

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5784
Be a Jewish Insider
Rabbi Karen Citrin

When I was young, and my mother had not yet gone back to work full time, she took interest in some sewing and cooking classes. While our family reaped the benefit of her expanded cooking palate, my sister and I were less enamored by the sewing. This meant trips to the fabric store, and wearing hand-made clothes, which did not look like the clothes that other kids wore. And not just us, our dolls, too. My mother even made clothes by hand for my Barbie doll, not an easy task given the small proportions. My Barbie did not look like other Barbies. You could say, that I had the ultimate “Weird Barbie.”¹

Like many American women my age, I have a complicated relationship with Barbie. While I admire how the Barbies of today intend to show kids professional possibilities for adult women – astronaut Barbie, doctor Barbie, chef Barbie, construction worker Barbie, I also learned how Barbie perpetuated a narrow definition of femininity and impossible physical standards of beauty. Yet, I found myself smiling, laughing and crying when I watched the Barbie movie this summer.

Director Greta Gerwig describes her film as a coming-of-age story in which the protagonist grows wiser through her journey, and makes the choice to open a new chapter in her life.² Today, Rosh Hashanah, is our annual Jewish coming of age story. Today, we are invited to open our Book of Life, to reflect on where we have been, to start a new chapter and dream about who we want to become. An awareness of our potential. Now that the metaphorical book is open, we take stock of what we wrote last year. What will we write on the pages of our future? Today, I would like to reflect on our identity as a Jewish people; where we have been and who we want to become.

The recent Barbie movie contains Jewish themes including a look back into Jewish history. The original Barbie doll was created by a Jewish woman, Ruth Handler. From her launch in 1959, Ruth intentionally made Barbie to not look stereotypically Jewish. The creation of Barbie was her fantasy of fitting in, during a time when Jews and other minorities were very much outsiders. In “The Tribe,” an excellent 18-minute documentary about Barbie and Jewish identity, director Tiffany Shlain wrote, “It took the ultimate outsider to create the ultimate insider.” In other words, the original and stereotypical Barbie was blonde, white, and slender. Barbie did not quote, “look Jewish.” Tiffany added with humor, along with her co-director husband yes, named Ken, “Jews always felt like outsiders, maybe that’s why they created a bread with only an outside” (a bagel).

As I look back on my family’s story, I recognize this feeling of being outsiders from my grandparents. I grew up hearing stories about fleeing Europe, and clubs and schools in America that did not allow Jews. Looking back on their experience, I recall how they

¹ Barbie. 2023 Warner Bros.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/11/magazine/greta-gerwig-barbie.html>

straddled a delicate tightrope of preserving Jewish customs and traditions while also wanting to blend in and not appear “too Jewish.” While this struggle is similar to other immigrant stories, there is a particular weight to the Jewish experience that many Jews were eager to cast away. Deborah E. Lipstadt in her book, *Antisemitism Here and Now* (2019), writes about the lachrymose view of Jewish history. How especially in the post Holocaust years, “the bad experiences loomed so large in the Jewish people’s collective memory that they eclipsed the positive and noteworthy accomplishments that fill Jewish history.”

It is heartening to speak to our teenagers today who share a different kind of Jewish experience. While I sometimes worry that they don’t hold those close memories that shaped earlier generations, for the most part Jews no longer feel like outsiders here in America. Even with the harsh reality of antisemitism on the rise, we no longer walk that tightrope with fear of falling off, no longer a fiddler on the roof. Today’s generation speaks of difference when it comes to Jewish identity; different can be challenging, but different can also be positive. We can take pride in our Judaism and share the light of our stories, holidays, values, and traditions with others from within.

There are many ways to look and be Jewish today. The doors to Jewish life in America have burst wide open - and inside is a kaleidoscope of brightness and celebration and color.³ Today as I look out at all of you— and wave to those on livestream - our community reflects all of this and more.

In 1990 the number of Jews in America was 5 million. Today it’s 7.5 million.⁴ We are becoming more and more racially diverse - as many as 28% of Jews under age 30 identify as non-Ashkenazi and/or as Jewish People of Color.⁵ More interfaith families are raising Jewish children and choosing to be part of synagogues. We are becoming more and more gender diverse – opening our doors wider to LGBTQ+ Jews, adding pronouns, and embracing more fluid non-binary gender identities. And what a blessing that an increasing number of Jews in America are Jews by Choice.

Judaism today is undergoing radical reinvention. This year Rabbis Joshua Stanton and Benjamin Spratt from two Reform synagogues in New York published a book called, *Awakenings (American Jewish Transformation in Identity, Leadership, and Belonging, 2022)* about their vision for the future of American Judaism. In their words, “The definition of what it means to be Jewish is changing before our eyes... If other eras relied on... ethnic identity, genetics, geography or economics, rising generations now

³ With gratitude to Rabbi Allison Berry for inspiration in her Rosh HaShanah 5783 sermon, “Broad Expanses; The Future of American Judaism.”

⁴ “1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS),” Berman Jewish Data Bank, and Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021).

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Race, Ethnicity, Heritage, and Immigration among U.S. Jews,” chapter 9 in *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021). And Ari Feldman, “Jews of Color Have Been Consistently Undercounted by the American Jewish Establishment. Until Now,” *Forward*, May 30, 2019.

call for new modes of connectivity.... Rather than fearing that this great diversification will be “a path away from Judaism, [instead this moment can be] a springboard for welcoming many who seek to forever entwine their lives with the Jewish people.” Spratt and Stanton are optimistic about the future of American Judaism. So am I. We are not disappearing. We are growing, especially here at Beth David. In the last two years we have welcomed nearly 60 new families including over 90 children, especially thanks to Shalom Corner Early Learning Center and Shorashim, our youth education program.

