

Falling In Love With Torah, Again: What All Jews Can Learn From Jews-By-Choice

Yom Kippur – Kol Nidrei 5775(2014)

Congregation Bet Mishpachah

#1

“I guess other churches are different, but when I was growing up, everyone seemed so judgmental. The idea of publicly confessing my every sin was terrifying. The first time I went to synagogue was Yom Kippur. I barely understood a thing, but one thing mesmerized me. Hundreds of people, in unison, confessing to sins they didn't commit, so that whoever did do those things, wouldn't feel singled out.”

#2

“Shabbos did it for me. It's true that “more than the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people.”¹ It's the world's best kept secret. Every week, we get 25 hours to eat, drink, sing, dance, sleep and have sex, and some people would rather go to work or shop online?”

#3

“I took the Introduction to Judaism class to make my fiancé happy. I decided to convert when the instructor was telling

¹ Ahad Haam, founder of Cultural Zionism.

us that you don't have to believe in God to be Jewish. That Judaism is a religion of deeds, not dogmas. You're not gonna make me swallow a lot of nonsense? That's my kind of religion."

Those are all real quotes from Jews-by-choice who were asked why they fell in love with Judaism. It's a love letter of sorts.

On Rosh Hashanah, I shared a love letter to our synagogue. I asked "why do we love each other? And why do we sometimes forget?" Tonight I ask a different question. "Why do we love Torah? And why do we sometimes forget?"

Quote #4

"Growing up, I was always disturbed by the song "That Old-Time Religion," with its implication that it's fine to adopt a way of thinking wholesale and unnecessary to give it any real consideration. I definitely have an inquisitive mind, so the Jewish approach is much more suited to me. Judaism asks us to take an open-minded, questioning approach to sacred texts. We accept them as sacred texts, but we also ask ourselves what they really mean (which is rarely self-evident)..."

That last point about Jewish intellectual tradition is one of the most common things I hear from Jews-by-choice.

As Jews, we're taught to challenge our teachers and challenge our texts. We're expected to bring our full intellect to our religious life.

If you were born into Jewish intellectual culture, it's easy to overlook that most religious communities don't work that way. We have what Jay Michaelson has called "the Jewish gift of unknowing." We are a religion for "those who know they do not know."²

Most rabbis will tell you that their favorite thing to do is a conversion. In fact, you heard me say just that if you were at Bet Mishpachah on shabbos exactly three weeks ago, when we welcomed a new Jew into our community.

But I'm not really taking about conversion. My subject tonight is what ALL JEWS can learn from those who have chosen Judaism.

My colleague Rabbi Jonathan Cohen says that watching a person choose Judaism is like watching someone fall in love.

The conversion ritual is like a marriage. You want proof? Every new Jew glows as they leave the *mikva*, the ritual bath that completes the ceremony. The only other place I've seen that glow is under the wedding *chuppah*.

² Michaelson, Jay. "Getting Serious About the Mystery" in the *Jewish Daily Forward*. <http://forward.com/articles/203974/getting-serious-about-the-mystery/#ixzz3CJb7uBQ>

That glow is love.

In progressive synagogues like ours, the Yom Kippur morning Torah reading comes from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the only book of the Torah to use the verb *ahavah*, romantic love, to refer to the covenant between God and Israel.

Deuteronomy is also unique in its use of the word “*hayom*,” on this day, which appears 74 times in that book. 16 of those times are in the *parshah* we’ll read from in the morning.

What is so special about “*hayom*?”

Over and over, Moses declares, “*hayom*,” on this day, God gave you the *mitzvot*. But if God gave us the *mitzvot* at Sinai, then why is Moses, 40 years later, saying God just gave us the *mitzvot* - *hayom* – on this day?

The *Chatam Sofer* (19th century Hungary) suggests that whenever the Torah uses the word “this day” it requires us to consider the *mitzvot* as if they were fresh and new - as if we just heard them for the **very first time**.

The quest for newness, suggests the *Chatam Sofer*, is part of human nature. We are easily bored and always seeking the next best thing.

New car.

New fashion.

New iPhone.

Mitzvot 9.0

To hear the *mitzvot* as if for the very first time means not only seeking new truths for new times, but seeking to renew ourselves. We must see with new eyes. We must fall in love with Torah all over again.

Psychologists tells us that relationships fail when we start to take our partners for granted. The anti-dote is to act like you're in a new relationship, to learn new things about your lover, and fall in love with your partner all over again.

Jews are the only people who think it's weird when someone wants to join their religion. Ask any Jew-by-choice. They have all had awkward conversations with confounded Jews-by-birth who acted like they were insane for wanting to become Jewish. Can you imagine a Mormon or a Baptist doing such a thing?

As Jews-by-birth, we can easily devalue what we were freely given. Jews by choice can't take Torah for granted, at first. But after twenty years, even converts can begin to forget why they fell in love.

I've fallen in love four times in my life. Once with my first girlfriend. Once with my wife. And twice with Torah.

My most recent love affair started almost four years ago, when I was feeling spiritually depleted. I was ordained full of passion, but years later I was just burnt out. Being

Jewish was my job, not my calling. But I wasn't ready to divorce Torah, so I started dating Judaism again. To discover new things about my partner, I tried something new. I took on a daily spiritual practice of Jewish prayer and meditation.

There were days when I meditated for only 5 minutes in my office between appointments. There were days I prayed while driving. There were days I prayed on the playground while pushing my son on the swings because I realized it was 6pm and I hadn't prayed yet. I prayed traditional texts, spontaneous thoughts and with no words at all.

