

## Rabbi Schwab's RH Sermon 5783: *Why Be Jewish?*

I once read a story that Rabbi Ed Feinstein of LA told about his brother that made me both smile . . . and think. And this story could have potentially been about any of us. He writes, “When I was young, I shared a bedroom with my brother Larry. On Rosh Hashanah morning, my mother would come into our room early, and wake us up for shul. I was the good kid, I got up, dressed, and got ready. My brother Larry pulled the covers over his head. “I don’t want to go to shul!” he’d yell. “I don’t like it. It’s *boring*. Why do I have to go?” Mom would then lay out a carefully considered case: the whole family is going, and you need to be with us; the whole Jewish people is celebrating; these are the *high* holidays, it’s an important day...” Mom did a good job ...but Larry wouldn’t get up. “I don’t want to be Jewish. I hate shul. Why do I have to go? Why do I have to be Jewish?”, he’d scream. And then Mom would lose her patience, lower her voice and bring in the heavy artillery – “My family died in the concentration camps, and you won’t go to shul?!” At this, Larry relented. “Ok, but I’m *not* wearing a tie.”

Now, let me start by saying that I would never condone behavior that exhibits disrespect to one’s mother (especially because mine will read this sermon). But while I firmly condemn Larry’s unacceptable attitude towards mom, we should acknowledge the essence of his struggle. My guess is that most of *us* have had

moments like Larry at one time or another, though perhaps not as dramatic. We too have questioned: Why *should* I go to shul? Why indeed *should* I choose to be an engaged Jew? For most of history, being Jewish was something assigned to you at birth - assigned by your community and reinforced by the rest of society. But as we all know -- not any more. American society at large, for the most part, does not really care what religion your parents practice, or if *you* practice one at all. So whether we like it or not, from a practical perspective, being Jewish, along with just about every other defining identity, isn't truly ascribed, it's *chosen*.

And I won't cite all of the studies and stats that you have probably already heard over the past ten years about the American Jewish community, but I will state the bottom line: in many areas of Jewish life, segments of the Jewish population are often *choosing* to live a Jewish life that is *less* robust than the previous generation. I am a history person so I want to acknowledge that measuring Jewish engagement and evaluating it over time is challenging. That being said -- the trend is still there. On the whole, fewer Jews are observing Jewish laws and rituals, Jewish children in the non Orthodox world are receiving less hours of Jewish education, and younger Jews are affiliating less with classic Jewish institutions.

There are a great many reasons for this trend, which are beyond the scope of my words today. However, the fact is, that it is more critical than ever for us to *articulate* the answer to Larry's question: **Why be Jewish?** Why should I personally engage? How can Judaism help *me* be the person I wish to be? For there **are** amazing, moving and incredibly wonderful answers to his question. And in the marketplace of life choices I believe 100% that the choice to live an engaged Jewish life is a *winning* choice for American Jews in the 21st century, Jews like you and me. Sometimes, though in the business of our lives, in our struggle to be successful, to help our family members be successful, and in our desire for convenience, or to go with the flow of society, we inadvertently *forget* the power of living an engaged Jewish life and we therefore have to be reminded to rediscover its magic.

For life is often complicated and challenging. So we simply put our head down and just live in the day-to-day. We wake up, we go to school or work or we follow whatever routine we have developed in whatever stage of life we are in. But sometimes we wonder why, or at least we should. Why am I here? What is my purpose? What *should* my life be about? What leads to lasting fulfillment and sustainable happiness? When I am in my final hours, what kind of life will I have

been proud to have led? *These* are the essential questions of life: profound, moving and foundational.

In my view, the ultimate purpose of *Judaism* is to offer us an accessible and meaningful path, lined with incredible wisdom, spiritual experiences and moments of insight, to help us answer these critical questions for ourselves- questions that can't be answered by going through our task list or by following our typical day to day routine. In fact, Judaism prompts us explicitly to ask such questions at the most celebrated Jewish ritual of the year, the Passover seder. As you will recall, the Passover Haggadah imagines four children sitting with us at the Seder table, **asking questions**. The first child asks a question about practice: "What are the rites and rules that are to be observed?" His question presupposes buy-in: he wants to practice and needs to know how. That is commendable. However, the answers we give *him* don't satisfy the *second* child. This one asks a more foundational question saying (quote): "What does all this mean (to you)?" Well, that is a much more challenging question -- a deeper question. So today I ask all of *us* to imagine ourselves as this "contrary" child: still at the Seder table but unsure why and wanting to get answers. And our tradition tells us that this child *should* be given answers. Foundational answers and essential truths.

