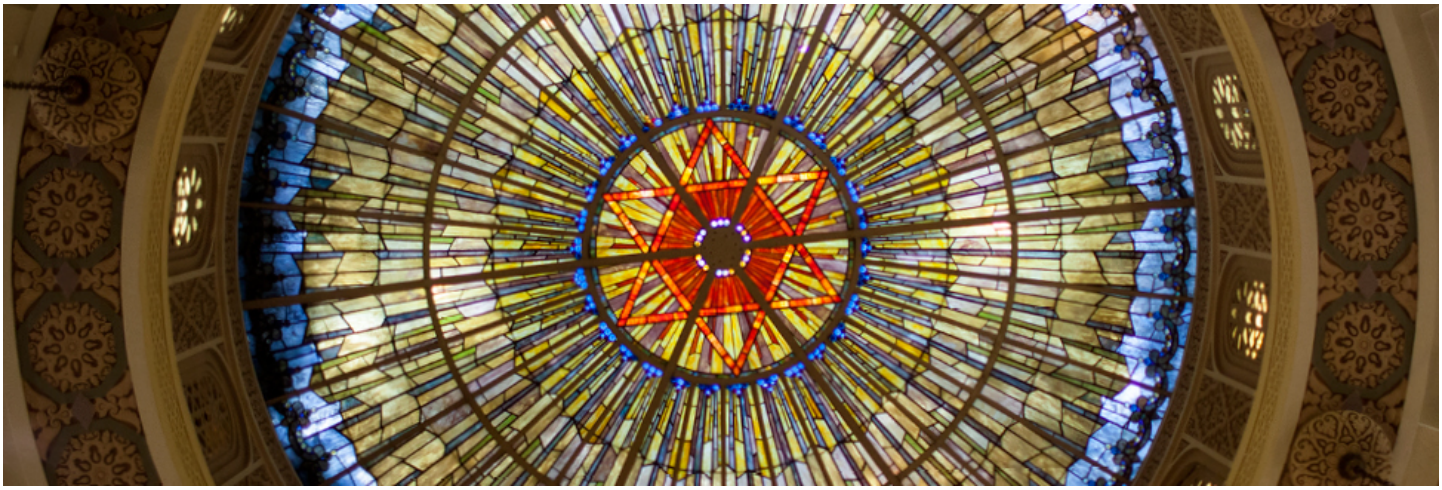

Why I Am a Jew

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A century ago, Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* was the talk of the town. The play was a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Jewish protagonist, David, immigrates to America from Russia in the wake of the Kishinev Pogroms. He falls in love with a fellow Russian, Vera, who is not only a Christian, but the daughter of the very Tsarist officer who directed the pogrom that forced David to flee. Unlike Shakespeare's tragedy, however, this play has a happy ending. The lovers are reunited. As the title indicates, Zangwill's play is about America's capacity to absorb its immigrants. Like John Lennon, Zangwill imagined a time where the world will live as one – all our differences, religious and ethnic, blended in one great melting pot – a utopian vision of cultural assimilation.

Rabbi Judah Magnes, then the Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El on the Upper East Side, preached a fiery sermon denouncing Zangwill and his play. Magnes took umbrage at Zangwill's vision of a world in which there are no longer differences of faith or ethnicity. Magnes explained that such a vision of Americanization asked Jews to give up their identity in the name of brotherhood and progress. Magnes' sermon became the inspiration for Horace Kallen's famous essay on the subject, offering an alternative image to the melting pot. Kallen proposed the image of a symphony in which the distinctive sounds of each instrument are not lost if the right harmonies are achieved. In Kallen's own words:

"As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form... so in society, each ethnic group... the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization." (H. Kallen, "Democracy Versus The Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality", in *The Nation*, 2/25/1915)

Kallen's wish for America, for American Jewry, was for one's heritage to be a point of pride, a powerful and positive assertion of self, an assertion which not only is not at odds with being American, but in and of itself, the most honest expression of what it is to be American.

One hundred years later, the Zangwill-Magnes-Kallen exchange is a prescient comment on American Jewry today. To what degree can and does American Jewry assert a positive Jewish identity, express its own sound, celebrate it, model it, defend it and teach it amidst the harmonies and dissonances of American life? A century has passed, but the neighborhood, literally and figuratively, is one and the same. The question sits at our doorstep just as it did then.

There is no better day than today, Rosh Hashanah, to address this question. Today, the first of Tishrei, marks the creation of the world. *Hayom harat olam*, "the day the world was created," marks the creation of the first person – Adam, not the first Jew, but the first human being – the ancestor of collective humanity. Every other new year celebration begins with the origins of a particular people. The history of Rome starts with the story of Romulus, the founder of that city. The Greeks planned the Olympic Games around their new year as a means of celebrating the achievements of their own society. The Muslims begin with the Night Journey of Muhammad, Christians with the birth of Jesus. Not so with us Jews. It is actually not until spring, at the new year of months, in Nissan, at Passover, that we commemorate our redemption from Egypt and the beginning of our peoplehood. We celebrate both new years, the birth of universal humanity and also the birth of our own people – both are of our deepest concern. We think of ourselves, but not only of ourselves; we think of all humankind. More than any other people, we aspire to create our own sound within the symphony of humanity.

