

Why are you here? This, by the way, is the part of the sermon where I worry just a little bit that asking the question will induce large numbers of you to look at each other and ask, “yeah, why are we here?” Thereby inducing a rush to the exits at which point the Board will begin to ask, “and why is he here?” But I’m going to push forward anyway and ask you again. Why are you here? Is it instinctual like salmon, which return every year to their spawning grounds? Is the answer, “what do you mean, ‘what am I doing here?’ I’m a member of the Jewish Community – this is what we do!” Is that enough of a reason? Why are you here?

It used to be that was enough of a reason. Religion was more, shall we say, coercive. When the Israelites crossed over the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land, we gave the Canaanites the following choices: they could become *geirei toshav*, resident aliens who followed Jewish law even if they were not Jewish; they could leave the Promised Land for greener pastures elsewhere; they could be killed. As I said – not exactly the model of inter-religious toleration.

Not that anyone else at the time was all that much better. The Syrian-Greeks tried to stamp out Judaism until we rebelled and, through God’s deliverance, prevailed as we retell in our celebration of Chanukah. The Romans would have been perfectly happy if we were to add Adonai to their pantheon of gods and begin to worship the entire pantheon. But we are a stiff-necked people insisting that God is, *davka*, God, the One, the Only. Our relationship with the Romans went downhill from there. We have had a long and complicated relationship with Christianity. For most of our history together we have been at best tolerated, when it was convenient, with significant restrictions on where we could live, what professions we could engage in and even what clothes we could wear. But as soon as it became inconvenient – we were shown the door, leave your property behind, thank you very much. Or massacred. Islamic rule was actually much better for us. We still had restrictions on where we could live, what professions we could engage in, we paid heavy taxes above what Muslims did and we did have to wear special clothing. But we weren’t killed or kicked out with our property confiscated.

Under all of these circumstances, Jews had no choice but to be Jewish and active members of the Jewish Community. Where else could they turn to? Rabbis with the

power to declare Cherem, a shunning from the community, could coerce behavior. The consequences of being shunned by the Jewish Community while simultaneously not being allowed into the wider non-Jewish community would have been devastating to an individual. People knuckled under and followed what the rabbis declared. Oh! Those were the good old days.

Emancipation changed all that. In the 19th century, when Jews were slowly allowed to become citizens of the countries in which they lived, we found that we were allowed, mostly, to live where we wanted, to join the professions we wanted to practice, wear the clothes we chose, and join the wider community. Not that you ever should, but today, one could safely ignore what the rabbis have to say. In this day, not even Orthodox rabbis have that coercive power. There is a phenomenon within the Orthodox world of agunot, or chained women whose husbands refuse them gets, Jewish divorce papers. They are forever chained without the ability to remarry or get on with their lives, and their Orthodox rabbis are powerless to enforce a Cherem. Their husbands simply move to another community with a different rabbi and pick up their lives. That's the thing: in this day and age, religion in general and Judaism in particular, is voluntary. There is nothing coercive that forces you to be a member of this or any other Jewish Community. So I'll ask you again, why are you here?

We are here because, even if we have never consciously thought about it, we feel a connection to our Judaism. For some of us the connection is deeper than for others, yet we all feel connected in one way or another and there are many ways in which we can feel connected.

For many of us, we feel a connection to Judaism through our families. I remember second night Seder at Anita's house, where she had all the furniture pulled out of the living room, folding tables set up for 20 or so people, kids running everywhere and so much fun. My brother and sister tell me stories of amazing, enormous, open house Chanukah parties at my Aunt Fannie and Uncle Ralph's house, though she died before I was old enough to remember either her or the parties myself. My father used to take me with him to Torah Study on Saturday mornings from about the age of 12 until I turned 15 and sleeping in had more appeal. But I remember how close it made me feel to my

father. Those of us who were born Jewish have these precious memories from our childhood and those of us who chose Judaism as an adult create these memories with their families. Through our celebrations and observances, we create deeply rooted connections between ourselves, our families and Judaism.