And that is where Elijah steps in. At the end of the Passover Seder, we invite the prophet Elijah to join us. Why him? And why invite him at the end? How rude of us to invite him *after* dinner. But, as Feinstein puts it, “Elijah comes at the end because it takes the whole Seder to prepare us to hear his message”. We need the full journey of the seder, a deep dive into our heritage, to get to the answer of the profound question of why.

Elijah discovered *his* answer when he was forced to flee into the desert to save himself from Queen Jezebel who sought to kill all of the Jewish prophets. He had just called attention to himself by performing a great public miracle, but even after such a miraculous event he and his followers were no wiser about Gd, about Judaism or about how and why to live a fulfilling spiritual life. So he fled to Horev, another name for Mt Sinai, where it all began between Gd and our people. The book of Kings relates: “... The word of the Lord came to him. Come out and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—*kol demamah daka*. When Elijah heard it, he

wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him: **“Why are you here, Elijah?”**

What does this narrative mean? There was an awesome display of wind and earthquake and fire, but Gd and spiritual truth were not found in *them*. Rather, Gd dwelled in the *kol demamah daka*, which means the delicate, soft, exquisite voice of inner silence. A voice that didn't command, or impress or terrify. A voice that, instead, asked a question, a personal question that speaks to the root of all human existence: **Why are you here?** What is your purpose? Gd's spiritual truth for Elijah was a foundational *question*. And Gd's genius, so to speak, was to reveal to us that we each have a spark of divinity *within* us and it is **that** spark that Judaism helps us to seek and inflame - a spark that is often unseen or forgotten in our busy routine lives, but which Judaism stokes and builds so that we can rediscover it. One needn't wait for a miracle to find Gd and spiritual meaning, one need only ask the right questions and look within.

As Feinstein wrote, “Elijah came to the mountain seeking God. And he discovered a God seeking him. He came to question God, and discovered a God asking questions of him. . . Why are you here? What is your purpose? The search for God begins with these questions. What kind of universe would I have to imagine in order to lend my existence meaning, and lend my life purpose? These

are not questions of a God far away in the heavens, or even up on the mountain. Not in the fire or the wind or the earthquake. These are the deepest questions of the human heart”. A spiritual truth that Judaism teaches us about life is that God *isn't* up there while we're down here. God isn't distant or esoteric. The ability to be spiritual and to find God is within the boundaries of our lives and within our capabilities through our human activities. The work is to come back to the basic questions Gd asked of us at Mt Sinai and again to Elijah in that same place. And Judaism provides the path and the tools to do this work. We are to seek essential truths and foundational meaning through study, prayer, contemplation, discussion, performing mitzvot and through the actions of our lives. As *Pirkei Avot* teaches, the world rests on three things: *Torah* (learning, wisdom and guidance), *Avodah* (ritual and prayer) and *Gemilut Hasidim* (acts of loving kindness). These are the pillars of Judaism and through them we can find meaning in life.

And to help us *remain* focused on these foundational truths the rabbis designed a system of cues and reminders, to keep us mindful in *daily* life. The *mezuzah* on the door, for example, lighting candles on Friday night, the blessing you say before you eat, the shivah visit you receive, the silence during the private amidah, the gathering together, like today, for important holiday celebrations. Each begs us: “listen for a moment, try to regain Elijah's discovery, connect your

daily action to timeless values”. For me in particular, during my private amidah, I think of each of my family members, I dwell on a core reason I love each of them and then I privately send whatever blessing to them I think they need. This helps me stay in touch with the deep love I have for those about whom I care, and reminds me of actionable ways in which I can help bring blessing into their lives. The Amidah provides the space for such a meaningful activity each and every day.

And these are but a few examples of using ritual and prayer to remind us of critical life lessons - there are so much more. “For that is the way with everything we do as Jews, every mitzvah, every blessing...it is all about slowing down, quelling the noise of the world, helping us break from our routine, lifting up our eyes to see, question, learn and do, so as to help us seek truth, deeper meaning, wisdom and Gd”. The Jew who embodies this lesson wakes up and from the first breath they take, before they reach for their phone, they ask! And they reinsert themselves into a life filled with ultimate questions and the search for personal answers.