The tragedy of the Jewish community today is that we have not internalized this message. To put it directly, my concern is that Zangwill won the argument and the fears of Magnes have been realized. American Jewry has lost its ability to express its distinct tone and timbre – we are simmering comfortably in a melting pot.
It is not that Jews are ashamed of our Jewishness. In fact, I would say that our children, certainly the children and grandchildren of our community, are entirely comfortable with the idea of being Jewish. I actually think that we have woken up to a situation that neither Zangwill, nor Magnes nor Kallen could have predicted. A moment in time when we are happy to be Jewish, when it is good to be Jewish, when there is no stigma to being Jewish – we just don't know what being Jewish actually means. Eugene Borowitz, in his famous book *The Masks Jews Wear*, called American Jews "Marranos in reverse." Marranos were Jews of 14th and 15th century Spain, who converted to Catholicism due to persecution, but secretly maintained Jewish practices; they adopted a Christian exterior but were steadfast Jews in private. We are Marranos in reverse. As Byron Sherwin recently wrote, "American Jews publicly affirm their identities as Jews but live out their personal lives as non-Jews." *(Faith Finding Meaning: A Theology of Judaism)* We are a new breed – comfortable in our Jewish exterior, but removed from the wellsprings of our inner identity.

I think of the old story of Sadie Goldstein, who found herself seated across from a well-dressed man on a train. "Excuse me," she said, "but are you Jewish?" "No," replied the man and returned to his paper. A few minutes later, Sadie asked: "Excuse me again, are you sure you're not Jewish?" "I'm sure," said the man. But Sadie, being Sadie, couldn't help herself and a few minutes later she asked a third time. "I'm so sorry, but are you absolutely sure you're not Jewish?" "All right, all right," the man said. "You win. I'm Jewish." "That's funny," replied Sadie, "Because you don't look Jewish."

Our problem is that we know we are Jewish, we just aren't sure what being Jewish means to us. The late Shlomo Carlebach, reflecting on his years of visiting students on college campuses around the world, once commented, "I ask students what they are. If someone says, 'I'm a Catholic,' I know that's a Catholic. If they say, 'I'm a Protestant,' I know that's a Protestant. If they say, 'I'm just a human being,' I know that's a Jew."

We live in a remarkable time for Jews. College quotas and exclusionary hiring practices are outside our children's experience. The century since Zangwill has blurred all lines, Elvis wore a Jewish star around his neck, explaining he would not want to be kept out of heaven on a technicality. The Caribbean-born Harry Belafonte has a better *Hava Nagila* that all of us, and Madonna knows more about Kabbala than most Jews I know. Jews in America aren't outliers anymore, we are remarkably unremarkable – most of all to ourselves. As Kallen himself once wrote: "A Jew is one of thirteen million people in search of a definition."

I think the most interesting event that happened this past summer was something that actually never happened. I was fascinated by the non-event of a nice Jewish boy marrying into the closest thing America has to royalty – the Clinton family. Think about it for a second. As my colleague and friend Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller put it, "it was the day that Judaism married America." A happening of sociological significance that I believe will be viewed in retrospect as of the same magnitude as a Jewish vice-presidential candidate, Sandy Koufax not playing on Yom Kippur, or the Oreo becoming Kosher. And it came and went without a comment. This is not a rant about intermarriage; it is rather an observation of the cultural significance of a Jew marrying into the First Family and the collective shrug it received from all of us.

What scares me is that Jews have lost the ability to give voice to what it means to be Jewish. We have lost the ability to articulate the distinctive qualities that make being

Jewish a badge of honor worth preserving. And here's the uncomfortable part: the answers that we have, that we continue to harp on, are unsatisfying at best and at worst, self defeating. The answers we give to ourselves are hollow; they are tinny; and they are neither necessary nor sufficient drivers of Jewish identity today.

All too often we point to anti-Semitism. For decades, we had a compelling argument for Jewish identity: we had to be Jewish given what Hitler tried to do to us. In my office, all the time, members of this congregation knock on my door filled with angst, telling me of their Jewish child's plans to marry a non-Jew and ask how can they, the grandchildren of survivors, do such a thing. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim coined the idea of the 614th commandment – that in addition to the 613 commandments, a post-Holocaust Jewry bore an additional obligation – not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. We have to remain Jewish. It is a powerful thought. Of course anti-Semitism exists and we will forever remember the lives of our people who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis. But as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote, "never again" does not necessarily lead to "ever again." *(Future Tense)* It is not a positive reason to be Jewish, it is an argument through negation, an intellectual cul-de-sac. The sociologist Egon Mayer wrote years ago: "We can no longer depend on the unkindness of strangers to keep us Jews." Try telling a young Jew to be Jewish because of anti-Semitism and you will get a blank stare. Try telling a Jew who has fallen in love with a non-Jew to put a passionate love affair on hold because of an intergenerational debt and you will see how ineffective the argument is.

