

The Family

Shanah Tovah tikoteivu, a *Gut Yontif* to everyone and best wishes for a happy and healthy 5780. It is truly wonderful to be here with you this evening to greet the new year, a time of great possibility for good. There have been many tribulations in 5779, and now we have a chance to leave them behind and live up to our full potential in the new year. It is a joy to begin the year with a beautiful and meaningful service as we have done tonight. First, because of our new machzorim. Thanks to Dorothy Kay and everyone who donated to our book fund, we finally have High Holy Day prayerbooks that are fully transliterated, gender sensitive, and most importantly, truly inspiring. The words in these books uplift us and help us to find that spark within us that fills us with holiness and hope.

Secondly, this is a wonderful way to start the new year because we are here with our fellow Jews. It is always wonderful when Jews get together for a good reason, a sacred reason. Not that we don't get along with non-Jews, not that they are not part of our lives. There are people who are here tonight who are not Jewish, but I venture to assume that they are very Jewish gentiles. But we are gathered here in a synagogue, in a Jewish service led by a rabbi and a cantor, to celebrate a Jewish holiday with our friends and neighbors, and there is something very wonderful about that.

With all of the suffering, the oppression, the exiles, the wars, the laws keeping Jews down, the terrible darkness of the Holocaust, the recent rise in anti-semitism, the two attacks in synagogues last year, we are still here. And we are here not to mourn, nor to count our diminished numbers. In fact, one of the high points of the Yom Kippur afternoon service is when we bless all the babies that were born in our community last year. So far from mourning our reduced numbers, we are celebrating our increased numbers. But mostly we are here to celebrate a new year, to celebrate having made it to 5780, to keep the commandment to celebrate *Yom T'ruah*, the day of the Sounding of the Shofar. We are here to recommit to being Jewish, to become better people.

It is a wonderful thing, when Jews gather together to do something so quintessentially Jewish. I speak as a person who loves Jews and Judaism, and I know you do too. So perhaps it would not be strange to ask the question, who are these people, these Jews, we love? Why do we love them? Why do we feel connected? What is that itch inside of us that we scratch by being here tonight?

Some people here tonight 'do Jewish' all year long. Some come to the synagogue

every Shabbat, or light candles every Friday night. Some celebrate Passover and Chanukah. Some may only come to synagogue on this night. But however much Judaism there is in your life, it is there because you need a certain amount of Judaism. You can't go a whole year without any Judaism. You can't let Rosh Hashanah go by without notice. I agree. So what is this thing, this Judaism, with which we have this connection?

As many of you know, there have been conversations here during our Torah discussions, during Lunch and Learn, and in the discussions around the tables after services, as to whether Jews are a people, a nation, or whether Judaism is a religion. There are elements to both in Judaism.

Once upon a time, we all lived together in one country. We had our own language, our own food, our own origin story, and our own Gd, although we had the *chutzpah* to say He was the only Gd, and therefore everyone's Gd. When we were exiled, our dream was to return to our own land, to be ruled by our own king. From this viewpoint, Judaism seems to be a nationality. Yes, things were difficult when we were exiled from our land for two thousand years, but basically we are a people. The word 'Jew' means someone from the land of Judea. This is why, when someone wants to join the Jewish people, they can't just say they believe in Judaism and that is it. We need evidence of a commitment, just as when a person from another country wants to become a United States citizen.

On the other hand, there are certainly ways in which Judaism seems to be a religion and not a nationality. When someone wants to convert to Judaism, we don't care what country they are from or where they live. We care what they believe, and whether they will follow the rules of the Jewish religion. You can say that you are an American or an Englishwoman or a Dane and convert, but you cannot convert if you believe that Islam is the true religion. You can be Jewish and not eat gefilte fish, hate bagels, and dislike arguments. You have left Judaism if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

When Jews wanted to become citizens of the countries in which they lived, we said that Judaism was a religion and not a nationality. That claim was made especially in the Reform movement, in which our goal was to be accepted as citizens like anyone else. But Judaism is not just a religion.

There are many people who are Jewish who do not follow the Jewish religion, or any religion. There are many atheists and agnostics who are Jewish. There are many people who do not come to services, not even High Holy Day services, and are still Jewish. If Judaism were only a religion, what would be the connection between Reform Jews and Ultra-Orthodox Jews? We do not believe the same things. We do not practice

the same way. The only thing we have in common is that we are all Jewish.

I know many Jews, and I'm sure you do too, who could not be less interested in religion, but who, nonetheless, are good Jews. They are concerned about Jews all over the world, they give *tzedakah*, they support Israel. If you ask them why, they will tell you, "It's a *mitzvah*," and if they do not even know that one Jewish word, they will still tell you "That is what Jews do," and they will be right.

So then is Judaism a nationality? Just as obviously not. Are we not American citizens? Do we not serve in the United States military and government? I have met French Jews and British Jews and Italian Jews and Australian Jews and Mexican Jews, and they are certainly French and British and Italian and Australian and Mexican. Before 1948 perhaps one could say that Jews were a people, but a people without a nation. After 1948, the story changed. If being Jewish was to be a member of the Jewish nation, why didn't all the Jews move to the Jewish nation? It wasn't merely that it was inconvenient. We didn't move to the Jewish nation because we already had a nation. We were Americans or South Africans or Argentinians.

