

TO BE A JEW
Rosh HaShanah 2012
Rabbi Harold Kushner
Temple Israel of Natick

Let me begin this morning with an important question that we don't ask nearly often enough, probably because we're not sure how to answer it: What does it mean to be a Jew?

If the first thing that comes to your mind is a list of foods you're not supposed to eat, you're missing the point. If the first thing that comes to mind about being Jewish is the long history of persecution, discrimination, anti-Semitism, you're giving our enemies too much power to define us. They don't deserve that power.

Let me suggest that the first component of being a Jew is that it makes you part of something bigger and greater than yourself, and that's important because we are beginning to appreciate how much we are shaped by the community or communities of which we are a part. The question of identity, "who Am I?" it turns out is really a question of "whose am I?" We are shaped by the people with whom we share our lives.

Ask yourself: wouldn't you be a different person if you had had different parents, shared a different religion, lived in a different country or even a different part of this country, had different friends, gone to different schools? There are no self-made men or women; we are all shaped by our interactions with other people.

Interestingly, the three most stimulating books I've read in the past year, -- The Social Animal by David Brooks of the New York Times, Thinking Fast and Slow by the Israeli Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, and The Righteous Mind by Jonathan Haidt, books on three completely different topics, but all three of them focus on the same point: we think we make decisions rationally, from what we'll have for dinner to whom we'll vote for in November. We think we weigh the alternatives and come up with the answer that fits our value system. But there is indisputable psychological evidence that we make decisions, both important and trivial ones, on a gut level, on an emotional reaction, and only after the fact does our rational mind come up with a cover story to justify it. And where do we get those gut reactions from? They are shaped by the people we have shared our lives with, parents, siblings, teachers and friends.

Despite all the jokes about Jewish mothers using guilt to control us, the truth is that Jewish behavior was never fueled by guilt, by a voice inside us telling us "that's wrong." It was primarily fueled by shame, the fear that people will think less of us. Not "God told us not to do that" but "what will the neighbors think?" Think of Tevya in Fiddler on the Roof. If one day, Tevya had an irresistible lust for a non-kosher meal, what would he have had to do? He would have had to leave the Jewish neighborhood of Anatevka, cross into the gentile part where he didn't speak the language, negotiate with a butcher who had no reason not to cheat him, and by the time he got home, none of his neighbors were speaking to him. That, not the fear of God or the words of the Torah, is what kept most Jews observant.

And that's where religion comes in. When you do it right, religion is not about a personal connection to God. It's about a connection to other people, so that together you can strive to come into the presence of God. As one writer puts it, "it is religious

belonging that [makes us] better neighbors, not religious *believing*.” Religion helps us rise above the concern with ourselves and leads us to connect with other people.

Some years ago, you may remember how the televangelists dominated the TV channels on Sunday morning. They would buy time and urge people to send them money so that God would bless them and the preacher would be able to continue to do God’s work (God’s work apparently defined as helping the preacher make his car payments and buy more television time.) It was during those months that I found myself on a panel with a prominent Christian theologian whose work I had read and admired. I asked him what he, as a serious Christian, thought about those TV evangelists, and he said to me, “Individualism is the Protestant heresy.” He wasn’t just saying that they were fakers, trying to prey on people’s gullibility. He was saying that anytime you define religion as a one-on-one relationship with God, without the mediating influence of a community, you’re doing religion wrong. Belief is a very private matter. It isolates you in the privacy of your own mind, it separates you from everyone who believes differently, and that’s not what religion is really about. Speaking as a theologian, he was telling me that the quest for God begins by being part of something bigger than yourself. That redeems you from self-concern and begins teaching you to care about other people.

That’s something Judaism has always understood. It’s impossible to be a Jew alone. That’s why we invented the minyan, God’s sacred presence conjured up when Jews come together looking for Him. That’s why it meant so much to you that so many people showed up for your son’s Bar Mitzvah or your daughter’s wedding, or that they went out of their way to pay a condolence call when you were sitting shiva. Religion connects you to other people as the first step in the process of your finding God.

