

On Jewish Identity, and Jewish Pride

I remember it like it was yesterday. The year was a year in the 1900s. The setting was my elementary school music room. The protagonists were myself and Mrs. Jones,¹ our music teacher and after-school choir director. Our conflict? The pronunciation of the “Jewish” song we were going to sing at our “holiday concert” in front of the Christmas tree at a local shopping mall.

“Now repeat after me,” Mrs. Jones said to our choir, assembled for practice, “HEV-a-nu Shalom I-like-him.”

“Um, Mrs. Jones,” I tried to cut in, “I know this song. It’s ‘hay-vey-nu shalom ah-leh-chem.’”

“No, Alexandra,” Mrs. Jones said (at least in my memory – she was probably nicer in real life). “I am the choir director. You will sing this song the way I tell you.”

Later that day, I marched home and searched through my family’s CDs and tapes, until I found what I was looking for: a recording of the song in question. The next day, I triumphantly brought it to the music room at school, and played it for Mrs. Jones, who acceded that we could, in fact, sing the words with their proper pronunciation during our shopping mall holiday concert in front of a Christmas tree. I was jubilant.

To understand this story, you need to know that during this time in my life, I was a pretty timid kid. I hated confrontations. Any abilities I have now to have direct conversations are consciously gained skills, mostly in adulthood. At age 9 or 10, I was not a “storm the elementary school gates to play someone a recording of the song they are mispronouncing” kind of a person. But in the case of “hay-vey-nu shalom ah-leh-chem,”² none of that mattered, because I was so proud of being Jewish. My pride in Judaism, and my excitement about sharing that with others, far outweighed any fears I had of disagreeing with an adult.

There was no part of me that was conflicted about being Jewish, or afraid to let other people know that I was Jewish.

As I grew up, my relationship to Judaism and Jewish identity matured and evolved, but the core of deep pride remained. It is still with me today. Judaism has been a source of great strength and wisdom throughout my life, and one of my most profound hopes as a rabbi is that it can be this for other people, too.

But the world has changed so much. Our lives have changed so much. And for many of us, our relationships to our own identities are a lot more complicated these days. Over the past few years, in particular, I’ve heard our community articulate a number of challenges to navigating our lives and identities as Jewish or Jewish-adjacent people today. Some are external challenges

¹ Not her real name.

² הבאנו שלום עליכם

– how people see us and relate to us as Jews, or as people connected in love to Jewish friends or family – and some are internal challenges – how it *feels* to us to be Jewish, or Jewish-adjacent. Some are both.

Tonight I'd like to talk with you about one of those challenges, which I don't think is universal – what I'm about to say may or not match your own experiences – but I do think it's pretty widespread. If it's not something you are going through, it's possible that someone in your life is – like a friend, or family member, or coworker, or someone in one of your clubs. And all of us have a role to play in supporting each other.

Here is the challenge: Many of us feel great personal distance from the actions of other Jews, or Jewish communities, and sometimes that distance and disagreement morphs into discomfort, or shame, or alienation. As a rabbi, one of the questions I've heard most in the past few years is something like: *what does it mean to be part of the Jewish community when there are people out there doing things in the name of Judaism that I believe are deeply wrong?*

Have you ever wondered this?

I've most frequently heard this question come up in relation to the war in Gaza that began after the terrible October 7 attacks, as many of us struggle with what it means that the ruling government of a Jewish state has taken the particular actions that it has over the past two years. There is deep moral distress in our community and in many Jewish communities – including many communities in Israel – about the treatment of the people of Gaza and about the perceived abandonment of the hostages. Many who follow Israeli news more closely are also dismayed by the escalation in violence perpetrated by Jewish settlers against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank over the last two years. What does it mean for us to be Jewish or Jewish-adjacent when all of this is happening?

And I think there is often a question underneath this question: do other people's actions, in the name of Judaism, reveal some essential truth about Judaism, something that is *more authentic* than the Judaism that we practice, something that should make us doubt Judaism itself?

I don't think so, but I do empathize with the question. When I think back to the version of myself that marched into Mrs. Jones' elementary school music room and demanded that we pronounce *Hevenu Shalom Aleichem* correctly (or correctly-ish) ... that was a version of myself who believed that Judaism was a powerful force in the world that would inevitably lead people who followed it to live good and moral lives. It was one of the reasons I loved Judaism.

I was crushed, years later, the first time I really grappled with the actions of people doing things in the name of Judaism that I believed were wrong. In my case, this was when I was studying conflict resolution in Tel Aviv, a few years before rabbinical school, and I first met and interacted with Palestinian civilians in the West Bank who had recently lost their land and sometimes their homes to settlers who took them by force. What did it mean about Jewish tradition that it could leave anyone thinking that this was an acceptable way to behave?

Over many years, and many conversations, I have come to believe that the existence of Jewish extremism simply means that Judaism is a human wisdom tradition, and like other human creations, it is varied and imperfect. There is no human wisdom tradition that I can think of – no religion or philosophy – that is immune to extremism. That’s disappointing, heartbreaking, even, but it does not obviate the really beautiful parts of these traditions. And it also doesn’t obviate *our* ability and *responsibility* to claim and be proud of our practice of Judaism ... we are the people who need to make a Judaism of love, justice, and respect for all human beings, created in the image of God, a reality in the world.

How might we each go about doing this?

The first step is to identify the parts of Jewish tradition we are most proud of, or most curious about, and find a way to bring them even more actively into our lives.

Before we get to pride, let’s start with curiosity: what is a Jewish experience you’ve always wanted to have, or a piece of Jewish tradition you’d like to learn more about? Is there a way you can imagine doing this?

