

# WHY BE JEWISH?

Delivered by  
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on  
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Congregation  
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As we begin this New Year together, for the fifth time, my friends, I come to you with a question. At first, it might seem to be a strange question. Certainly for a rabbi to ask his congregation it may be a little unusual. But I believe that the question I want to ask you tonight, and which I want to try to begin to answer with you, is basic to what we are all about. It is basic to our being here together tonight, it is basic to the establishment and maintenance of this congregation, it is basic to our effort to teach our children, and to live our lives in this land, or anywhere. Tonight I come to you with a question, a demanding and difficult question. I want to ask you, my friends, "Why are you Jewish?" Why are you here celebrating a Jewish holyday? Why are you a member of this congregation, or any congregation? Why be Jewish?

In the society in which we live, to opt out is not difficult at all. Assimilation, disappearance into the "melting pot America" is easy. In our country, people don't have to carry cards that tell what religious or ethnic group they are a part of. Many of us don't look Jewish, whatever that means. We live our lives just like our neighbors, who are not Jewish. We work in the same places, we go to the same restaurants, we even belong to the same clubs. There is no great outside compulsion to keep us a part of the Jewish community.

That, of course, has not always been the case. Too often in our history and for too long, we were shut off from the rest of the world. Forced to live in ghettos, barred from many occupations, commanded to wear distinctive dress, we could not engage in free communication and social intercourse with those around us. But all that is over. Certainly here, in America, we have always been free to go and come and do just like anybody else. Assimilation, blending in to the world around us, is easy here.

And some have found that to be the way they want to live. They are not here tonight to answer my questions. They rarely, if ever go to synagogue. They have no associations with the Jewish community. They live their lives as Americans of no particular religious persuasion. Their answer to why be Jewish? is "I'm not!" Or, "I am, but only in name."



And nowadays, perhaps some have discovered that it is dangerous to be a Jew. (As if it was ever safe.) There is unease in some places about being Jewish. We just came back from Berlin. The Jewish community there is growing. A newly rebuilt synagogue was just opened a week or so ago. But when you visit a synagogue there, and really throughout Europe, the security is greater than at most airports. When a JCC in LA can become a shooting gallery, when a Jewish name on a passport, even an American passport, singles you out for terror, there can be danger in being Jewish. So some might decide it is just too dangerous to be a Jew. And they opt out as well.

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Over the years, indeed across the centuries, there have always been those who have sought to escape our heritage. Faced with the question of why be Jewish, they have decided not to be, or they have tried not to be. Sometimes, apparently, they have succeeded. In open societies, filled with freedom, in which it was easy to be a Jew, it was, often, just as easy, not to be a Jew. In more restrictive times when being a Jew was hard, it was often just as difficult to flee. But some have always tried.

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And so, tonight, my friends, we ask again, “Why be Jewish?” And it is a serious question, for us, for our times, for this night, and this place. “Why be Jewish?” Why here? Why now?

In the few minutes in which I have been speaking, I imagine that each of you has been trying to formulate an answer to these questions in your own mind. And perhaps it is not as easy a question to answer as you might have thought. I know that I have often been confronted by young people who are searching for their own identity and challenging me, a figure of authority. They have asked me the question that I am asking you tonight. And often I have struggled to find an answer.

Tonight I want to share with you my approach to an answer; to some answers to this basic question. I want to begin an exploration of this subject with you. It is an idea which is so profound, which is so important for all of us, that like a beautiful diamond, it needs to be turned over again and again. Sometimes one facet will catch the light, at another time different hues are exposed. And so we turn again and again to this gem. And, perhaps we shall never understand it in all its brilliant array. Why we are Jews. Why I am a Jew.

## I.

I begin with our heritage. A broad topic to be sure. I believe that it is important for each of us to make this heritage our own. I love Jewish history. It fascinates me. It challenges me. It compels me to try to put myself into the world of our ancestors, to try to understand how they thought and what they did and how they lived their lives.



I am a part of the Jewish community and, therefore, the history of the community is somehow my history too. The search for our roots, genealogy, the story of our families has become popular in recent years. This has been a Jewish avocation forever. We have always taken an historical view of our heritage.

I remember seeing an Oprah show. I am not a regular viewer. But this show was about how she hired somebody to trace her heritage, her roots back to Africa. I must admit it was a moving show. The story of her roots touched me. Even though it was her history, her heritage, I was moved by watching.

