

## Yom Kippur Erev Kol Nidre Sermon 5785

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“Make Yourself Proud to Be a Jew: Lessons Learned from Wearing My Kippah”

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*Shanah tovah, and gut yuntif.*

Once, it happened like this: in Newton Center, an elderly Jewish man with a cane came up to me and said, “I’m so sorry, I just missed my bus, and it’s way too far for me to walk to my brother-in-law’s house – but I’m Jewish, and I see you’re wearing a Kippah, so... I trust you – would you mind giving me a ride?” I was a little apprehensive, and I told him that, in general, he should probably be more careful, but I ended up giving him a ride, (and by the way, he turned out to be a fascinating person.) And when I dropped him off, I was proud that I had been visible as a Jew.

Throughout my life, I’ve had lots of stories about strange and delightful things that have occurred to me because I wear a Kippah. Sometimes, it happens when I’m in the supermarket. A Jewish person will come up to me and ask, “Excuse me: What time does Shabbat begin this evening?” When I’m walking around the city, sometimes random people will just come up and wish me “Shalommm!,” and they usually mention that they “once met a Jew”! Another person might be put off by this, but I see it that wearing my Kippah brings more kindness and blessings into the world.

I’ve always been proud to have an outwardly identifiable sign of my Jewishness. (Oh, I do also have a classic Ashkenazi nose!) But It’s now been about 25 years that I wear my Kippah wherever I go, from the time I get dressed in the morning, until the time I go to sleep, out on the street, in restaurants, wherever I am.

My Kippah is a visible sign of my Jewishness. It makes me a representative of the Jewish people, and it’s also a spiritual reminder to me, to live out my Jewish values always, as a liberal, egalitarian, modern Reform Jew.

And for years, each morning, as I place it on my head, I have said these words that are found in our prayer book:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשני ישראל  
“Blessed are You, Eternal Spirit of the Universe, who made me a *Yisrael*,  
who made me a Jew.”

Every morning, these few words are my expression of pride in what it means to be a *Yisrael*, a member of the Jewish people. Because to be a *Yisrael* is to strive to be holy, to rise up, through all the teachings, rituals and traditions of our people, to be my best possible self – to make my life holy, in whatever time I have alive.

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But this year, as we come to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for our people, being a Jew feels a lot more complicated. Now, it’s never been simple or uncomplicated to be an

American Jew – or to be a Jew in any age or land, for that matter – but the acuteness and the seriousness of the current situation is beyond anything we’ve ever experienced.

We’ve felt **disbelief and horror** at how the preponderance of statements at some protests glorifying the brutality of Hamas on October 7, justifying violence and declaring a global intifada revolution. I’m fairly certain that I would not have felt comfortable wearing my Kippah on Storrow Drive this past Tuesday.

I’m **worried** that on college campuses, more and more reports are coming out about intimidation and violence directed at Jewish students.

A number of members of our community have talked about the **shame and embarrassment** they’ve felt by the scope and scale of the retaliation being carried out in Gaza in the name of the Jewish people. One member of our congregation said he was filled with so much **anguish** about how other Jews acted in the world this year, that he couldn’t come to the synagogue for months.

And I heard from some people who were **fearful** enough about antisemitism that they chose to take down their Mezuzah from their doorway, and have avoided going to Jewish gatherings.

Many of us have felt this, on top of the **grief** that doesn’t seem to end for Israelis and for Palestinians (as I talked about on Rosh Hashanah).

And feeling **torment** for what this conflict is doing to our people – tearing us apart, not just on the political level of organizations and statements, but also among and within families and between friends who can’t talk to each other. How some people seem not to care the tiniest bit whether Jews live or die, and how some people seem not to care whether the Jewish people lives up to any measure of integrity or morality. We wonder: Will the Jewish people ever regain its reputation and moral standing in the world again? Will we ever be whole, or experience healing, as a people?

