

Here All Along
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When my father was diagnosed with cancer 11 years ago, the Oncologist asked him if there was some milestone he would like to live to see. Without skipping a beat, my dad answered, "I'd like to live to see my grandson become a *Bar Mitzvah*." The kind doctor said, "how wonderful! How old is he?" To which my father replied: "Two."

A bit taken aback, the doctor came back with, "I was thinking of something more imminent." As I bore witness to this moment, I just smiled. For the physician, making it eleven more years with Acute Myeloid Leukemia was an impossibility, an eternity. But for my dad, his grandson's Bar Mitzvah was as close to his heart as breathing.

It was why he survived the Holocaust. It was why, after unimaginable loss, he risked love again and again. It was why, in spite of his experiences, he continued to hope in humanity, in the triumph of good people over evil. It was why he affirmed his faith every week at Shabbat services when he wrapped himself in his tallit and prayed fervently for all who need uplift and healing and peace. It was why he lived-- to share the best of Judaism with the world and to pass on the immeasurable values of our tradition *l'dor v'dor*, from one generation to the next, so that we could do the same . . . for eternity.

It probably doesn't surprise you that I think about Judaism a lot -- why some of us are deeply engaged and why others of us are tenuously connected. We all know people for whom Judaism is irrelevant; painfully, some of them are our own children and grandchildren. Indeed, the much touted 2013 Pew Research Study found that while 94% of American Jews feel proud to be Jewish, 22% of them, including 32% of millennial age Jews (those ages 20 - 37) "describe themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity or culture alone." A full two-thirds of these Jews of no religion report that they are not raising their kids with any kind of Jewish identity.^[1]

Traditional Jewish demographers like to point the finger at inter-faith marriage. They say 72% of all Jews who got married since the year 2,000 married someone not Jewish. But I disagree vehemently. Some of our most engaged families are driven by the commitment of a non-Jewish or newly Jewish member. Might it be easier to live a Jewish life if one married someone Jewish? Perhaps. But to my eye, what determines whether or not a rich Jewish life is chosen is not whom one chooses to love, but rather whether or not it is important to the Jewish person to live Jewishly. The deeper question really is why are so many Jews choosing to opt out of Judaism?

There is plenty of blame to go around. The narrative that we or our kids or grandkids should be Jewish so our people survives is not very compelling in and of itself. "Because of

the Holocaust” doesn't always resonate with Jews under the age of 50; it just isn't relevant to their lives . . . even though we have, of late, seen a significant rise in anti-Semitism.

Their Jewish literacy, like our own, is minimal. With a religious school education at best, most of us aren't awed by the inspiring adult Jewish values and ideas that Judaism possesses because we've never studied them. We have a vague idea that our morals are shaped by our tradition's teachings, but can't articulate the connection between our thoughts and actions and Torah. We appreciate the beauty of the world, but aren't conscious that it is God, or a power greater than ourselves, who created and sustains it. We know that Jews are disproportionately represented in science, technology, public service, and philanthropy, but we don't understand them as the direct result of living rich and engaged Jewish lives in the context of a Jewish community.

And yet . . . and yet, here we are, sitting in synagogue on Rosh Hashanah year after year after year, hoping, praying for an infusion of the magic that is Judaism to inspire us to be and do better; to strengthen our relationships with those we love; to connect us with our roots, our ancestors, our heritage and our Jewish community; to arouse us out of our complacency and command us to fulfill our obligation to repairing our broken world. This place, this heritage, this tradition is our touchstone. We come back year after year to be reminded of who we are, of our purpose, of our sacred obligation. These hours are what make the builders of our cities and their cultural, educational and medical institutions. Here is where Jewish Congressmen and women are raised up. This is the place that inspires Jewish Nobel Prize winners.

My dear OST family and friends, this is why Judaism is worth choosing, worth loving, and, most of all worth living. And this is how it has the capacity to connect you to a life of greater meaning and to transform you into the person you were meant to be if we choose to engage with it. Let's call the following what we can love about Judaism:

We can love the idea that we are created in the Divine Image - that all people are precious, deserve respect and dignity, and are of infinite worth. None of us is expendable. We are all here for a unique and holy purpose, even if we do not know yet what it is. This is why every Jewish baby born is not only perfect, but has the capacity to redeem the world. We teach our kids that they can be and do anything they dream and we mean it, because a spark of God resides within them.

We love that Judaism empowers us, demanding that we be worthy partners for the Divine - that we ask hard questions, think for ourselves, and push back on immorality wherever we find it, even if that means pushing back on God. We strive to hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards of behavior, standing up against wrongdoing and pursuing justice. It isn't always easy, but as Jews we try to make the best choices and do the right thing.

We love how countercultural Judaism is. It insists on hard things, on obligations we didn't choose, on our communal ties rather than just our individual needs. We give

tzedakah because Judaism teaches us it is upon us to share our plenty with those in need. We support Jewish institutions, like our congregation, because Judaism teaches us we need places to gather that teach and perpetuate these values that sustain our community and world.

