

**Why Judaism? ...**

**It's About Being Part of Something**

**Much Bigger than Yourself**

**Yom Kippur Morning 5782**

*I will insist the Hebrews have contributed more to civilize men than any other nation.*

*If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations. They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth.*

*The Romans and their empire were but a bubble in comparison to the Jews.*

- **John Adams**

*If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky way.*

*Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of.*

*He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.*

*His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.*

*He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him.*

*He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it.*

*The Egyptian, Babylonian, and Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.*

*The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind.*

*All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains.*

*What is the secret of his immortality?*

- **Mark Twain**

**These laudatory words of praise written by two non-Jews, John Adams, the second President of the United States, and Mark Twain, the great American novelist, speak with wonder about the role Jews have played on the world's stage.**

**"The most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth," says Adams, "all things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains," says Twain. If other prominent world figures see the Jewish people thus, then how do we see ourselves? Do we share their fair**

**estimation of who we are or are we ignorant and dumb to our own achievements? And if these singular words of praise are true, then what is the secret of the reason for our success as a people? In a phrase, “what makes us so special?”**

**Today especially this question is all the more poignant and relevant. In a secular age such as ours, when organized religion is not only on the decline, but is seen more and more by many as irrelevant, what purpose does Judaism play in such a world? Add to this daunting challenge the lure of living in an open society where the intermarriage rate is over 50%, where assimilation into the majority culture is seen as preferable to holding fast to quaint “tribal customs,” where “woke” attitudes place a value on universalism at the expense of particularism, and where a watered down pediatric Judaism leaves one philosophically defenseless against these relenting new realities, you then have the makings of a foreboding and challenging question, why Judaism?**

**A few months ago, with the passing of my Rabbi and mentor, role model, and friend, Rabbi Henry Cohen of Philadelphia, I reacquainted myself with one of his foremost literary masterpieces, entitled Why Judaism? A Search for Meaning in Jewish Identity. Written in the 1970's, even 50 years later, this book still resonates with contemporary issues that give us pause to consider: does Judaism still matter?**

**In Rabbi Cohen's prologue, he succinctly summarizes the task before us. Is there a compelling case to be made for why Judaism matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

**Rabbi Cohen challenges us with these words:**

*More basic is an issue that brings together the realms of God, Torah, and Israel: What is the meaning of being Jewish? Does peoplehood have a purpose beyond eating lox and bagels? Some Jews find the answer in the covenant between God and Israel: The people were chosen by God to follow his Torah. Others maintain almost the reverse: Israel chose God and Torah and in this choice has created its own purpose for being. Still other Jews may see no purpose in Jewish*

*existence, and yet for some reason they remain Jews. Why? All this leads to the final question: "Why Judaism?" -- a question that, verbalized or not, is being asked by Jews of all ages. From the student who feels forced to attend religious school to the parent who does the forcing but finds that Judaism makes little or no perceptible difference in his life—many are wondering: why bother?*

**Why bother? On this day of all days when we look inward and challenge ourselves to seek truth and reconnect with what is most authentic and lasting in the way we live our lives, let us consider the ways Judaism and living a Jewish life can positively impact our lives and our world in 2021.**

**The first of these enduring understandings which hold the keys to participating actively in Jewish life in a meaningful and relevant way is all about connection.**

**The following story illustrates that even for those Jews who have drifted from their Judaism, it is still and always will be a piece of their core identity.**

**The story is told of a Jewish man who moves to the hinterlands of Kentucky. Wanting to find his peeps, as it were, to ascertain if there are any Jews around, let alone a Jewish community to speak of, he decides to search the local phone directory for a Jewish name. He comes upon the name of Seymour Cohen. Feeling pretty sure he has found a landsman, a "M.O.T." a Member of the Tribe, he decides to call Mr. Cohen. This is how the call went:**

**Hello, is this Seymour Cohen?**

**Yes, that is I.**

**My name is Abraham Goldberg from New York, and I just moved to Paducah. I was wondering if you might be Jewish and could tell me if there is any sort of Jewish community here.**

**Jewish? . . . exclaimed Mr. Cohen.**

**Why sir, you are sorely mistaken. I am not Jewish, my wife is not Jewish, my kids are not Jewish, and even my father, alev Ha-Shalom, wasn't Jewish either.**