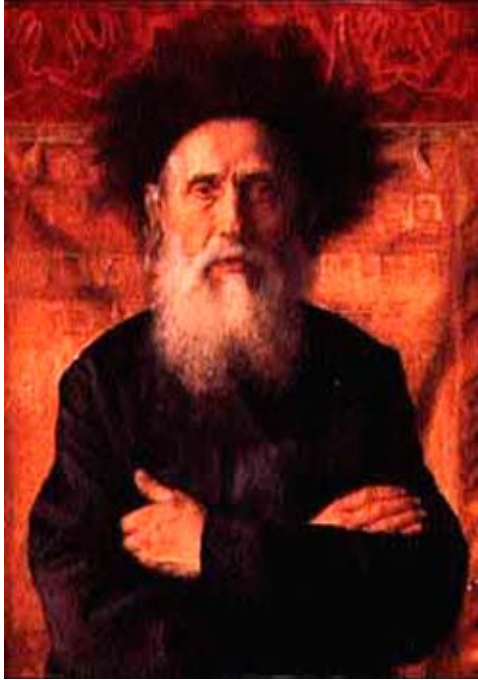
I think I responded partly because I am a Jew. I respond, intellectually and emotionally to the history of a people, to the history, especially of my people. I am Jewish because I am moved by the story of my people's quest, because I identify with them wherever they have stood, in triumph and in tragedy. The story of the Jewish people is, in a very real sense, my story. I am Jewish because I cannot deny that story, the history of my people.

But heritage is more than history. It is belonging. When I make the history of my people my own history, I also cast in my lot with them. We are a people

of common history and of common destiny. Whatever befell my people in the past, also befell me. That is what we mean when we read, as we shall next week, "all of you are standing this day before the Lord your God." That is what we mean when we say at our Seder, "In every generation, each person should feel as though they themselves had gone forth from Egypt." The past of my people is my past.

And whatever befalls my people, today, or tomorrow, affects me as well. History has taught too often and with too much pain that the fate of each of us is inextricably bound.

Seventy years ago, when the Nazis came to power, they decreed that people who were Jewish were non-citizens of Germany. It was illegal for any Jew to hold public office, to work for the Third Reich as a civil servant, to practice law in the German courts, or to be employed on an academic faculty. The definition of a Jew for the National Socialist Government was ultimately one which included many people some who did not think of themselves as Jews. Anybody who had at least one Jewish grandparent was a Jew. A number of startled Christians suddenly found themselves out of work and in the camps.



The fate of one Jew, even of one Jew who did not know that he was a Jew, became the fate of every Jew.

Our own experiences convince us that there is a bond. Even without danger, there is a bond. How many times do we pick up the paper to read of some disaster, of some great occasion, and we look for Jewish names? When the list of Nobel laureates is issued each year - which of them is a Jew? There is a bond - invisible, ineffable, eternal - which links us to our people. I am Jewish because my fate is intertwined with the fate of the Jewish people.

Just as the history of our people links me to them, so does my personal history, the story of my life make me a Jew. I was raised in a Jewish home, an observant home. In an observant Reform home. Shabbat and holidays were for us, very important family gatherings. I still remember Seders as a child. My grandfather led the service, for as long as he was able. One uncle always drank too much wine. Some of the things we do in our home to celebrate

Seder, even with a different Haggada, are things I remember from my childhood. I hope my children and grandchildren will remember them.

Every holiday, every life cycle reminds me of my own unique Jewish past. Sometimes I see the festivals of my childhood. Sometimes I see the celebrations in my own home when my children were younger. Sometimes it is last year that I recall with affection. Every time I stand on this bema to participate in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah of a child of this congregation, tucked away in the recesses of my mind are the occasions on which my own children became Bar and Bat Mitzvah. It does not take much - a word, a gesture, a melody - to bring those memories to consciousness. They are a part of my Jewish past. I pray that they will always be beautiful Jewish memories for my children as they are for me. May they always inspire us to live richer Jewish lives.

And so it is with all of us. Whether we were raised from infancy as Jews or came to it only recently, as adults, all of us have personal Jewish experiences which link us to our heritage and our tradition. Sometimes when we get together to talk about these things, and we don't do it often enough, we are able to share our own personal experiences of being Jewish. Most of us would not trade those experiences, some of which are bittersweet, for anything. They make us what we are: Jews.

My identification with my people and its past, my own experiences in Jewish living strengthen me. They hold me to my heritage. I am a Jew.

## II.

Why be Jewish?