After all, even without the cloud of anti-Semitism, it is very difficult to make an argument about the future drawn from the past. In other words – nostalgia doesn't sell. As the late Arthur Hertzberg wrote, "A community cannot survive on what it remembers; it will persist only because of what it affirms and believes." (*The Jews in America, Four Centuries of An Uneasy Encounter*, p. 374) Bringing up Jewish heritage as a compelling reason for Jewish identity is a platitude that doesn't hit a younger generation in the kishkes, who, by the way, have no idea where their kishkes are. A religion of nachas and nostalgia is nice, but it is not compelling. Guilt does not sell! Jewish survivalism, as my teacher Rabbi Louis Jacobs wrote, is not a substitute for Judaism. Survival for what? Throwing out the past as a reason to keep people Jewish is no more effective than it was to get me to eat by telling that people were starving on the other side of the world. We can't count on the family history to make people value being Jewish. The old stories can't glue together the contemporary world.

There is another argument in need of reconsideration, and here I need to speak with more caution. Israel. Support for Israel is not a substitute for Judaism. Let me be very clear, as a Jew, as your Rabbi, I believe that a Jewish identity that does not embrace and engage and support the modern state of Israel is an incomplete Judaism. I can't take credit for being born into a time when the dream of thousands of years of Jewish history, to be a free people in our own land has come true. But I was born into this time and so were you, and that means that Israel is necessary part of our Jewish identity. Not once, not twice, but three times, in a single calendar year members of our congregation will be going to Israel together. On six Tuesday evenings this Fall, we will be flying in Dr. Ken Stein, who I believe to be the finest Israel educator in America, to teach a master class on the history of Zionism and Israel. Whether your politics are to the right or the left, American Jewry has a responsibility to be informed and vocal about the Jewish National home. Come on your own, bring a friend, your teenage children, the class will fill up, if it has not done so already. And I expect that on Friday night, when Ambassador Oren addresses our community about the newly resumed peace talks, that this sanctuary will be standing room only as we show our support. I have more expectations when it comes to this congregation and Israel than anyone realizes, and yet I tell you – it is not enough.

Because when it comes to Jewish identity, Israel is necessary – but it is not sufficient. This summer I had occasion to read from the diaries of Theodore Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, whose 150th birthday was observed this year. I was fascinated to discover what Herzl's deepest fear was at the first Zionist Congress in 1897. He wrote that it wasn't the crowds, it wasn't the internal debates amongst his colleagues, it wasn't how the world would respond to the Zionist dream. On the Sabbath prior to the historic conference, Herzl was informed that he would be invited to the synagogue, and he would be called up to the Torah for an aliyah. He wrote, "The few Hebrew words of the brokhe cause me more anxiety than my welcoming and closing address and the whole direction of the proceedings. (*Complete Diaries*, p. 588-589)

Israel is not Judaism. Neither in Herzl's time, nor in ours, not in America nor in Israel can or should our faith be reduced to nationalism. Birthright trips are important only insofar as they connect young Jews back to synagogues in North America. Writing a check to AIPAC or J-Street or whomever you support, is an expression of, not a substitute for, being Jewish. It is spiritually shortsighted and pragmatically

inadvisable to reduce the totality of the Jewish experience to Israel. I don't want the faith of my children to come and go based on a news flash on CNN or the latest proclamation of cynical politicians on who is or isn't a Jew, or the pronouncement by the former Sephardic chief rabbi on his proposed solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. And while it is not my business to tell Israelis how to run their lives, I do think that unless Israelis themselves begin to take more seriously the "Jewish" content of the Jewish state, they will in short order find themselves to be a country of either secular Hebrew speakers or ultra-Orthodox Jews who share the single fact that neither group has a developed sense of Jewish Peoplehood.

There are so many reasons why support for Israel cannot be the driving argument for Jewish identification, but let me tell you the real reason. Because I want peace. As Heschel once wrote, "I am an optimist against my better judgment." And on that day when peace does come, I want to know that the people of Israel and the Jewish community of America have more to talk about than security and borders and Iran. Unless we start an active conversation on what it means to be part of a broader people of Israel, American Jews and Israelis will have increasingly less in common. The challenge we face, both here and in Israel, is how to be unflinching in our support for the State of Israel, but to know that the State is not and never has been and never should be the sum total of Jewish identity.

