

Rosh Hashanah Eve Sermon 5775/2014

“I am a Jew because...”

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The story of Jews in America begins in the mid 17th century...in Recife, Brazil. Recife was a Dutch-held province that attracted many Conversos, Jews from Inquisition-run Spain, Portugal and other Spanish-held territories, who, in their home countries, made the precarious choice to pretend to live as Catholics in public while practicing Judaism secretly. Some fled to places like Recife, because the Dutch were tolerant of Jews and they could practice their Judaism openly.

By 1654, Recife was no longer safe for Jews, having been reconquered by the Portuguese. Some Jews wasted no time getting away. That year, twenty-three of them acquired passage on a ship called the St. Catherine, bound for Dutch New Amsterdam, later to become New York. Two Jews already present in the colony, Solomon Pieters and Jacob Barsimson, an Ashkenazi trader, became the advocates for the new arrivals and facilitated their settlement.

Peter Stuyvesant, the director-general of New Amsterdam and the whole of New Netherlands, stood in the way of granting Jews freedom and equality in the little colony. However, after pressure from his bosses at the Dutch West India Company and the firm's Jewish investors, Stuyvesant relented but remained recalcitrant. In fact, a year after the arrival of the Brazilian Jews, Jacob Barsimson and Asser Levy had to petition for the responsibility of taking their turn standing armed watch over the colony. Stuyvesant grudgingly gave in. Asser Levy, one of the Recife Jews, would later become the village's butcher.

That same year, 1654, six Jewish businessmen from Amsterdam joined the fledgling Jewish community of **New** Amsterdam, bringing with them North America's first Torah scroll. However, by 1664, when the British captured New Amsterdam, the Torah and those who brought it were gone and Asser Levy, the butcher, was the **only** Jewish name on the list of those who signed the oath to the British crown. Apparently he was the **only** Jew left in

New York! He **remained** the only Jew for **sixteen years** at which time he was joined by relatives from Amsterdam. He would later become the first Jew to serve on a jury in North America.

Let's skip ahead more than one-hundred years to August 17, 1790. President George Washington was in the midst of a visit to the thirteen states to promote amendments to the Constitution, the third of which would guarantee the right to freedom of religion and the press. When he came to Rhode Island, one of his greeters was Moses Seixas, one of the officials of Yeshuat Israel, the first Jewish congregation in Newport and the second in the country! Mr. Seixas articulated beautifully the deep appreciation that Jews had for these United States. We would do well to remind ourselves of this appreciation. Seixas said:

“Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now...behold a Government, erected by the **Majesty of the People**—a Government, which **to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance**—but generously affording **to All** liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine...”

Upon his return to the Capitol, Washington wrote acknowledgements to each of the constituent groups who greeted him on his tour. His letter to the synagogue in Newport is a precious piece of Jewish American history. The President was obviously quite taken by the way in which Moses Seixas expressed the core of the American ethic because he chose to repeat it verbatim in his return letter to the congregation. Washington wrote:

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...”

Since 1654 the Jewish experience in America has fostered not just one but many Jewish identities. Last year, Pew Research released its latest “Portrait of Jewish Americans” and the first thing the folks at Pew had to figure out was “Who is a Jew in America today?” They pose the question thoroughly, something we all should do. They say:

“On the one hand, being Jewish is a matter of religion – the traditional, matrilineal definition of Jewish identity...founded in halakha (Jewish religious law). On the other hand, being Jewish also may be a matter of ancestry, ethnicity and cultural background. Jews (and non-Jews) may disagree on where to draw the line. Is an adult who has Jewish parents but who considers herself an atheist nevertheless Jewish, by virtue of her lineage? What about someone who has Jewish parents and has converted to Christianity? Or someone who has no known Jewish ancestry but is married to a Jew and has come to think of himself as Jewish, though he has not formally converted to Judaism?”

I find it absolutely wonderful how many of these Jewish identities are present within our Beth Shir Shalom community! We are a true microcosm of what it is to be Jewish in America today.

What the Pew study does not ask is why we identify as Jews. To help answer this question, listen to this wonderful definition of being a Jew written by Edmund Fleg in 1927 as if he were speaking to his future grandchild:

I am a Jew because
Judaism demands no abdication of the mind.
I am a Jew because
Judaism asks every possible sacrifice of my life.
I am a Jew because
wherever there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.
I am a Jew because
whenever the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.
I am a Jew because
the message of Judaism is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because
the promise of Judaism is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because
for the Jew, the world is not finished; human beings will
complete it.

I am a Jew because
for the Jew, humanity is not finished; we are still creating
humanity.

I am a Jew because
Judaism places human dignity above all things, even Judaism
itself.

I am a Jew because
Judaism places human dignity within the oneness of God.

Then, Edmund Fleg asks his future grandchild:

But you - will you feel yourself a Jew, my child? People say to
me, "You are a Jew because you were born a Jew; you neither
willed it nor can change it." Will this explanation satisfy you if,
though born a Jew, you no longer feel one...?...Will you take it
from me, my child? Will you hand it on...?"

If we imagine that we are Edmund Fleg's grandchildren, we
might ask ourselves why are any of us Jews? Why be Jewish in
America when America makes it so easy for us to opt out of Jewish
identity? Identifying as Jews so as to not insult the heritage left to us
those many centuries ago by the Jews from Recife or Newport will
not take us very far. Being Jewish in America must be something we
do for us, our children and our grandchildren – not for those long
gone.

A section from the Pew study notes that while 94% of us are
proud to be Jewish, only 31% of us belong to a synagogue (barely
half that in the Los Angeles area, by the way). In fact, the great
majority of American Jews **do not** feel that being part of a Jewish
community (of **any** sort) is essential to being a Jew. 35% of America's
Jews self-identify as Reform, but only 61% of **them** belong to a
synagogue. Less than half of us who identify as Reform and are
raising children are giving those children some kind of a Jewish

education. Almost half of us **do not** believe that working for justice and equality is part of what it is to be a Jew.

We who are here tonight are a precious minority within a minority, within another minority. Before we take too much pride in this moment, Edmund Fleg would remind us of something more precious than the Jewishly identified adults in this room – it's the next generation, only some of whom are sitting beside us, or are celebrating elsewhere on this campus or will arrive tomorrow afternoon.

Mr. Fleg points to the paragraph following the Shema, the V'ahavta, as the original statement of our responsibility to buttress and gird our Jewish identities. Here's a power**fully** articulate translation of that text compiled by this community's friend, David Katz:

...And these things that are revealed to you this day as mitzvot will remain in your heart. Pattern your days on them, that future generations may discover Torah within you. Make your life into a voice of God, both in your stillness and in your movement. Renew these words each morning and evening in prayer and reflection. Bind them upon your arm and head as symbols of acts and thoughts consecrated to a holy purpose.

These words tell us why, especially in America, it is **SO** important for us to be here, with one another, as part of a synagogue-community not just today, but all year long. We need to be with one another in order to help each other insure these words "remain in our hearts", that is, our minds. We need to be with one another because Jewish culture and Jewish values exist, thrive and **are inheritable only within a context that is both familial and communal**; it is within this context that we "pattern our days on them" so that this and "future generations discover Torah within" us. We celebrate being with one another and know that we need to keep this commitment because Jewish culture and Jewish values are expressed as part of the voice of God **only** when we make them part of "our stillness and our movement". We celebrate being with one another and know that we need to keep this commitment because Jewish culture and Jewish values exist, thrive and **are only truly inheritable** when they are part

of our daily routine. We celebrate being with one another, and know that we need to keep this commitment **today and all year long**, because Jewish identity exists, thrives and is **inheritable** only when we think of its many components like spiritual stop signs, speed bumps, yield indicators and “speed checked by radar” reminders so that we gauge our behavior against the yardstick of Jewish values, not because we fear doing wrong, but rather because we see the benefits of making a positive, **holy** Jewish contribution to and impact on this world.

Asser Levy, the butcher, and the other brave Jews who set out for New Amsterdam, Moses Seixas and the Jews of Yeshuat Israel in Rhode Island, President George Washington, who, though he was not a Jew, understood what it would take for Judaism to survive in this American experiment have all done their part. Now it is up to us to act upon what we already know, Pew Study or not. This Jewish thing is no idle commitment. Thank you for your membership in Beth Shir Shalom or thank for thinking now that you **should** be a member and that you will join. The most insidious effect of assimilation is denial. The numbers of the Pew study make denial impossible. The study concludes that Jews whose Jewish identity is not religiously connected are not only much less associated with Jewish organizations, synagogues in particular, but two-thirds of them are not raising their children as Jews. Now we know, because we really did all along, that Reform Judaism simply **will not** exist for our children and our grandchildren unless we model for them, join and remain as members of this synagogue and infuse our lives with Jewish ritual, customs, and ceremonies and pursue the Jewish journey with inventiveness, innovation and joy. Thank you for being Jewish Americans when you move and when you’re still, for demanding holiness of your actions, for **never** leaving your brain and heart behind when you make a decision, for always knowing deep inside that each of us represents what being Jewish in America is to our children, our friends – to everyone who knows us, sees us, hears us...today and all year long. Amen.