

Rabbi Alex Freedman
To Life!
Yom Kippur 5786

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

Most of us in this room today were born Jewish, like me.

But others here today joined our people through conversion. Our people is strengthened by these committed newcomers who *chose* to join the Jewish family.

One special privilege I have as a rabbi is to participate in these Jewish conversions. In these moments I am part of the Beit Din, a group of three rabbis which represents the Jewish community. Each conversion candidate interviews with the Beit Din after their course of study. We ask questions to determine how much the person has learned, and how committed the person is to living a Jewish life. Like a final exam for school, the student has much to review before test day.

But there is always, always, always one question for which the convert does not need to review their class notes: what motivates you to join our people now?

The Talmud, 1500 years old, articulates the question this way: “[The Beit Din should ask]: ‘Why do you want to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them?’ If the student says, ‘I know, and although I am unworthy of joining, I still desire to do so’ then the Beit Din accepts him or her immediately to continue the conversion process” (B. Talmud Yevamot 47a).

Today the question still stands, and so does the ominous tone. One of the Beit Din rabbis essentially asks the conversion candidate the same question: “Surely you are aware of the deep challenges facing Jews today. About Israel being under attack, and frighteningly high antisemitism here in Chicago and around the world. Why do you still choose to join the Jewish people?”

It's very gratifying when this pivotal question is answered quickly and confidently by the many students who say: “Of course I am aware of the dangers, but the light and joy of Jewish tradition and community drive away my fears of antisemitism. I know being Jewish is not easy, especially now, yet that won't stop me. Joining this people is still so worth it.”

No matter how many times I hear this, it's the highlight of my day.

Today, on this holiest of days, I pose that same question to you for a different reason. Of course our Jewish identities are official, but the question "*Why* be Jewish?" is vital for us too. Especially now.

Being Jewish has never been easy, but it feels like it's never been harder than it is right now. The well-being of our faith and our people, as well as Israel, is being challenged in ways most of us adults have *never* experienced before.

Why should we live active and openly proud Jewish lives during this challenging moment?

Being actively Jewish even now, especially now, enriches us as individuals, as families, as a Beth El community, and as a global Jewish people.

As *individuals*, the Jewish tradition offers us the Torah and its 613 Mitzvot. I acknowledge that the commandments are challenging in very real ways. But it's precisely this discipline that shapes us into becoming the honest, ethical, responsible people we can be. To use an analogy, if we want to get physically stronger, we can't just think about the gym. We actually have to exercise, which means pushing our bodies through hard workouts. Only real effort makes our bodies stronger. We have to sweat! It's supposed to be hard!

Mitzvot are like the workouts we do for our characters and souls.

The Midrash teaches that the commandments are there "*Letzaref Bahem Et Habriyot* - to refine people." And to build our character.

We have a Mitzvah to recite blessings - in order to make us more grateful.

To not steal - in order to make us more honest.

To love our neighbors as ourselves - in order to make us compassionate and responsible for others.

To eat Matzah on Passover - to remind us of the pain of slavery and the sweetness of freedom.

To celebrate Shabbat - to prioritize important relationships over work one day a week.

To give Tzedakah - in order to make us more generous.

I could keep going; only 607 more to go!

Let's go back to Tzedakah. When I was seven, my parents began to give me an allowance. They would give me \$2.50 each week and told me 10% goes to Tzedakah, 40% goes to savings, and 50% was for spending. When they shared this with me, I responded, "Dad, I'm confused. You said I would get \$2.50 each week, but you're only really giving me \$1.25!" I was too young to understand that my parents wanted to strengthen my Tzedakah muscles. My savings muscles too. Looking back, of course they were right. All those weeks and years of dropping quarters into a blue Tzedakah box taught me that charity is simply a part of having money. That it's easy to do. And that no matter how little I had in my wallet, I could always give *something*. It's why even when I was a rabbinical school student and earning just a little money that I still gave something. This is why I do the same with my children's allowances today, and I know many parents do something similar. Because when we do something enough, like giving Tzedakah, it becomes a habit and part of our character. I really believe it makes us more generous and quicker to share.

The Mitzvot are the spiritual discipline that enable us to be the best version of ourselves. Like exercise: not always easy, but essential.

An active Jewish life also does wonders for our *families*. Coming to synagogue for religious school and joining for services can provide parents and children a shared vocabulary for values: honesty, responsibility for others, the importance of our history, the beauty of tradition, the power of community, and more.

One of the strengths of our tradition is that the *home* is of paramount importance, even more so than the synagogue. And *these* family Jewish rituals create a lifetime of wonderful memories of family generations together around the table: Of weekly Shabbat dinners, grape juice stains and all. My favorite moment is when parents bless the children; my kids would say it's the dessert. We have memories of Rosh Hashanah meals together, dipping apples in honey. Of Yom Kippur break-fast together, when water and bagels never tasted so good. Of meals outdoors in the Sukkah together, bundled up in sweatshirts and jackets. Of lighting Hanukkah candles together and maybe eating too many jelly doughnuts. Of enjoying Passover Seders together, and wondering who is going to find the Afikoman. All of these key moments happen *at home*. What a gift!

Then there are special lifecycle events that occur during milestone moments in our lives. Think about your own lives. Remember the family Brises and baby namings. Recall the family Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Call to mind the family weddings. No matter how long ago they were, I bet you remember them. I bet many of you even have photos from those big days around your house. Those were all joyous family celebrations that usually brought out of town family back home as well. How powerful! Of course, funerals

are part of life too, not joyous in any way, but reassuring that the Jewish tradition provides guidance and comfort to families in the uncertain time after a loved one passes away.

