

Rosh Hashanah 5780: Why Be Jewish?

Several weeks ago, I was running errands in downtown Bethesda. While I was walking to my car, I noticed a pick-up truck with handwritten signs in the windows. As I got closer to the truck, I read the signs. One stated, “By now, most of my children hate Jews.” On the other, “Jews must be seen to be punished for what Jews do to humans. It’s ok to be angry at Jews.” Here, on a beautiful Tuesday afternoon in the middle of downtown Bethesda, I had come face to face with antisemitism.

In 2019, antisemitism is everywhere. Its terrifying rise in recent years and its horrific turn to murderous violence over the past year has sounded our alarms. You are going to hear a lot about anti-Semitism over these holidays because it cannot be avoided. I applaud and thank you all for being here this morning because sadly, coming to synagogue is no longer just a good thing to do on the Holy Days, it is an act of courage.

That leads me to the question I would like to pose this morning. Why be Jewish? Wouldn’t it be easier to let that piece of us go? We would not have to worry about antisemitism if we didn’t identify as part of this particular group which has faced challenges and adversity for thousands of years. Over the past 50 years or so, many of us were committed to being Jewish because of what philosopher Emil Fackenheim wrote, known as the 614th commandment. He declared, “Thou shalt not hand Hitler a posthumous victory. To despair of the God of Israel is to continue Hitler’s work for him.” That answer used to be convincing. However, as the Shoah becomes more distant and the survivors die out, it is losing its relevance. Instead of answering the question in the past, it is time to turn to the present and to look to the future.

This morning, I would like to provide you three answers which resonate with me. They are all connected. You may feel drawn to one, all, or none of these answers. I encourage you, on these Holy Days when we are commanded to reflect upon our lives and our purpose, to spend some time thinking about your own Jewish identity. Ask yourself the question and come up with an answer that works for you.

I believe there are three main reasons to be Jewish in America in 2019. The first, because it helps us understand ourselves. The second, because it gives us a meaningful path to connect with others. And finally, because Judaism provides us with an essential task and purpose.

First. Judaism helps us understand ourselves. It provides values and guidance for how we should live our lives and what we can do to make life meaningful. For me, the practice of Mussar has been a game changer. Mussar is the study of *middot*, character traits, and I know many of you here this morning has engaged in this study of the soul. Mussar teaches that we have an inner, divine spark but that spark is often hidden by the obstacles we face in our lives.

Mussar acknowledges our flaws, but then compels us to examine them. After deep reflection, we practice *kabbalat*, exercises, that will help us cultivate better character traits and healthier habits. If we find that we take up too much space at work, we talk too much, we don't listen to others, and we are not good collaborators, then our middah of anavah, humility, needs attention. We keep a journal of our experiences, and we try out different methods of behavioral change. We may decide only to speak once during a meeting. We may put on an outfit that is less colorful. We may decide to purposely sit at the back of the room. Through outer experiences, the Mussar masters teach that we can improve our souls. Mussar is one way that Judaism can help us better understand ourselves and guide us to make real change in our lives.

The second reason to be Jewish today is that it provides us with community. I teach my conversion students that you cannot be Jewish on a desert island. We depend on one another. There are countless examples. To say most prayers requires a minyan of 10 people. A beit din, a rabbinic court, must include three judges. Two witnesses are required in matters of legal proceedings. Judaism includes with it a built-in community. At Temple Sinai, we are proud of our Kathie Rabinovitz SinaiCares program which provides rides for people to and from the Temple, brings challot and yahrzeit candles to mourners and baby bags to new parents. Our SinaiCares volunteers visit people who are homebound, lonely, or struggling, and supports our clergy in the pastoral work we do. Being a Jew means you should never be alone.

The third reason to be Jewish is that it provides us an essential task and purpose, to mend the world. You only have to turn to the Bible to hear the plea of the prophet, imploring us to take care of the vulnerable among us and to turn from evil toward the good. Being Jewish means you should never be satisfied with how the world is and that we look instead to how the world

could be. Our sources give us practical advice and guidance. Let's take guns for example. The Talmud, redacted in the 5th century CE did not know of guns, but it did know of weapons and the dangers they posed. It very clearly states in the Talmud that one is not allowed to sell weapons to idol worshippers or to people who could do you harm.

The world envisioned by the rabbis of the Talmud was one that was ruled by laws which were supposed to be just and protect society. So we turn to our ancient wisdom to guide us today. In 2019, close to 100 Americans a day are killed by guns. In the face of continued governmental inaction, Judaism compels us to act. That is why several years ago our synagogue formed the Temple Sinai Gun Violence Prevention Group, which has just been recognized nationally with the Irving Fain Social Justice Award which will be awarded this December at the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial conference. Has our gun violence prevention group solved the plague of gun violence in this country? No, but we have taken meaningful steps to create change locally, and we will continue to advocate for commonsense gun safety legislation here and federally. Judaism grounds us in the sacred work of fixing our broken world.

Why be Jewish is a question we should ask ourselves throughout our lives. I believe Judaism can provide each of us with a light to shine out into this dark world. I want to share with you an inspiring answer I read in an opinion piece by New York Times columnist Bari Weiss titled, "To fight antisemitism be a proud Jew." She writes, "In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful, and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul—and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours." ¹

If you've decided you want to remain Jewish, and I'm guessing all of you here would answer affirmatively, take some time to think about what that looks like in your life. Perhaps you decide to light shabbat candles every week. It may mean that you make a more conscientious effort to attend services. Perhaps you will begin or return to a serious course of Jewish education through one of our many exciting learning opportunities. Maybe you join the green team, the gun violence prevention group, multiracial sinai, our immigration and asylum seeker working group

¹ Bari Weiss, "To Fight Anti-Semitism, Be a Proud Jew" The New York Times, September 6th, 2019

to do meaningful social action and social justice work. Perhaps you decide to read Jewish books, see an Israeli film, cook a kugel, fry falafel or try out that delicious Sephardic charoset recipe. We Jewish professionals cannot keep Judaism alive alone. We need you to join us and bring forth your talents, your skills, and your wisdom to keep our faith strong, meaningful, and relevant.

Edmund Fleg was a French poet and writer and essayist. He, like many of us, was raised in an unobservant household and did not think too much of his faith growing up. But then, in 1894, he witnessed the anti-Semitic events of the Dreyfuss affair where a Jewish officer in the French army was accused of treason and was paraded through the streets of Paris to angry shouts of “death to Jews.” This awakened something in Fleg and propelled him to discover and connect with his Jewish identity. In 1927, as he found out he was going to become a grandfather for the first time, Edmund Fleg wrote this letter to his unborn grandson.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel asks every possible sacrifice of my soul.

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of Israel is the most ancient and the most modern.

I am a Jew because Israel’s promise is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished; men will complete it.

I am a Jew because for Israel man is not yet fully created; men are creating him.

I am a Jew because Israel places man and his unity above nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because above man, image of the divine unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

As we begin the new year and renew our souls, let us also renew our commitment to Judaism. In these dark and scary times, let us turn to our faith as a source of meaning, comfort, and hope. May the wisdom of thousands of years challenge and inspire us. May the Jewish people and all who are connected to us be blessed with strength and peace. May we each be able to answer the question by proclaiming, I am a Jew, and I am proud.