All this is real. It is really hard to be a Jew right now. Maybe that’s why, a number of times in recent months, (when my sense of humor has revived), I’ve thought about that line from “Fiddler on the Roof,” the question that Tevye asks:

**“Master of the Universe,  
I know we are the chosen people,  
but once in a while, couldn’t you choose someone else?”!**

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And yet... it’s Yom Kippur, the gates are open, and we stand before God, as individuals – each person on our own, and as a collective. It is time to return, to reconnect with our purpose. The annual call to our people to fast and confess our sins and spend the whole day in synagogue is about entering the innermost chambers of our hearts, and remembering who we can be, each one of us. What does it mean to be a *Yisrael* – that same *Yisrael* I refer to each morning when say my blessing for putting on my Kippah?

Our name, Yisrael, comes from the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel – you know the story: he wrestles all night in an epic match, and in the morning, there is no clear winner. As his prize, Jacob gets his own blessing, a new name: “Yisrael,” “One who wrestles with God and with human beings.” To be a “Yisrael” means we should keep struggling and wrestling with, and questioning and striving **to bring out the best within us**, even (or especially) in times of tremendous challenge.

I think this is one reason we have seen so many more people walking through the doors of the synagogue since October 7. In a recent study of the Jewish community, researchers observed<sup>1</sup> that even while the heartbreaking events of the past year were unfolding, there has been a “Surge” in participation in the Jewish community, in synagogues and in other Jewish spaces, by people who were otherwise not engaged, “an explosion in Jewish belonging.” Many Jews who describe themselves in the surveys as “not engaged” with Judaism, have been coming to connect with their people, for prayer, Jewish learning, celebrating Shabbat and holidays. Jews are craving to be in community with other Jews. And similarly, there has been a sharp increase in people coming to convert to Judaism across the country (not only at Temple Sinai). Many already have Jewish lineage, or are dating or married to someone Jewish, but many others have been drawn to the content of Jewish life, and they want to join our people. Many of them are, metaphorically speaking, choosing to wear their own Kippah, and say: *Baruch Atah Adonai, she’asani Yisrael*.

This is a very surprising phenomenon! One American rabbi was quoted in a newspaper<sup>2</sup> where these studies were reported as saying, “the whole thing is kind of **weird**. You’d think that October 7 would be a pretty good reason not to want to be Jewish, and yet here you have all these people wanting to cast their lot with the Jews.” **Why would anyone want to become Jewish now!?**

One answer is: Because we Jews are a community of purpose, and people see that. Some are coming to express their heartfelt solidarity with our people, or with family members who are Jewish; some, because they feel a personal alignment with Jewish values. One recent conversion candidate wrote when he first encountered Judaism: “I felt like there was something there in Judaism that was big and important.” There is meaning in being part of a community grounded in strong values.

Judaism demands our utmost upright and ethical behavior – to commit ourselves to working to bring justice, trust, compassion and loving-kindness into the world. And our people’s tradition is a spiritual one that is meant to awaken us to the preciousness of life and to life’s possibilities. Jewish spiritual teachings suggest that “there is no place where God is not,” and that that awareness helps us elevate our lives to be lives of goodness. To be “Yisrael” is to see<sup>3</sup> God’s Presence in every experience – and that’s the function of all our rituals: our blessings, of

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<sup>1</sup> “‘The Surge,’ ‘The Core’ and more: What you need to know about the explosion of interest in Jewish life,” by Mimi Kravetz, Sarah Eisenman, David Manchester, [May 9, 2024, eJewishPhilanthropy](#).

<sup>2</sup> “‘Time to Take the Plunge’: How October 7 Sparked a Huge Wave of Jewish Conversions in America,” by Judy Maltz, [Haaretz](#), June 2, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> See the Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Lunschitz), commentary to Gen. 32:29, and his interpretation of Yisrael as *אשר ראיה* הוא לשר כי ישר אל, related to Numbers 24:17, *אשרינו ולא קרוב*, with *אשר* translated as “behold,” “see.”