Now, if you buy into the idea that being a Jew is not a private matter but a matter of being a community, a people, there is something I want every one of you to do in the coming year. I want you to claim ownership of Temple Israel of Natick. I want you to see it as something that belongs to you, not something you belong to. A synagogue doesn’t work, it can’t give you what you need from it, if you see yourself as a customer: “Let’s see what’s happening at the Temple and decide if it interests us.” For your wellbeing more than ours, you have to see it as something that belongs to you. Find something we do that matters to you. If it’s not religious services, it could be one of our award-winning adult classes. It could be the fellowship of the Sisterhood or the Men’s Club. It could be working with teenagers, guiding the Religious School, or being part of the group that visits the lonely and the shut-ins or delivers food to families sitting shiva. Do it for your sake, not for the Temple’s, because you understand that nobody can be a Jew alone.

What does it mean to be a Jew? It not only makes you part of a larger group, it makes you part of a truly fascinating group. I am convinced that Jews are more interesting than most other people. Barely two percent of the American population, we write more books, we create more movies and television shows, we are disproportionately represented among doctors, lawyers, college professors, Nobel Prize winners. I will argue that, forty or fifty years ago, an interfaith marriage was usually the result of a Jewish person trying to escape the limitations and discrimination practiced against Jews. Today it will almost always be the result of a non-Jew fascinated by Jews and Judaism for our intellectual depth, our theological openness and the warmth of the

Jewish family. I remember a young woman preparing to convert to Judaism years ago saying to me, "I know it drives my boy friend crazy but I wish I had a mother who cared enough about me to say, Put on a sweater; it's cold out." Astonishingly, intermarriage has become a doorway into Judaism not an escape route out.

If the first ingredient of being Jewish is being part of a people, part of something greater than yourself, the second part is that the essence of the Jewish enterprise is being part of a community charged with the divine mission of turning people into human beings. And how do you turn people into authentic human beings? By teaching them to see themselves as capable of generating holiness, something that in the beginning only God could do but which He came to share with us. Being able to turn ordinary moments into moments of holiness is what identifies you as an authentic human being.

That's what we are doing when we visit the sick and the bereaved. We're creating a moment of holiness. That's what we are doing when we give tzedakah, or when we support Israel. And I would insist, that is the purpose of the mitzvot, the ritual commandments that we find in the Torah. They are not about obedience, mindlessly doing what God tells us to do in the hope that He will reciprocate by doing what we ask Him to do. They are about holiness.

The Jewish dietary laws, the system of keeping kosher, don't derive from some obsolete ideas about what foods or combination of foods are unhealthy in hot climates, which is what I suspect a lot of you believe. That makes it easy to ignore them. They are an effort to take something we share with the animals, the need to eat every day, and elevate it above the animal level by imposing choice on instinct. That is what holiness means for humans, imposing choice on instinct, in a way that no other living creature can do. That's why we fast on Yom Kippur. It's not to atone for the sin of overeating during the rest of the year. If that were the case, one day of Yom Kippur wouldn't be enough. We fast to proclaim our humanity. We can be hungry but we choose not to eat.

If the dietary laws are a way of making mealtime a sacred moment by imposing choice on instinct, if the laws about adultery and marital fidelity are about imposing choice on sexual activity instead of being ruled by instinct as animals are, Shabbat is a demonstration of our ability to manipulate and sanctify time. This Friday, September 21, will be the autumnal equinox, twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. After that, days will gradually get shorter and the sun will set earlier without our having to do anything to make it happen. It's automatic. That's Nature. But the day after Friday the 21st won't be Shabbat unless we turn it into Shabbat, unless we light candles and spend the day differently. We have that power. Today is a High Holy Day only because we exercise our power of choice to make it that. For the rest of the world, it's just Monday.