So if we are not a nation, and not a religion, what are we?

Before I get to the answer, I would like first to say 'Thank Gd!' Thank Gd we are not only a religion! And thank Gd that we are not only a nation! If we were only a nation, we would loose all of the Jews who did not love Israel. If we were only a religion, we would loose all of the Jews who did not follow the religion. And I tell you now, we need every Jew. We need every Jew.

We need Jews like General David Goldfein, the current Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, or any one of the 15,000 Jews currently on active service in the U.S. Military. Not all of them are religious. But they are all Jews, and we are proud of them.

We need Jews like the ones who serve in the United States Government, some of whom are members of this congregation. If Judaism was their nationality, they would not serve the United States. But they do serve.

We need Jews like Harvey Fierstein, like Ira Glass, like Marcel Proust and Jacques Derrida, like Emma Goldman and Oliver Sacks, even though all of those people are or were self-declared agnostics or atheists. We need Jews like Rabbi Shemtov at the Chabad House, like the young men and women studying to be rabbis at the yeshivah at the Hebrew Institute, all of the Chasidic and Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews, even those who do not accept other forms of Judaism. And, of course, we need all of the Reform Jews as well. Each and every person here is vital. Not just to your family.

Not just to your friends. But to the entire Jewish enterprise, which has lasted thousands of years, for three quarters of recorded human history. Judaism would not be complete without you.

These days, when there seems to be a divide between the Jews of Israel and the Jews of the diaspora, it bears repeating: We need all of the Jews of Israel. Religious, anti-religious, leftists and rightists and everyone in between. Whether you support the Government of Israel or you do not, whether you think Israel is an oppressive colonizer or the most enlightened country in the world or somewhere in the middle, we need all of the Jews of Israel.

We do not need all of the Jews because Jews are a religious group. If that were true we would only need the Jews who were religious. We do not need all of the Jews because Jews are members of a nation. If that were true we would only need the Jews who were not members of other nations.

All Jews are essential not because we are a religion or a nation. Not because we are a society or a civilization or a community. All Jews are essential because we are a family.

We are a big family. We are a family that has members all over the world. We have members of whom we are proud, and members of whom we are ashamed. We have family members we love and family members we have never met. Wherever we go, anywhere in the world, we can find fellow Jews, and they will treat us like relatives. Some like distant relatives, others like long lost cousins.

The Torah itself insists that we are all a family. We are not called Jews in the Torah, but B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel. Not Israel the country, but Israel the person. Jacob, our third patriarch. We are also called Hebrews, because Avraham Avinu, Abraham our father, was called Avraham HaIvri, Abraham the Hebrew. And when a person becomes Jewish, they are known as bat or ben Avraham v'Sarah, the descendant of Abraham and Sarah. They become, not just a person in the group, they become a member of the family.

What does it mean to be a member of this family? Like any family, it means that you are connected. No matter how far away you go. No matter how long it has been since you have been in touch. You are still a member of the family and we will welcome you back when you return. Being a member of a family means that every Jew is respon-

sible for every other Jew, as it says in the Talmud.¹ It means we are proud of every good Jew and ashamed of every bad Jew, because whatever a Jew does reflects on the entire family. It means that the State of Israel is a home for us, whether we have ever been there or not, whether we like the current government or not, whether we like what goes on in Israel or not. And whether you support the settlers or think they are terrible people, they are part of your family. You can be angry with them, but you can't turn your back on them.

Everyone who has been to a synagogue somewhere else, perhaps in a foreign country, and who has been approached by someone there who has said, 'Hello, where are you from? What are you doing for Shabbat dinner?' knows this is true. Everyone who has been to Israel, and has had some stranger there ask questions that are a little too personal, knows this is true. Everyone who has travelled with small children, and has had an elderly Jewish couple come over to play with the children like surrogate grandparents knows this is true.

You may have liked it, you may not have liked it. You may have not recognized the feeling until I put a name to it just now, but that feeling is the feeling of being a member of a family.

And therefore every Jew is essential. Because every member of your family is essential. You may not turn your back. As the Torah tells us, you may not stand by while your brother bleeds.²

Does this mean that Jews don't care about gentiles? Of course not. You have your family, and you also have your friends, your neighborhood, your community. But there is no shame in loving your family more than others. There is no shame in thinking of them first. The *Shulchan Aruch* says that when you give charity, first you give to your family, and then to neighbors, and then the poor from elsewhere in your city.³ There is no shame in feeling a connection to Jewish people anywhere in the world. And there is no shame in supporting Israel, no matter what.

That is why we are here tonight. That is why it is good to be here. That is why it is necessary to be here, because it shows that you still remember that you are part of the Jewish family. And we cannot afford to lose you, because every member of the family is important. No matter what you believe. No matter where you are from. You are here.

1. BT Sh'vuot, 39a

2. Leviticus 19:16

3. Yore Deah 253:1

And that means everything.

I am truly happy to be here with you this evening, on a Jewish holy day, in a Jewish synagogue, with members of our Jewish community. With members of our family. We showed up tonight to honor our parents, our grandparents, our ancestors going back to ancient days. We showed up tonight for our children. We showed up for each other. Because, after all, family is family.