There are other reasons. Judaism adds an extra dimension to my life. Our heritage, our culture, our traditions are so rich and full that they can add immeasurably to our lives. Take this season, for example. It marks the passage of time, as every season marks its passing. But the beauty of this season,

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its meaning for me, is not in just tearing another page from the calendar. There is so much more.

The sound of the shofar stirs within me deep and hidden feelings. It calls me, it calls us, to examine our lives, to look deeply into them. We live in such a busy world that we need markers on the way to tell us to stop and look at where we are and where we have been and where we are going. This day is such a marker. Our ancestors were remarkable in their understanding of human nature and human need. Every season has its own special celebration to mark the passage of the seasons, and more, to enrich the days of our lives

as they drain slowly through the hourglass of time. I cannot imagine living my life as fully, as richly, without the beauty of our festivals to mark the passage of the passing years.

We mark the changes that are all around us every day in other ways as well. There are moments in each person's life which call for more than the mundane, the everyday, the commonplace. The birth of a child is a time for celebration. The growth of that child is cause, sometimes, for concern, often for joy. The death of a loved one, a friend touches our lives with sorrow, even with bitterness. But these are the times in every life which call for more than passing notice.

How rich is our heritage in giving us guidance for these peak moments in our lives! We need the anchor of tradition, in these times of stress, even of joyous stress. Over the centuries, our people has developed methods of celebrating these times, of observing the occasions that come into each life. The rituals of our people, in these moments of joy and of sadness, are rich and filled with meaning. They can enrich our lives and fill our experiences to overflowing. Why be Jewish? To live as fully as possible in the richness of Jewish observance.

And there is more. The beauty of our heritage is not limited to religious practice, to ritual observance. We have a literature. It is a treasure house of knowledge, of beauty, of challenge to mind and heart. We have a musical heritage. The melodies of our people, whether ancient or modern, touch our hearts. Why is it that so many people who otherwise never enter any sanctuary, come to hear Kol Nidre? Why is it that so many people have such strong opinions about the music of our service? The melodies of our people touch our hearts. They reach out to us as Jews, and we respond.

There is art, there is dance, there is cuisine, there is so much more. The diversity of our experiences around the world have shaped us into the most cosmopolitan of people: cultured, urbane, involved with the beauty of the world around us and the world within. Why be Jewish? To be involved in and appreciative of the culture of our people.



### III.

There is one more area, one more facet, I want to explore tonight. Why am I a Jew? Because Judaism adds a spiritual dimension to my life. Through my belonging to the Jewish people, through the personal Jewish experiences of my life, through the richness of holidays and heritage, of culture and civilization, through all this I am able, on occasion, to encounter my God. Living my life as a Jew, I am able to communicate with the Ruler of the Universe, the Ground of all Being, the Eternal One, with God.

And it connects me to my God. Oh, I know, there are other paths to God. The Talmud recognized that. But not for me! And not, I pray, for you. We are Jews, and it is through our heritage and our people that we glimpse the Eternal: God. I cannot really, sincerely, pray any but Jewish prayers. I cannot respond from my heart to any but the Jewish prayer book. I read the Bible of other people, but somehow it is not the same, even when the words are the same. It is not the same as my Bible.

I mean not to sound chauvinistic, for I am not. I respect and admire the religious traditions of others. I find dialogue with other peoples of other faiths enlightening and uplifting. I celebrate our differences. But for me, there is only one way. There is only one way to live my life, only one way to teach my children, only one way to try to find my God. That is the Jewish way. The righteous of all nations, the Talmud teaches us, have a share in the world to come. But for me, in my personal life, in my faith, in my outlook, I am a Jew. I could be nothing else. It is my connection to my people, to my heritage, to my God. I am a Jew.



Why be Jewish? To preserve our heritage. To forge a link in the chain of history and heritage that is the Jewish people.

Why be Jewish? To join with our brothers and sisters all over the world in mutual support, in common aspiration. Their fate is our fate.

Why be Jewish? To experience again the experiences of my family, of my childhood. To pass them on to my children and grandchildren.

Why be Jewish? To fully share in the richness of our traditions which mark the seasons of the years and the seasons of our lives.

Why be Jewish? To enjoy the multitude of colors and words and sights and sounds and ideas which are a part of the Jewish world. To drink from the fount of Jewish knowledge. To thrill to the sound of Jewish music. To be part of Jewish culture and learning and civilization.

Why be Jewish? To find a grounding for our lives in our covenant with our God.

For me, I believe for many of you, there is no equivocation. We are Jews. The heritage is ours. The future is ours. And for the present, we shall live our lives as richly and fully as we can – as Jews.

Amen.