Two and a half years later, I can honestly say I haven't missed a day.

Don't be too impressed. I have had my share of empty prayers. I don't get upset when I'm not feeling it on a random Tuesday, but in 5774, on one particular day, I really disappointed myself. It was a major holiday, and I was feeling NOTHING. I was on the *bimah*, and my body was davenning, but my soul was absent.

After the service, I was speaking with a congregant who is one of our communal exemplars of spiritual piety and devotion. He wouldn't call himself that, but I will.

He confessed that he felt as if he hadn't prayed at all. So I confessed in return. We both knew we deserved an F for that day's prayer practice.

We didn't berate ourselves abusively. We didn't give up on prayer or synagogue or Judaism. We went to bed and

started fresh the next day. The next morning, we both *davenned* – really davenned.

Practice doesn't make perfect. It just improves your stats. That's why we call it spiritual practice.

So here's an idea – a challenge from the Rabbi. Think of it as homework if that means you'll actually do it. Ready: Change your life! Really. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to choose a mitzvah. Commit to doing it regularly for a year. A year from now you can stop. Or not. But give it a year.

I do this myself. One year, I worked on not gossiping, and I became a mezuzah kisser. I kissed lots of mezuzahs, and I forgot a lot too. And needless to say, I did gossip a few times that year, and since. I'm not perfect. But I gossiped less and kissed mezuzahs more.

This is your chance to stop taking Judaism for granted. To act like you're in a new relationship.

It may be hard to believe that becoming a mezuzah kisser will change your life, but I promise you it will. You don't actually have to move to Brooklyn and buy a wig or a black hat to hear Torah anew. You can change your life right here, right now.

Just pick something. If you don't know what to choose, here are a few suggestions to consider.

You could consider the mitzvah *u'vecharta b'chayim* – choose life. Choose life if you need to get your diabetes or

your HIV under control, or cease an addictive behavior, or leave an abusive relationship, or anything else that will keep you safe and healthy.

Some of you have a relationship that needs attention. A parent or partner or ex, a sibling or colleague or friend. Some significant relationship is on the brink. Take this chance to repair what seems irreparable.

If your health and your primary relationships are in pretty good shape this year, pick something else. Increase your charitable giving, by a noticeable amount. Start studying Torah, regularly. Go visit your Aunt Helen, every week.

Consider something that will change your priorities, change how you spend your time, or how you spend your money.

Before we let someone become a Jew they have to explore three significant Jewish practices – Shabbat (holy time), kashrut (holy eating), and tefilla (holy prayer). If you have never made Jewish choices about what you eat, what you do on Saturdays, and how you talk to God, then how can you understand Judaism? So think about it. Maybe this is the year to explore holy time or holy eating or holy prayer.

If you feel called to talk to God, ease into it. If the last time you prayed was a major holiday or family bar mitzvah, then start praying once a week, for 20 minutes. If you go to synagogue weekly, consider adding a daily personal prayer practice, for twenty minutes.

Or maybe holy time is calling you. If 25 hours of Shabbat is too daunting, start with 5 hours. It doesn't have to be fancy. The best Shabbat dinners Mira and I ever had were frozen pizza. We didn't have time to cook. It was our ritual in Colorado that after synagogue, we arrived home just in time to turn on our favorite show, and cuddle up on the couch.

Or is holy eating intriguing to you: Consider eating products that are healthier for the planet or kinder to human beings. Consider making blessings before you eat, or kashering two sets of dishes. Consider only eating meat that's cruelty free or kosher slaughter, or both.

Some of you may be thinking, I already do all that. I turn my computer off before I light my Shabbat candles. I buy organic and skip the pork. I say the shema twice a day every day. Good for you.

Now give it some honest thought. Is there nothing you want to improve? Has it gotten a little stale over the years?

Some of you are thinking, but I'm not "religious."

Well, you don't have to be "religious" to care about the ethical implications of what you eat. And you don't have to believe in God to enjoy having sex on a Friday night.

Just one more love letter from a Jew-by-choice.

“In other religions,” she said, “you find God. To become Jewish, you find a community, and you find yourself.”

To hear the *mitzvot* as if for the very first time means not only seeking new truths for new times, but seeking to renew ourselves. We must see with new eyes. We must fall in love with Torah all over again.

Tomorrow morning we will read:

You stand ***this day, all*** of you, before YHVH your God...to ***enter the covenant.***

We hear the *mitzvot* anew, so that today we may reenter the covenant. Yes, that covenant. The one you were born into. Or perhaps it's the one you entered into of your own free will many years ago, and you thought you were in for good. You choose to reenter it ***hayom.***

One last thought. Our shul is blessed by a much much higher than average number of Jews-by-choice. I'm convinced it's *davka* because we're an LGBT synagogue. The world doesn't make it easy to be Jewish, and LGBT, and religious. I know. True, I didn't have it half as bad as some of you, but we all have our stories, and I can share a few doozies. We fought for every last bit of our spirituality the hard way. We all know just how hard it is. And even those of us who are straight and cisgender, fought too, albeit in a different way. The world tells us that Torah isn't for us. That religion isn't for us. And yet, here we are.

We're all here for a reason. What's yours?

In our age of choice, we are all Jews-by-choice. Nobody made us come here tonight. We chose to be here. Why?

Are you searching for yourself? For God? For a community? For an intangible something?

It's time to stop taking things for granted.

Fall in love with Torah again, or perhaps for the first time.