The challenge is how we will define our Jewishness in this vast sea of possibilities. From the beginning of Creation we were given free will, which enables us to continue to grow and change. Here we can learn another lesson from Barbie. In the movie there is Barbie Land and the Real World. In Barbie Land nothing ever changes. Every day as the sun rises and sets, the Barbies greet each other in the same order, wear the same clothes, and head to the same beach. Life is happy but there is not much depth. After Barbie tastes of freedom, and some challenge, in the Real World, Will Ferrell as CEO of Mattel tries to coax the doll back into her classic pink box. As the twist ties clamp down like handcuffs on her plastic skin, she flees. Barbie is on a quest to find her identity, her true self, and she will not be tied down.

And neither are we. The Jewish doorway is open with the *mezuzah* pointing us into a vibrant tapestry of growing Jewish expression - relevant and engaging study for all ages, uplifting prayer and rituals, acts of loving kindness and *tikkun olam*, meeting Jewish friends, celebrating together, sharing a meal, supporting one another, strengthening community, adding our voices. It is up to us to choose. Choose to be an *insider* in Jewish life, here at Temple Beth David, where we are embracing this revival. Choose to shape meaningful Jewish community for yourselves.

During each *b’nai mitzvah* at Beth David we engage in a moving ritual of passing the Torah through the generations of the family. Each time I witness this, I think about the powerful preservation of tradition, and the excitement for the next generation to continue to interpret and pass it on in creative new ways. And when you are present at Temple Beth David, when you make time to do Jewish here, you make history. You make Judaism thrive and you make it possible for others to grow their Jewish identity in community.

In a letter to a skeptical student, Lipstadt reflects on her experience of entering a synagogue with two friends – a mother and her five-year-old girl. The synagogue is a joyful place for the girl, where she runs around with the other kids on the playground, attends a children’s service that is filled with singing, and comes up to the *bima* in the sanctuary to receive a treat from the rabbi. “My hope for you,” she writes to the student, “is not dissimilar. Should you choose to, you can participate in a vibrant Jewish future... You will encounter hatred... but Jewish tradition in all its manifestations – religious, secular, intellectual, communal, artistic, and so much more – is too valuable to be tossed aside. This need for Jews to balance the ‘oy’ with the ‘joy’ is an exhortation... rejoice in who you are.” (*Antisemitism Here and Now*) In other words, we all need a playground where we can express the beauty and joy of our Judaism.

Again, Greta Gerwig offers us a relevant and joyful message. In an interview, she told the New York Times that she hopes the movie will be a spiritual activity for its viewers.⁶ The feeling that she wanted to achieve is the same one she felt as a Christian child when she was a guest at Shabbat dinners of close family friends who were Jewish. At those dinners, she recalls feeling completely welcome at the Shabbat table, where the parents would bless her as if she was their own child. Those hands on her head helped her to release the “wins and losses of the week” and affirm a sense of safety and blessing. She wanted to transmit that Shabbat feeling into the theater, wanting her audience to feel blessed. Shabbat is the epitome of Jewish joy. Every week Judaism asks us to take a spiritual retreat. As philosopher Achad Ha’am famously said, “More than Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel” [the Jewish people].

So today we join, with generations who have come before us, from Abraham and Hannah, from Torah to Talmud, our ancestors fleeing persecution, Jewish scholars and creative artists, children today, to affirm our Jewish identity - where we have been, and to dream about who we want to become. During this annual Jewish coming of age ritual, we open a new chapter and become co-creators of our present and future. Come inside and add your voice.

Gerwig offers us one final personal message for us to take into our New Year. My colleague Rabbi Michelle Pearlman calls this, “Pink Torah.”⁷ In the movie, Ruth Handler, a quintessential Jewish mother played by actress Rhea Perlman, makes an appearance to offer Barbie guidance and wisdom on her identity quest. It’s probably not a surprise to you that I see Ruth Handler in Gerwig’s film as a Creator or God like figure. At the end of the film Barbie once again encounters Ruth, this time to ask for permission to become human in the real world. Ruth replies, “you don’t need any permission. I can’t control you any more than I could control my own daughter. I named you after her and I always hoped for you, like I hoped for her.” Ruth adds: “We mothers stand still so our daughters can look back and see how far they have come.” It’s as if that Divine Parent, *Avinu Malkenu*, is sitting in her kitchen putting on a pot of tea, hoping we might soon come home, to begin to fix what is broken. What an empowering image to encourage us to be who we are and to dream big.

Like Barbie, we, too, have existential questions about life and death, power and politics, relationships and love. We, too, are wondering who we are and where we fit in. These are especially timely questions to ponder on Rosh HaShanah. And, as the Indigo Girls, Emily Saliers and Amy Ray, sang out with full hearts in their song about seeking knowledge and wisdom from different sources, “There’s more than one answer to these questions, pointing me in a crooked line.” The questioning, the searching and the seeking is what brings us “closer to fine.” Each of us has a role to play in our Jewish awakening. The book is open. God is calling us home. The choice is ours.

Anthem – Closer to Fine by the Indigo Girls (rendition by Brandi and Catherine Carlile)

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/11/magazine/greta-gerwig-barbie.html>

⁷ With gratitude to Rabbi Michelle Pearlman for inspiration in her High Holy Day 5784 sermon, “Pink Torah.”