Once again, that is something no other creature can do. All other animals are at the mercy of Nature. The rhythm of day and night, the change of seasons tell them when to eat, when to sleep, when to mate. Imagine a world where human beings lived like that, ate like animals, hibernated like animals, mated and raised their offspring like animals. That is the world that the Torah came to redeem us from, teaching us to bring holiness into the world and to model holiness for others by imposing choice on those powerful instinctive drives. To be a Jew is to recognize that we live in a world that is starved for holiness. It's rich in natural beauty, in creature comforts, in scientific breakthroughs, but

poor in all the things that make human beings human. That is what God summoned us to do for His world when we stood at Sinai 3200 years ago, and that is what we as Jews are summoned to do for God's world today.

The Biblical name for members of the Jewish people is Yisrael, Israelites. The name comes from the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, or some divine being (I like to think Jacob was struggling with his conscience) the night before he has to do something difficult that he's not sure he's up to doing. Yisrael, Israel, means "one who struggles with God, who wrestles with God." Do you realize what a unique name that is for a religious community, people who wrestle with God? Islam means "submission," surrendering your own will, no questions asked. Christianity is rooted in a theology of "It's not up to us to question His will." Tragedy strikes – it's God's will. "She's in a better place now." But to be an Israelite is not to accept God or God's demands unquestioningly and not to reject them as irrelevant or obsolete but to struggle with them, trying to ascertain what is God's authentic demand. You've heard me interpret the Torah reading about God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a story of God speaking twice to Abraham, once telling him to kill the boy, once telling him to let him survive, with Abraham's task being to identify which of those two voices is the authentic voice of God, not to simply obey and not to dismissively reject but to struggle to figure out what God is really after. What does it mean to wrestle with God? Someone has pointed out that wrestling is a unique combination of hugging and fighting, and isn't that what we do with all the truly important relationships in our lives? Isn't that how we relate to our parents, our spouses, our children, alternatingly hugging and fighting?

Several months ago, I got an e-mail from a man who had heard my interpretation of the Garden of Eden story, that it was not a sin, it describes the first human beings acquiring a knowledge of Good and Evil with all the problems that would entail. He forwarded to me a short story that my talk reminded him of. In the story, God confronts Adam and Eve after they've eaten the forbidden fruit and says to them, "Why did you do that after I told you not to?" They answer, "Yes, we understand You told us not to, but we talked about it and it seemed to us that a knowledge of good and evil would be a good and useful thing to have." God says, "You realize I'll have to punish you for doing that." They answer, "You have the right and the power to punish us, but we were hoping that, once you heard our side of it, you would decide not to." At that point, God says, "Congratulations. You've passed the test. I've been waiting for someone to say that to Me. Until now, all I had were creatures. Now, for the first time, I have a partner."

That's what it means to be Yisrael, the people that struggles with God, the people who take God seriously enough to go beyond saying "Thy will be done" and asking "What might God genuinely want from us?" I confess that at times I have envied the Muslim imams for the level of obedience they command from their followers. The Koran tells them to fast every day from sunrise to sunset for a month during Ramadan, and they all do it. Olympic athletes, Wall Street executives go the whole day without eating, because Islam tells them to and Islam means "submission, no questions asked." There have been times when I envied my Christian colleagues for being able to tell a congregation at the funeral of a young person killed in a car crash, "It's not a time to question God or feel sad or angry. She's at peace in the arms of our Father in heaven."

There have been times when I envied my Orthodox colleagues for knowing where to find the answers to all questions. But then I stop and reflect, and in every case, I realize I like our way better. We struggle with God, simultaneously hugging and fighting, simultaneously affirming and challenging. We struggle to come to terms with the demands made in His Name. We don't accept them unquestioningly, nor do we reject them dismissively. We insist on being God's partners, not just His servants, in the sacred task of conjuring up holiness in His world. With Job in what may be my favorite verse in the entire Bible, we insist that if God is as great as we want to believe He is, He will prefer our honesty to another person's flattery.

My friends, it's not easy to be a good Jew any more than it's easy to be a good parent, a good husband or wife, a good doctor or business person. But it's easier when you don't have to do it alone, when you have the example of Jews who preceded you and the support of Jews around you, and you have the promise of a reward that will make the effort and the sacrifices worthwhile. May that be our challenge for the New Year that begins today.