We have so many answers – Anti-Semitism, nostalgia, Israel. None of them are bad. They are just neither compelling nor sufficient. Tikkun Olam, repairing or mending the world – also critically important, but "doing good" is not a substitute for Judaism; you don't have to be Jewish to be a global citizen. Our rabbis teach in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, that any love that is contingent on only one thing will not last. A Judaism built on any of these "one things" alone will not hold.
The sociologist Marshall Sklare wrote years ago, "American Jews have entered a period of Jewish assertion – but they have yet to make up their minds what it is they propose to assert. And what they do assert turns out, on close examination to be superficial and assimilated… In short," Sklare continues, "the people we have dealt with call themselves Jews, and their Judaism matters to them. But they are vastly uncertain in the main what calling oneself a Jew or caring about Judaism means or is supposed to mean."

It is this sort of message we are communicating to each other and it is not enough. We want the next generation to be Jewish, not only Jews. We want to be at home in our Jewishness, to appreciate it, to know its distinct sounds. If this is what you want, and I think it is, we have to offer more, more substance, better answers better examples. We can't rely on the tired old answers of the past.

So am I going to give you a good answer for this question? Am I going to conclude with a forceful argument that you can give your friends and your children for why they should want to be Jewish? No! I have my answers, but they are just that – my answers.

I am a Jew because Judaism is a faith that provides me with the tools, the mitzvot to make the everyday of every day sacred. Shabbat is a life-giving refuge in a world of emails, phone calls and schedules – an island of tranquility in a sea of frenetic activity. The rites and rituals of Jewish living provide me with the language to fill my life and the life of those around me with meaning, inquiry and the presence of God

I am a Jew because Judaism demands of me that I see every other human being as created in the image of God. Rich or poor, young or old, friend or stranger – every human being is created with equal and infinite dignity.

I am a Jew because Judaism sees no conflict between being a Jew and being a member of a shared humanity. Because for Jews, particularism and universalism are not at odds, but two sides of the same coin. I am a better human being for being a proud Jew. I am a better Jew for being concerned with my shared humanity.

I am a Jew because to be a Jew means that I get to be a lifetime member in the greatest book club ever created. Ancient, medieval, and modern literature, rabbinic discourse, fiction, and poetry – my bookshelves are my playground, a sanctuary for my soul, a stimulus for my mind and a shared vocabulary with my people across time and space. To be a Jew means I get to add my voice to the grandest narrative of all, the story of a people that long preceded me and will endure long after I am gone, and I am trying my darndest to pass on the story in as good, if not better, condition than how I received it.

I am a Jew because it is fun to be a Jew. I sing with my children and they teach me new songs. I love a good Jewish joke – especially the ones I am not allowed to tell from the pulpit. I love being Jewish because I watch my wife light Shabbat candles

every week with our children at her side and that never gets old. I get paid to serve a community, and that is a unique blessing, but I get to see the passion of so many individuals whose sense of self is fulfilled by giving of their time, wisdom and resources to the Jewish community.

I am a Jew because Judaism gives me the tools to give voice to my faith in God – a faith which is sometimes comforting, but usually challenging and disturbing, a faith filled with doubt and spiritual yearning. Being a Jew means I can tap into a tradition that is rich enough to answer the existential questions lurking in the depths of my soul.

I am a Jew because I love Jews. I love all people, but I especially love my yiddishe mishpacha. I get a sense of belonging and community from attending a rally, teaching a class, going to a shiva minyan, being at a Shabbat morning service, receiving a warm smile from a congregant while I'm on my morning jog.

I have my answers, but they are just that – my answers. None of these answers ask me to disparage another faith. None of these answers are built on guilt, compulsion, or fear and yet they are all worth fighting for. Each one, unto itself, is probably not entirely sufficient, but collectively they make up the answer to the question of why I am a Jew. There are many forceful answers to this question. Mine may not be yours. But you must have an answer! As my teacher Rabbi Alan Lucas wrote, "It is just not good enough to be Jewish out of stubbornness, sentiment or fear. We must be Jews out of knowledge, commitment, faith and love." You need your own answers. If you don't feel that your answers are good enough, if you feel that they are somehow inadequate, I can think of no better way of spending these High Holy Days, these hours of introspection, than formulating a new answer for yourself.

Thomas Mann once wrote that "There is at bottom only one problem in the world, and this is its name – how does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?" (*Doktor Faustus* XXX, 308.) We must burst forth and reclaim the tone and timbre of what it is to be a Jew. It is nothing but an accident of history that we were born Jews. But to live as a Jew – that is a choice we need to make. To live proudly, passionately and joyfully as a Jew – that is what we seek to achieve today and in the year ahead. I will be here, this synagogue will be here, to help you make that journey. The first step is for you to take. May we all have the courage to do so in the year ahead.

Tag(s): Sermons