As if seeking Gd and answers to our ultimate questions were not enough of a reason to engage in Judaism, there are plenty more reasons. The most poignant for many of us is linked to the very difficult summer our community endured. A tragedy befell us in Highland Park that many of us are still trying to work through



and sort out. Members of our congregation were shot, members of our congregation were in mortal danger, members of our congregation had to run in fear of their lives, and all of us were traumatized by what happened in *our* community, in our *home*. As I shared with the congregation the Shabbat after, I personally leaned on my Judaism at that time. For me, Jewish wisdom offered, and continues to offer, the *resilience* required to traverse such a tragedy as well as the type of hope that can guide us through such deep darkness. For example, I think that Judaism's emphasis on community is critical- our tradition's requirement to come together to pray, and to gather for holidays, to perform mitzvot together and to strive for goals *as a community*, has made a huge difference in dealing with *this* tragedy and so many other challenges, personal and communal. Not all religious traditions place such an emphasis on community and the religious importance of person to person connections. I know that I received so much comfort and strength from all the calls, texts and emails that day from all of you and from many others around the world. And we *all* deserve to feel that power of community and to know that others care. That is why we gathered virtually that very night, and gathered for an in person healing service the next night. That is why we provided counseling and companionship to anyone who needed -- to support each other and to show we care. We should feel pride that Judaism demands that we supply such love and compassion to everyone. And I feel blessed

that so many people from Beth El reached out to so many others in our community, as they have during COVID, and as we do all the time!

Another gift Judaism offers us is that our tradition has literally a treasure trove of powerful texts, enlightening stories, revealing teachings and so much general wisdom to share about all crucial aspects of living, and even about enduring tragedy. One particular text that I found myself gravitating towards during that week, is a text from the Talmud. The context is that Rabbi Yohanan had just visited a deathly ill colleague and through his visit, and by reaching out his hand to his colleague, he saved him from death. And now Rabbi Yohanan *himself* has fallen ill. And the Talmud tells us a *different* colleague came to visit *him*, reached out *his* hand, and saved Rabbi Yochanan. But then the Talmud wisely asks: “Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan wait for Rabbi Ḥanina to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, let Rabbi Yoḥanan stand himself up.” The Gemara answers its own question, “They say: A prisoner cannot generally free *himself* from prison, but depends on others to release him from his shackles.” The Gemara knows that Rabbi Yohanan has the power to heal because he saved his colleague previously and thus marvels at why he does not then just save himself. So the Talmud teaches us precious wisdom: that generally we, on our own, *cannot* save

ourselves when we are in deep distress. We need another person to reach out a hand, to care, and to come to our aid. Only then can we begin to heal.

This text gives me strength, purpose, resolve and motivation to understand that *even as I hurt*, I have something to offer to *someone else* and must be there for them if I can. For we all need others in order to heal. And at the same time, even though I recognize that I have the power to comfort and assist others, *I still need others to help and comfort me*. Therefore, with the strength of Gd accompanying us, and with the strength of each other reaching out to those who are in need, we can heal and endure in the face of anything. And what is more, our tradition teaches us that even though we have scars that will never disappear, once we heal we can, and we must, be stronger and better in the future so that we can repair our society and our world. This is resilience at its best: to endure in a way that strengthens us and makes ourselves and the world better. This is what Judaism teaches.

But life isn't only about challenge; life is also about celebrating our blessings. And Judaism also teaches us the primacy of joy. As the great Rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsh, wrote, "Judaism never considered pain, sorrow, self-affliction, or sadness to be valid goals. The opposite is true; one should pursue happiness, bliss, cheer, joy, and delight." While, of course, sadness, pain and suffering accompany life, Judaism does not promote or romanticize these. Instead,

as exemplified in the wisdom of our shivah practices, Judaism provides rituals and customs geared at creating perspectives around troubling moments in life so that we can dwell in our pain for an appropriate amount of time, learn from it what we can and then Judaism provides a path *back* to life and that which brings us blessing and joy. That path includes, for example, Shabbat dinners each week, full of food, singing, Torah, family and friends. *No matter what the week looked like*, a traditional Shabbat dinner comes to provide joy and respite from the difficulties of life. And our emphasis on joy is on full display at a traditional Jewish wedding, when communal song, group dancing and feasting are the order of the day. Judaism gives us the tools to enhance the happiest moments of our lives.

Another incredible aspect of Judaism lies in the fact that our tradition daily reinforces the primacy of deed over creed. Judaism greatly encourages the individual (irrespective of personal belief or doubts of faith) to help build a better world through acts of *tikkun olam* and provides the individual with a variety of opportunities to do so. It is no coincidence that our people have created dozens of organizations (the alphabet soup of Jewish institutions) whose mission is to make a difference in the lives of fellow human beings and that every synagogue has a Social Action or Tikkun Olam group. And the doing of these good deeds, which emerge from a foundation of positive Jewish values, brings us closer to others and to humanity and is not solely dependent on our current state of beliefs. To

illustrate, I personally have gained so much fulfillment in the mitzvah of *Bikur Holim*, in visiting those who are ill. I know those that I visit truly appreciate the care and companionship. And what is more, through these visits I have deepened *my* relationships with people and have personally learned life lessons by hearing about *their* lives and struggles. Our daily deeds aid us in actively becoming better versions of ourselves and therefore serving to transform the world one act at a time.

