the soul that whispers to us, "come back." Even people distant from the synagogue, who claim little connection to Jewish life, are here. Instead of seeing this as a negative, however, consider how incredibly positive it is that on this day each of us feels, for whatever reason, there is a home for us in the Jewish community and Jewish life.

One of the great Jewish philosophers of the 20th century was Franz Rosenzweig. Like many German Jews in the beginning of the last century, Franz was alienated from Judaism. His superficial Jewish education had not equipped him to counter the attractions of liberal Protestantism, which professed to embody the essence of enlightened universalism. In 1913 Rosenzweig resolved to adopt Christianity, a move which was conventionally viewed as a prerequisite to full acceptance into European

culture and society. He wished, however, to enter the new religion "as a Jew" and decided to spend the last days before his conversion in Jewish settings, emulating the founders of Christianity who had seen the new faith as a fulfilment of their Judaism. Thus, Rosenzweig attended Yom Kippur services on October 11, 1913, in a tiny *shtiebl* (a house of prayer) in Berlin.

The experience was an overpowering one. Rosenzweig never described precisely what it was that transformed him that day, but we know that immediately afterwards he decided that the prospect of conversion was "no longer possible." In later writings he emphasized that, beyond feelings of personal exaltation and communal solidarity, Yom Kippur constitutes "a testimony to the reality of God that cannot be controverted." He described movingly how on Yom Kippur we are "as close to God ... as it is ever accorded [one] to be."¹

Whatever it was that Rosenzweig experienced, it impelled him to devote the remainder of his life – much of it in the grip of a debilitating illness – to studying and teaching the Jewish tradition. His book the *Star of Redemption* remains one of the most important works of Jewish theology. He collaborated to produce a fresh new German translation of the Hebrew Bible and under his leadership he established the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, an institute of free adult Jewish learning that inspired some of German Jewry's most distinguished intellectuals. On that fateful Yom Kippur in 1913, Franz Rosenzweig found the door open, and he turned back into a Jewish life that enriched him and countless others.

This call back is at the heart of every Yom Kippur, where the focus is on תשובה *teshuvah*. Generally translated as "repentance", תשובה really means turning, or even better *re*-turning, of the spirit. But returning to what? Whenever we place the Torah back into the ארון הקודש *Aron ha'Kodesh*, we say words השבִּינוּ ה' אֵלֵינוּ וְנִשְׁבֶּה: "Cause us to return, Eternal, and we shall return."² Jewish commentators have long pondered who is turning to whom? Is it us towards God? To the Torah? Do we seek a return to the Land of Israel? Or are we hoping that coming back to the synagogue

¹ ["A Great Thinker Rediscovered His Judaism"](#), Tablet Magazine (September 13, 2013)

² Lamentations 5:21

on this day – and even if *only* on this day or just online – we will be “turned” (or even “turned on”) in some way, inspired to live a better life, a life of purpose and meaning, a life filled with worthy relationships, a life dedicated to building up the Jewish people and bettering our world?

We live in an age of fluid identities. Nothing seems to be fixed. If even gender identity is fluid, how much more so might be our faith or ethnic identity. For many who have Jewish background, the ties to the Jewish people and faith are tenuous. It reminds me of the comedian Seth Myers who offered in a hilarious monologue that despite his name, and his looks and the fact that his wife is Jewish, that he is not in fact Jewish. But he admitted that with all of that he is kind of, Jew-ish.

According to one teaching, after the Messiah comes there will be only two holidays that Jews will continue to observe. One will be Yom Kippur, for even in a time of peace there will be a need for repentance and forgiveness. The other, you be surprised to learn, is Purim – the holiday of merry-making and wearing masks.³ Actually, these two days are more similar than they might first appear. Today is Yom Kippur (יום כפורים) but it is also יום – a “day”, כ (the Hebrew for “like”), פורים, a “day like Purim.” How so? On both days we try to hide. On Purim we wear physical masks, pretending to not be who we are. On this Day of Atonement, we are reminded of the masks we wear every day to hide the truth about ourselves. We try to hide from responsibility, from God, from our identity as Jews. But on both days the masks come off. Like the family I met years ago seeking a place in the Jewish community, like Franz Rosenzweig, many of us may be distant from Judaism, but Yom Kippur reminds us who we truly are. Softly, it says to us, “Take off the mask. Stop hiding. Accept who you are. Come home.”

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said that our goal as Jews is not necessarily to make the world “more Jewish, but rather more human.”⁴ Yet he also taught that the only way we Jews can help make the world more human – more *humane* – is to not be Jew-ish, but openly, unabashedly, proudly Jewish.

³ [Midrash Mishlei 9:1](#)

⁴ New York Times, September 29, 2000

This, then, is the appeal – if you want to inspire our children to want to be proud and knowledgeable Jews, this year you get more involved in Jewish living and learning to model that for them. If you feel overwhelmed by life, seek out *Shabbes*. Come – if not weekly, then at least from time to time – to our weekly Shabbat morning Torah study. Show up at our experimental Shabbat morning offerings – with your children or grandchildren to our 45-minute Jr. Congregation we will offer every 4-6 weeks, or at one of our “Shabbat Pop Ups” (beginning this coming Shabbat at 9 am with Bagels by the Bay – with a nice walk with me as we nourish our bodies and spirit). Unsure about how to lead the *Erev Shabbat* (Friday evening) prayers at home? Ask any of your clergy to come to your home with 5-6 other households for an informal “Shabbat at Home” and potluck dinner. Need a respite from life, or to be inspired and renewed? Come on *Erev Shabbat* to the synagogue. Trust me, it's not nearly as busy as today ... and we need you, we really do. If you never became Bat or Bat Mitzvah – *this* is the year, with a class led by Cantor Franco and Rabbi Sank Ross. Want to really show your family what it means to remember we were strangers in Egypt? Volunteer 5 hours a week to welcome Ukrainian refugee families or help feed our neighbors at one of our three Saturday evening Community Dinners this year or join us on Mitzvah Day. Get involved in the many opportunities our Social Action Committee offers to repair the world. Deepen your understanding of Jewish history, heritage and values by joining the Jewish Civil Rights Journey in a few weeks, our Israel Trip in February, or coming to Central Europe next May to learn how Jewish life flourished, was destroyed and is rebuilding.

There is so much here to connect you. There is so much here that offers you a chance to build a richer Jewish life, to inspire your children. There is so much here that can give you hope, courage, resilience. There is so much here. So come back. Come home. The door is open ... and open wide.

I close by paraphrasing a poem Ruth Brin, a gifted contemporary writer who reminds us that Yom Kippur is:

Calling and recalling
bringing us home
Turning and returning us
to other years

Calling us to remember
and dream once more ...

In the dreaming and remembering
In the winding flow of time
We hear the weeping of [those]
who were torn from our people ...
They call these words, "We were not lost
nor shall you be lost,
We were not destroyed,
nor shall you be destroyed."

[Yom Kippur] returns us to our past
to the home of our ancestors.
[It] turns us toward the future,
toward the unknown homes of our children.

Call to us and change us, O Lord ...

השבנו ה' אליך ונשובה

Turn us, as we sing this prayer,
and we shall return to You.