Maybe you are an adult who never had a b’nai mitzvah, and you want to join our adult b’nai mitzvah cohort, *Rodef Chochma* (which means seekers of wisdom). Maybe you want to expand your tzedakah practice, or your volunteering practice, or your involvement with advocacy through a Jewish lens. Maybe you want to travel and get to know the Jewish community in a part of the world you’ve never been to before, or maybe you want to dive more deeply into Jewish communal life here at home.

Maybe you just want to read some books! We are in a moment when Jewish identity is changing and evolving rapidly and dynamically, just as our world is. Part of what this means is that in the past few years, a number of thinkers have published books which are essentially their treatises on Jewish history and the Jewish present, and what they think being Jewish can, does, and should mean in the world today. *We can read these books.*³ We are in a time of rich exploration about the meaning and implications of Jewish identity, and rich debate about the same. We can join the conversation.

Let’s turn to pride: what are the parts of Jewish tradition you are most proud of? Are there ways you can incorporate these sources of pride more fully into your daily life? I think each of us will answer this question differently, but for example, here are three of my answers:

³ We can read:

Judaism is About Love by Rabbi Shai Held (2024)

To Be A Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People by Noah Feldman (2024)

Tablets Shattered: The End of an American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life by Joshua Leifer (2024)

The Amen Effect by Rabbi Sharon Brous (2024)

Living the Letters: An Alphabet of Emerging Jewish Thought by Rabbi Michael Michael Marmur (2025)

As A Jew: Reclaiming Our Story from Those Who Blame, Shame, and Try to Erase Us by Sarah Hurwitz (2025)

Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning by Peter Beinart (2025)

For Such A Time As This: On Being Jewish Today by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove (2024)

The Jewish Way to A Good Life: Find Happiness, Build Community, and Embrace Lovingkindness by Rabbi Shira Stutman (2025)

... and more!

1. I am proud that the most frequently repeated commandment in the Torah - repeated 36 times!⁴ - is the commandment to not oppress the stranger. In the ancient world, this was a commandment about how to treat people who weren't born in your town or city, but moved there and stayed there. Over the course of our history, Jewish communities have applied this commandment to a variety of contexts, including interpersonal – how we treat people who are new to our community – and broader – how we treat anyone who is marginalized or treated as an “other” in our society.

I am proud of the many ways that Jewish communities have tried to live up to this commandment throughout our history, and proud of the many ways we are still trying to do so, today. In this new year, in a time when so many immigrant communities in our country are living in fear, in a time when families are being torn apart, I want to recommit to standing with our immigrant neighbors.

2. I am proud that our tradition values human life. I am proud that our tradition in fact enjoins us to go to great lengths, including violating almost every other commandment, to save lives – our own and those of others.⁵ Judaism is not a pacifist religion – although there are certainly pacifist Jews – but it is a religion with a strong tradition of ethics, including teachings about the ethics of war, and the ethics of self-defense, and these teachings are not “anything goes.” War is complex just as self-defense is complex, and Judaism is thousands of years old, so Jewish teachings about both are far from unanimous. But we can claim our place in this multivocal tradition, by learning, and advocating for what we believe is right, and in this new year, I want to recommit to doing so.
3. I am proud that our tradition emphasizes the capacity that all human beings have to grow, and change, in dialogue and community with one another. I am grateful that our holiest days – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the ten days that stretch out between them – are dedicated to reflection, repair, and renewal.

Because here's the other thing: what we're not proud of, in ourselves, in our communities? These are things we can work to change. We are the inheritors of a tradition that has survived for more than 3000 years in large part because its practitioners believed that they could change and grow, their societies could change and grow, and their religion could change and grow. We are not the passive recipients of the conditions of our lives – even when a lot feels out of our control. We are people with agency, and Rosh Hashanah calls on us to recognize that agency within ourselves, and reaffirm it in our actions.

What might claiming your own agency, as a member of the Jewish community and as a human being, look like for you this year? What might it look like for you over the next ten *days*, this sacred stretch of time from Erev Rosh Hashanah through the final moments of Yom Kippur when we are invited by our tradition to look deeply within and beyond ourselves and take the first

⁴ BT Bava Metzia 59b.

⁵ BT Yoma 85b.

steps towards change, growth and repair? And what might it look like for you this *evening*, in the words of the poet William Stafford: “starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?”⁶

Proudly claiming your connection to Jewish tradition is not always as simple as marching home, grabbing a CD, and playing it for your elementary school music teacher. In fact, it is often complex, requiring courage, and perseverance. *But it can be worth it.* In a time when we are often unsure about what to do next, in a time when many of us are hurting and so painfully aware of others who are hurting, Jewish tradition can be a guide for us. It can be a stabilizing force, and it can even be an agent of transformation – for us and for the world.

In this new year of 5786, we are the people who need to make a Judaism of love, justice, and respect for all human beings a reality in our world. And we are the people for whom a rich Jewish legacy of love, justice, and respect is waiting, inviting us to take hold of it, and call it our own.

Hadeish aleinu shana tova, we will pray together, in just a few moments: renew us for a year of goodness.⁷

This year, may we embrace renewal.

May we embrace connection - to ourselves, to each other, to this tradition that is our inheritance, and to the world beyond these walls.

And may we embrace growth, and possibility.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, may this be God’s will.

⁶ “You Reading this Be Ready,” by William Stafford.

⁷ This is one of the requests in the *Avinu Malkeinu*. אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ, הָדָשׁ עָלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה.