

This is the sermon I gave on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. It begins with a question, one we don't hear nearly often enough because we probably don't know for 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 that you are not supposed to eat, you are missing the point. If the first thing that comes to mind about being Jewish is the long history of persecution, discrimination, antisemitism, you are giving our enemies too much power to define us. They don't deserve that power.

Someone suggested that the first component to being a Jew is that it makes you a part of something that is greater than yourself, and that is 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 are you?" it turns out is really a question of "whose are you?". We are shaped by the people with whom we share our lives.

Ask yourself: would you be a different person if you 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.

We think we make decisions rationally, from what we will have for dinner to whom we will 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 that does our rational mind come up with a cover story to justify it. Where do we get these gut reactions from? They are shaped by people we have shared our lives with, parents, siblings, teachers and friends.

Despite all of 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 of us telling us "that's wrong". It was primarily fueled by shame, that people will think less of us. Not "G-d told us not to do that" but "what will the neighbors think?". Think of Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof. If one day, Tevye has irresistible lust for a non-kosher meal, what would he have had to do? He would have had to leave the Jewish neighborhoods of Anatevka, cross the Gentile part where he didn't speak the language, negotiate with the 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 G-d or the words of Torah, is what kept most Jews observant.

And that's where religion comes in. When we do it right, religion is not about a personal connection to G-d. It is about connection to other people, so that together we can strive to come into the presence of G-d. As one writer puts it, "it is religious belonging that makes us better neighbors, not religious believing." Religion helps us rise above the concerns of ourselves and leads us to connect with other people.

A while back, you may remember how the tele-evangelists dominated the T.V. channels on Sunday mornings. They would buy time and urge people to send them money so that G-d would bless them and the preacher would be able to continue to do G-d's work. (G-d's work apparently defined as helping the preacher make his car payments and buy more television time.) It was during that time that Rabbi Harold Kushner found himself on a panel with a prominent Christian clergyman whose work he had read and admired. He asked what he, as a serious Christian, thought about those T.V. evangelists. He said to Rabbi Kushner "individualism is the Protestant heresy." He wasn't just saying that anytime you define religion as a one-on-one relationship with G-d, without the mediating influence of community, you are doing religion wrong. Belief is a very private matter, and that is not what religion is truly about. Speaking as a theologian, he was saying that the quest for G-d begins by being part of something bigger than yourself. That redeems your self-concern and begins teaching you to care about other people.

That is something Judaism has always understood. It is impossible to be a Jew alone. That is why we invented the minyan, G-d's sacred presence conjured up when Jews are together looking for G-d. That's why it meant so much to you when so many people showed up for your son's Bar Mitzvah or your daughter's wedding or 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 G-d.

Now if you find the idea of being a Jew is not a private matter but a matter of being a community, a people, there is something I want everyone of you to do in the coming year. I want you to claim ownership to Temple Emanuel. I want you see that it is something that belongs to you, not something you belong to. A synagogue doesn't work, and can't give you what you need, if you see yourself as a customer: "let's see what's happening at the Temple and decide if it interests us." For your well-being, more than ours, you have to see it as something that belongs to you. Find something we do that matters to you. If it is not religious services, it can be one of our adult classes. 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 during 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 2% of the American population, far fewer than a rounding error in a Chinese census, 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, 40 or 50 years ago an inter-faith 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 boyfriend crazy but I wish I had a mother who cared enough about me to say, 'put on a sweater; it is cold out'."

If the first ingredient to 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 dedicated to clarifying the image of what it means to being a human being in today's world, it understands the essence of being human, of being capable of generating holiness, something that in the beginning only G-d could do but which G-d came to share with us. That is what we are doing when we visit the sick or bereaved. We are 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 G-d tells us to do in the hope that G-d will reciprocate by doing what we ask G-d 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 aren't healthy 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 no other creature can. That's why we fast on Yom Kippur. It is 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 we can make 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, Sabbath is a demonstration of our ability to manipulate and sanctify time. Thursday, September 22 was the autumnal equinox, twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. Since then days gradually got shorter and the sun set earlier without our having to do anything to make it happen. It is automatic. That's nature. But the next Friday 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 is just a regular day.

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 off-spring like animals. That is the world 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, but poor in all the things that makes human beings human. That is what G-d summoned us to do for G-d's world when we stood at Sinai more than 3500 years ago and that is what we Jews are summoned to do for G-d's world today.

The biblical names 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 that Jacob was struggling with his conscience.) The night before he had to do something difficult that he is not sure he is up to doing. Yisrael, Israel, means “one who struggles with G-d, who wrestles with G-d.” Do you realize what a unique name that is for a religious community, the people who wrestle with G-d? Islam means submission, “surrendering your own will, no questions asked.” Christianity is a religion with the theology of “His will be done.” Tragedy strikes – it is G-d’s will. “She’s in a better place now.” Being an Israelite is not to accept G-d or G-d’s demands unquestioningly and not to reject them as irrelevant or obsolete but to struggle with them, and to ascertain what is G-d’s authentic demand. You have heard me interpret the Torah reading about G-d telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and the story of G-d 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 these two voices is the authentic voice of G-d, not to simply obey and not to dismissively reject but to struggle to figure out what G-d is really after. What does it mean to wrestle with G-d? Someone once pointed out that wrestling is a unique combination of hugging and fighting. Isn’t that what we do with all of the important relationships in our lives?

Sometime ago, I received an email from someone who heard my interpretation of the Garden of Eden story, that it was not a sin, it describes the first human being as acquiring the knowledge of good and evil with all the problems it would entail. They forwarded me a short story that my talk had reminded them of. In the story, G-d confronts Adam and Eve after they had eaten the forbidden fruit and says to them, “why did you do that after I told you not to?” They answered, “yes, we understand that you told us not to, but we talked about it and it seemed to us that the knowledge of good and evil would be a good and useful thing to have.” G-d says, “you realize I will 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, G-d says “congratulations, you’ve passed the test. I have been waiting for someone to say that to me. Until now, all I have 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 want genuinely from us?” I confess at times I 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 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 have envied my Christian colleagues for being able to tell a congregation at the funeral of a young person killed in a car crash, “it is not a time to question God or feel sad or angry. She is at peace in the arms of our Father in heaven.” There have been times when I have envied my Orthodox colleagues for knowing where to find the answers to all questions. 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 questioning. We struggle to come to terms with the demands made in God’s name. We don’t accept them unquestioningly, nor do we reject them dismissively. We insist on being God’s partners, not just God’s servants, in the sacred task of conjuring up holiness in God’s world. With Job, we insist

that if God is as great as we want to believe God is, Adonai will prefer our honesty to another person's flattery.

It's not easy to be a good Jew any more than it is easy to be a good parent, a good husband or wife, a good doctor or business person. But it is 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. Let that be our challenge for the new year that begins today.