If an active Jewish life only enhances our individual lives with purpose, and our family lives with shared values and wonderful memories, Dayeinu. But another gift of our tradition is that it provides us with a built-in *community*. We come to this place, Beth El, precisely for this reason. Our building is beautiful, yes, but the *people* make the place.

I'm sure you have all heard about the loneliness that many Americans are experiencing. It's serious enough that two years ago the US Surgeon General called attention to it and labeled it an "epidemic." We now know that having an active social life with others is essential to healthy living. Family and friends are fundamental, and so is community.

I define community as people who are not your best friends, who are not even your age, but with whom you share values and experience life's important moments together.

Beth El is special because here - even though our congregants are diverse in many ways - we all share Jewish values and traditions. We need each other for rituals and holidays like today. We need each other to feel that we are not alone.

Today's English date is October 1st/2nd. We are almost exactly 2 years removed from October 7th, 2023. When Hamas massacred Israelis and others on that most awful day, we were all devastated and heartbroken, along with Jews around the world. Just a few days later, Beth El hosted a gathering here for our congregation to stand together in pain. There were hundreds of you in attendance, wearing blue and white shirts. The most important part of that evening was not the words of the rabbis, but instead the hugs and embraces you offered each other. Along with the unbelievable feeling of singing Hatikvah together as you waved hundreds of Israel's flags. That evening was just what I needed to begin to heal. And Beth El made it possible. Thank you.

That snap gathering was only possible because our synagogue is a thriving, vibrant Jewish community. It's precisely because we celebrate Shabbat each week and host Minyan daily that we can mobilize in a minute on a weeknight. Of course preparing for tragedies is not the only reason why our community gathers. We gather together to experience life together - with both its ups and downs - through a Jewish lens.

It's also the best way for us to feel that we are part of something bigger: a *global people*. We are a faith, of course, but we are also a Jewish nation, a people. We are familiar with the story of Ruth the Moabite, the quintessential woman who joined the Jewish

people as an adult. Her loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi continues to provide a model. She famously told Naomi: “Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d” (Ruth 1:16, 17).

Notice which Ruth prioritizes, which she names first: your *people* shall be my people, and your *G-d* my G-d. For Ruth, the Jews are a nation first and a faith second. And Jewish life connects us to this storied people, all across the world today, and across millennia of our history. Being part of this people is a special destiny, and we can only sense this when we are actively engaged in Jewish life.

I opened today with a question: Why should we live active and openly proud Jewish lives during this challenging moment? Because we each need strength right now in this hostile world, and strength comes from being certain about what we stand for.

In two words, we’re about sanctifying life. Sanctifying life. Taking something ordinary and making it extraordinary.

Each of us has an ongoing and active choice about how to be in the world. This choice is actually first articulated by the Torah. Moses presents that binary choice to the Israelites in Deuteronomy, as he shares his final words with his people:

“See, I set before you this day life and goodness, death and wickedness... I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day : I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life - *Uvaharta Bahayim* - in order that you will live, you and your children” (Dt. 30:15-19).

In the context of the Torah, Moses urges the Israelites to choose life; that is, to continue the covenant with G-d by obeying the Mitzvot, the source of spiritual life and Jewish identity. Because if the Jewish people were to stray from the commandments in Israel, the Jewish people would disappear. Death. But if they were to keep the Mitzvot, the Jewish people would live and endure forever. Life. History has shown that to be true.

For us today, the verse means something a little different. The contemporary Rabbi Yitz Greenberg interprets it this way, saying: “Overall, the purpose of the covenant is to repair the world so that life flourishes in this world. At this moment, every act in every life situation involves a mixture of life and good, and of death and evil. People must...act to maximize elements of life and minimize elements of death.”

Greenberg claims that we each have many choices every day about how to be in the world. Every interaction has a chance to make a positive change with the intention of

adding life and goodness to our corner of the world. To make the world what it ought to be rather than what it currently is.

Jews say “To life! *LHayim!*” so frequently that it's an involuntary reflex whenever we raise our wine glasses. How amazing it is that we articulate this core value so often.

Being Jewish gives us so many special moments: by ourselves with G-d, with our families, with our Beth El community, and with the entire Jewish people. Some of these moments are fun, like Purim, but many of them are about something deeper: joy. These joyful moments are enduring and worth celebrating even in difficult moments, like the past two years: Shabbat and holidays; B'nai Mitzvah and weddings; the satisfaction of taking care of people in need. *These* are bright spots in an increasingly dark world.

I know it's Yom Kippur, but this topic has me thinking of Hanukkah. During the darkest part of the day on the coldest, darkest days of the year, we light the holiday candles to combat darkness with light. We add candles, one by one, until the whole room glows. The dark room symbolizes antisemitism, hate, injustice, fear. But the light of the flickering flame stands for love, justice, Mitzvot, Torah...life. Ultimately that's what our people stands for.

On this Yom Kippur we don't light Chanukah candles, of course. But we do gather in shul in front of the Ner Tamid, the eternal lamp that never goes out. This signifies something critical: the Jewish people can never be extinguished. And every time we gather in synagogue, the Ner Tamid also reminds us of something else: when we kindle our flame, it brightens the whole world.

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