Another aspect of Judaism that has both improved my own life and that of our people, is that Judaism emphasizes lifelong educational growth of all kinds. Jewish education helps us to morally navigate the world and gives us incredible advice on how to manage so many of life's issues. For example, this past year I taught a class on Jewish wisdom relating to the ethics of navigating difficult relationships. Analyzing rich Jewish texts and engaging in thoughtful discussion with others around those texts, helped all of us understand more effective ways of balancing our obligations to family and friends, with meeting our own needs, as well as how to handle difficult interactions with family members. Through study and reflection we become more wise and discerning and we increase our ability to teach our children, and others, their moral responsibility to the world as well as give them the tools to navigate it. Join one of our on-going classes: to study is to learn and to learn is to grow.

It probably comes as no surprise that Judaism also cultivates the spirit, through the observance of Shabbat as well as through prayer, study and mindfulness. Shabbat is a key feature of this process as it provides a needed weekly respite from the day to day and feeds our soul with family, joy, community, prayer and study. Growing up, my family celebrated Shabbat and even as a child I would have told you it was one of the biggest gifts my parents, and Judaism, have given me. Judaism gives us the spiritual framework to fan the spark of Divinity inside each of us so that soulfulness plays a larger role in our lives.

Finally, one of the foundational aspects of Judaism is that as a Jew, our individual lives become elevated *beyond themselves* to become part of something much larger. We all find fulfillment in allowing the events of our lives to echo beyond our own existence. In Judaism, the *collective* story of the Jewish people becomes our *personal* story, expanding the meaning of our personal lives in ways that are hard to accomplish by any other path. Plus, on the flip side, through a Jewish lens my own life's individual story *contributes* to the collective memory of the Jewish people as a whole, deepening its significance and creating the immense personal fulfillment that comes from knowing that my personal actions can make lasting impacts across time. We experience this aspect of Judaism through rituals like the Seder, connecting us back in history. Or through our involvement in tzedakah and supporting the incredible array of Jewish organizations through

which we as individuals can support Jewish communities across the globe. And we do that through our relationship with Israel, the historical homeland of our people and a touchstone for our own personal Jewish identity. A connection to Jewish life, Jewish history and Jewish peoplehood magnifies our lives and allows them to be meaningful in expanded and powerful ways.

These are some of *my* favorite answers to the incredibly important question of why being an engaged Jew can be meaningful to us today. What are yours? I challenge *you* to ask yourself this question this year and share your answers with me in person, by email or on zoom. I asked some of our fellow synagogue members this question in advance of today and received such inspiring answers already. I would like to share *one* with you now and I will share a couple of others during the rest of our davening today as their reflections are inspiring. Here is what one community member wrote, “Judaism is a source of grounding in an otherwise material world. It connects me to people with shared values. Judaism helps me persevere during life's many challenges. It centralizes family. It makes *tzedakah* a joy in life. Judaism gives me a unique relationship with Gd. It asks me to be humble and practice humility. In short, **it is my guiding compass for who I need to strive to be.**” Beautiful.

In our High Holiday prayers today we ask some big questions, which may be familiar: מה אנחנו? מה חיינו? מה חסדינו? מה צדקינו? מה ישועתינו? מה כוחינו? מה נבורותינו?

מה נאמר לפניך יי אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו? What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What is our righteousness? What our help? What is our strength? What is our might? And what can we possibly say before You, Lord Our God and God of our fathers?" These are the questions Judaism begs us to ask of ourselves today and throughout life. It is a path to personal and spiritual meaning that offers us incredible answers to these questions and more. This upcoming year, I urge you to begin asking yourselves what Judaism can mean to you. I urge you to take advantage of our prayer services, our learning, our opportunities for social action, our ways to connect with others and to engage in Judaism in order to make the most of our sacred lives. And I *personally* stand ready to assist in any way I can. Nothing would make me happier!

As Rabbi Feinstein put it, "So, "Why are you here?" Judaism has an answer: You are the eyes and ears and hands of God in the world. You channel God's power -- to bring healing where there is pain, hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, peace where there is conflict. You have been entrusted with an ancient truth. And at this moment in human history, when there is so much pain and anguish in the world, our Judaism inspires us to lift our eyes and bring that peace, wholeness, hope and light to ourselves and as many as we can around us." Sounds perfect to me. *Ken Yehi Ratzon* - may it be Gd's will, *Amen! Shanah Tovah!*