Shabbat, our candles, silence, prayer, the holidays, my Kippah, and more. Our task is to make God's presence felt in the world. That's what it means to be *Yisrael*. \*

And, yes, being *Yisrael* is indelibly about connection with a people; it is based on peoplehood. To be a "Yisrael" is to be responsible to other Jews, and for other Jews – that's exactly what the Talmud says: "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh*": All members of the people of Israel are responsible to, and responsible for each other.

When some Jews are suffering or in pain – to be a Jew is to respond to them in their time of need. When some Jews are experiencing grief and mourning – to be a Jew is to show up and comfort them. When some Jews are vulnerable, to be a Jew is to show up and protect them. Because we're all responsible for each other.

But that's not all.

When some Jews are acting badly or committing injustices or giving Jews a bad name – it affects us all, and there is no getting around that. To be a Jew in those moments is to stand up, and speak up, to admonish them if necessary, from love as family members, and try to set them on a better path. Tomorrow afternoon, we'll read from the Torah portion from Leviticus the words *הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָאת*, "You shall rebuke a member of your people, so that you do not bear their misdeeds<sup>4</sup>." To speak up when members of our people are violating our values can be an act of commitment, connection and love.

And we need to do it.

Because much of the world is watching to know who we are. And we if leave it to others to represent the Jewish people, we cede the field, we relinquish control over the narrative of who the Jewish people is, and what we stand for. We have to show up and be visible as Jews, and show that this how a Jew behaves. In the words of my friend Rabbi Rachel Timoner: "Our story is being told right now, our history is being written. Your face, your voice, your values, your example, need to be part of that story."

Printed in our Reform Shabbat prayer book, there is a poem written by a Jewish and French writer named Edmund Fleg titled "I am a Jew,"<sup>5</sup>. Fleg had been deeply disturbed by the antisemitism of the Dreyfus Trial, and the precarious conditions of Jews in the world at the time. And he wrote this poem as a personal statement for his grandchild who was expected to be born shortly. He wrote:

"I am a Jew

I am a Jew because my faith demands of me no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because my faith requires of me all the devotion of my heart. I

am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, I weep.

I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, I hope. I am a

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<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:17. Parashat Kedoshim will be our Torah portion for Yom Kippur afternoon this year.

<sup>5</sup> *Mishkan Tefilah*, p. 203.

Jew because the word of the people Israel is the oldest and the newest. I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise. I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not completed; we are completing it. I am a Jew because, for Israel, humanity is not created; we are creating it. I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above the nations and above Israel itself. I am a Jew because, above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.”

The poem was written in 1927. Nearly a hundred years later, it's words still ring true, and, also, each one of us could supply our own additional lines to his. Tonight, on Yom Kippur, even as the Jewish world is in turmoil and facing so much pain, let me ask you:

What lines would you add, for yourself, to this poem?  
For what purposes are you a Jew?

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Which brings me to this final Kippah experience story: Once, a number of years ago, while I was waiting in a restaurant in San Francisco, a man noticed my Kippah, and said: “Excuse me, but I’m Jewish, and I just want to thank you for wearing your *Kippah*.”

Why was he thanking me?, I asked.

Because, he confessed, somewhat sheepishly, he assumed that I was the type of Jew that he wished he could be, more rooted to his tradition, more connected to his Jewish practice, to his people and to God.

I don't recall what I said to him in that moment. But here's what I wish I had said to him: “Kippah or not, there is nothing holding you back from being the type of Jew you want to be.” And I wish I had said: “We need you. And the gates are always open. Know that, if you are striving to make your life holy, there is no one more Jewish than you.” I wish I had said: “Go, and make yourself proud as a Jew; go, and make us proud.”

Yes, it's complicated to be a Jew today. But we are part of a people, Yisrael, and that people is called to be holy. In this troubled time, let's keep striving and struggling, and being present and being visible, and speaking out for what we believe in, so we can make ourselves proud to be the Jewish people.

*Shanah tovah*. Please join me, if you wish:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשני ישראל.  
*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'Olam, she'asani Yisrael.*