Another way we can connect to our Judaism is through prayer, the community and God. Some of us pray privately and freely whenever we feel so moved, whether from joy or grief, expressing gratitude or seeking comfort. This private prayer connects us directly to God when and where we need that connection. Others of us have difficulty with private prayer, but join in communal prayer and feel the connection to the wider community. I'm sure you've heard the old joke: Schwartz was getting ready to go to shul as he did every morning when his son stopped him. "Dad," he asked, "you don't believe in God. Why is it that every morning you go to shul to pray?" "You remember Cohen?" "Your best friend? Of course!" "Well, Cohen goes every morning to speak to God and I go every morning to speak to Cohen." When we join in a shivah minyan or celebrate a friend's child becoming bar or bat mitzvah, we may not be praying for our own sake, but for the sake of the connection we feel to the wider community. Prayer connects us to God either directly or through the community. Even for those of us who doubt God, the connection to the community still exists.

There is a curious phenomenon here and in many, many other synagogues across the United States. The phenomenon is that the Torah Study on Shabbat morning is well attended but only a third of those who have come to study stay to pray at services. In Austin, I had several regulars who came to both Torah Study and services and who simply couldn't understand why you would leave if you were already there. I think, however, that Dave Golbert in quoting his teacher summed it up best: When we pray, we speak to God; when we study, God speaks to us. To study is to engage in a holy act. When we puzzle over Jewish texts seeking out the meaning that speaks to us we connect to the wisdom of the ages, whether derived from God or from the generations of Jews who thought about and struggled with the same or similar issues that we face today. I understand why some who come to Torah Study don't stay for services; they are fully

satisfied through the holy act of study and the pursuit of wisdom. I would love it if they stayed for services, but I understand how they feel fulfilled solely with Torah Study.

Part of the joy of study is purely from the intellectual pleasure of the study itself. Part is the satisfaction of learning new insights on how we should conduct ourselves in our daily lives. Part is how we feel closer to God when we try to understand what it is that God wants of us. Part is the feeling we have when we realize that we are part of a chain of tradition stretching back thousands of years and, please God, stretching forward in time for thousands more to come. We feel part of a greater whole stretching through all of History, our history as Jews. We become larger than our limited selves when we realize that we are studying the same texts that have been pored over for thousands of years. We become part of the grand debate over the meaning of these texts when we interact with the commentators, adding our own thoughts to the mix. We also become larger when performing the same rituals that have been performed for thousands of years. Every year for thousands of years Jews have been gathering on this day, Rosh HaShanah. Every year for thousands of years Jews have observed and eaten their Passover meals together. Every week for thousands of years, Jews have observed Shabbat. We connect through study and ritual to Jews past, future and present as well. In communities all over the world, when we sit down to study, we study the same Torah. In communities all over the world, when we gather to pray, we may speak in different languages and sing with different melodies, but we all recite the same Shemah. When we gather round our Passover tables, the foods, the smells, the tastes may be different but the same story is shared with our children. Each of us is but one thread in an enormous tapestry, a tapestry whose length spans the entirety of time and whose width encompasses the entire world. But we are part of it all.

For some of us, we find that we are most strongly drawn by Judaism's call for Social Justice. We see the imperfections in the world around us, we hear the cry of our Prophets demanding, "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice shall you pursue", and we cannot but heed the call. We work together with others in the Jewish community, feeding the hungry, teaching the young, supporting the ill, housing the homeless – a myriad of needs that as we meet them, we slowly bring forth the Messianic Age. We are

partners with God in perfecting this world. For some there could be no more meaningful life than establishing a just society. While some of these activities take place here, within the walls of the synagogue, so much more takes place out in the wider world we are working so hard to improve. Yet all of it is a part of the Jewish experience.

Here on Long Island, and in Port Washington in particular, it's easy to be and feel Jewish. When I was living in Texas, not so much. Here the Jewish holidays are also school holidays. In Texas, every year I had to explain to public school teachers why my students needed to be excused from major exams on Yom Kippur. Here, when I tell people that I'm a rabbi, everyone understands. In Texas, I had to explain that a rabbi is kind of like a minister, but for Jews. Part of the appeal of belonging to a Jewish Community, is that we are with people who are like us, who get us, who we don't have to explain ourselves to. We connect to the Jewish Community because everyone wants to feel like they belong to a larger group rather than feeling like an isolated individual.

Why are you here? You're here because instinctively, if not consciously, you know that you want to feel connected and part of a greater whole. That's what Judaism and the Jewish Community offers: connection. Connection through family and friends. Connection through prayer and through study. Connection through time and through space. Connection by working towards a greater purpose, the perfection of this world. Connection by being with those who understand us. You're here because you belong here. You're here because you know that you are always welcome and needed to play your part in this Jewish Community. It's all here for you if you but open your mind, if you but open your hand, if you but open your heart.

Shana Tova.