Speaking of which, we love that Judaism flies in the face of the strip-mall culture of our time - that depressing array of generic, disposable-quality merchandise - and instead offers us something wonderfully durable, enduring and unique, commandments: to cherish our parents, spouses and children; to revere a loving God who also demands our best; to treat our neighbor as we would want to be treated and to love the stranger; to be a people committed to the betterment of society and the world, even when it demands sacrifice. That is why we love the many Jewish last names on the building directories of our hospitals, in the ranks of activists doing social justice work, of those Nobel laureates, public servants and philanthropists, all of whom are embodying Judaism's ethic on non-indifference in their lives.

We love the primal aspect of Judaism - how we mark our most important holidays by blowing on an animal horn and how holidays start at sundown, prompting us to notice the changing of light and darkness over the course of a year. Through blessings, we practice mindfulness - stopping to take notice of the wonders around us, expressing gratitude for the gifts of our lives, elevating what can seem like the ordinary, mundane routines of life to the extraordinary moments of wonder they truly are, moments that infuse our lives with awe, meaning and joy.

We love our breathtaking story of survival, that Jews, like my father, who survived the Holocaust, came to America and went on to have more children than Jews who were not survivors. "To think that after all they had endured, they still believed they had a duty to life."^[2]

Most of all, we love how, even when we try to give up on Judaism, it does not give up on us. No matter how frustrated or distant we become, something still tugs at us, some thread we did not even realize was there, albeit faint and inexplicable, calls us back. There is a Yiddish phrase for this, "*dos pintele yid*," which literally means "that little point of a Jew" and refers to that spark of Jewishness in each of us that we just can't manage to ignore, no matter how hard we might try (p. xxix).

Friends, Judaism has been here all along and has the capacity to help each of us to find greater meaning, spirituality, and a deeper connection to life. We need only choose to look here more intentionally . . . and as adults. So let me suggest that this year, each of us explores the wonder of Judaism beyond this time we spend together during these High Holidays, that you feed the *pintele yid* within you. Here are some easy ways to begin:

- Find yourself a teacher or many teachers. Begin with Cantor Jen or me or with our amazing Dr. David Metzger who leads our Torah study twice a week or Kathryn Morton who explores "What is Judaism?" in her Shabbat morning class as only she can. Then, if that

isn't enough, there are other teachers offering classes locally, myriad books on every Jewish topic imaginable, podcasts for those who prefer to listen, and online classes that we can suggest. You would be amazed at the Jewish renaissance that has been going on for years!

- Experience Jewish spirituality and community by joining us for Shabbat and holiday worship and observances, and other forms of Jewish meditation from chanting to walking with intentionality. If discomfort with customs and rituals or the Hebrew language or our melodies are an impediment, let us help guide you through. The worship is uplifting, challenging and motivating; the community is warm and gracious and kind. We can connect you with others with similar backgrounds and interests. I could give so many amazing examples of the difference actively engaging in temple life had made. And if it is God you are not sure about, we are happy to offer spiritual direction as well. You'd be surprised. The God you don't believe in is very likely the God that many great Jews throughout history did not believe in either and all are considered to be authentic Jewish beliefs.

- Engage in *Tikun Olam*, the repair of the world. Act for the betterment of humanity and the world through the many social justice endeavors our Temple takes part in from volunteering at our monthly soup kitchen, to making food for ForKids, to helping asylum seekers in our area. If you want to be a part of living Torah, all of these are ways to do so and in the context of Judaism. Of course, anything you do for those in need is a *mitzvah*. If your good deeds happen out in the community, let us help you make the connection to the Jewish values you are living out while doing them.

Do it for yourself. Do it for your children and grandchildren. Do it for our community, for humanity and for the world. You will be amazed at the wonder, meaning and deep connection that were here all along . . . after you make the choice to really look.

A post script: This summer I traveled to Israel to celebrate my nephew Oz's Bar Mitzvah. Surrounded by my family and the members of my sister's synagogue, we stood together at Robinson's Arch, the egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall. I had asked for one honor alone -- to give my nephew my father's tallit, which no one had taken out of his tallis bag or worn since the Shabbat before his passing 11 years ago. I had been tasked with its safe-keeping. And now, without sound, without words but with the weight of history and eternity hanging in that moment, I took it from my dad's blue velvet tallis bag with the frayed gold embroidery, unfurled it to its full enormous breadth, and lovingly placed it on the shoulders of my sweet, smart, good nephew. As I smoothed it out, tears falling from my eyes, I said to myself, "you made it to your grandson's bar mitzvah, dad."

My father was the keeper of our family history and of our family's Jewish story. Now that sacred responsibility falls to me. . . . and to every one of us gathered here today. In this New Year, may you be blessed with the riches of the teachings of our tradition: our hope in humanity in spite of the insanity and evil of the few; our faith in God and our tradition and its ability to uplift, to comfort, to heal; our commitment to living in a way that uplifts the

fallen, restores wholeness to the broken, and affirms all that is good and true and beautiful in this world of ours *l'dor v'dor*, from one generation to the next for eternity. Amen.

^[1]Hurwitz, Sarah, *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*, New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2019, p. xiii.

^[2]Samantha Powers, Human Rights Activist, as told by Sarah Hurwitz, *ibid*, p. 254.