**As Rabbi Cohen states, "still other Jews may see no purpose in Jewish existence and yet for some reason, they remain Jews." But even more to the point, in this story is Mr. Goldberg's longing to connect with his fellow Jews. This felt need to be in the company of others like ourselves, regardless of religious observance, level of Jewish education, or involvement in Jewish life, is what it means to be B'nai Brit – Jews who share a common bond as members and partners in a covenant that reaches back in time over 4,000 years. Whether it is something embedded in our spiritual and cultural DNA that seeks a tribal connection, or the fact that we Jews share a common history, a common language, cultural similarities, and similar values and ways of understanding life, it is clear that most Jews even today prefer to live in proximity to a Jewish community, to be part of an "Am," to belong to a people that helps give definition to at least a part of our identity.**

**Clearly, it is about building and sustaining relationships. I would submit that the number one reason why Jews choose to affiliate with a synagogue is to connect with their fellow Jews. They know intuitively that by “belonging” they feel part of an extended family that speaks to their desire to not be alone. They know that in good times and bad, and throughout the varied cycles of life, a community that shares their identity will be there for them.**

**In a world of hyper-connectivity digitally and electronically, the existential desire for human interaction can leave us feeling alone and abandoned.**

**To be connected with *Am Yisrael*, as *ben* or *bat brit*, as Jews inextricably linked together through time and space for over 4,000 years is a compelling reason to respond, “Yes,” to Why Judaism matters still. Somehow we feel we are all connected and related to one another on some metaphysical level, as it is said, we all stood together at Mt. Sinai. It is said that between most people there are 6 degrees of separation. For Jews that number is far less.**

**A fundamental building block in answering the question Why Judaism?, surely has to do with peoplehood, the innate feeling of wanting to be part of something bigger than yourself, a desire to be connected with familiar traditions and folk ways that are the spiritual “comfort foods” that feed our restless souls.**

**A second core reason why Judaism resonates still for most Jews has to do with *Tikun*. The Hebrew word “Tikun” means repair or improvement. “*Tikun Atzmi*” means self-improvement. “*Tikun Olam*” means repairing the world. The power of Jewish tradition that can effect positive change in one’s own life is a reason to answer affirmatively, why Judaism matters.**

**Torah is the collected wisdom of our lawgivers, our prophets, sages, and rabbis, mystics and philosophers as distilled in our sacred literature. Inscribed upon these pages of parchment are life lessons which refine our character, sharpen our moral compass, instill within us virtues and values and ultimately give us the prescription for how to live as a mensch. *Tikun Atzmi* is a gift that our Jewish heritage**

**bestows upon us, helping us to achieve personal growth and attain hearts of wisdom.**

**The recipe for how to live a meaningful and righteous life as taught by our tradition including ingredients such as compassion, kindness, optimism, the pursuit of justice, perspective, perseverance, resilliance, rootededness, humility, and so much more is another reason to proclaim the attractiveness of Judaism.**

***Tikun Olam* on the other hand is our Jewish ethic which compels us to be partners with God in the work of repairing the world. For many, if not most, one of the pillars of a relevant Judaism is surely social action. Studies have also shown that for the younger generation especially, a Judaism that is actively involved in the great issues of our day is a Judaism they want to be a part of. Pursuing justice and equal opportunity for all regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious background is paramount to healing our world.**

**A Judaism that matters is one that is actively engaged in the pressing issues of our day including reducing gun violence, preserving**

**democracy, protecting the right to vote, reducing our carbon footprint, pursuing criminal justice , immigration reform, and eradicating racial bias.**

***Tikun Olam* is about searching our Jewish values for moral clarity, for being inspired to roll up your sleeves to help others less fortunate, and for hearing the voice of the Israelite prophets of old who commanded us to pursue justice and seek peace.**

***Tikun Olam* is about making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches each month to feed the hungry and it's about contacting your representatives in government, holding them accountable to enact legislation that reflects your values.**

**In short, *Tikun Atzmi* and *Tikun Olam* are twins; necessary ingredients that attest to the enduring worth of a Judaism that matters still.**

**Finally, a Judaism worth its salt is one that offers us a guide to life which helps us in confronting the most profound questions concerning the meaning of life and the problem of finitude, the fact that life as we**

**know it will end some day. Judaism provides us with the wherewithal to seek a spiritual presence to accompany us through life, tried and true methods to connect us to a power in the universe greater than ourselves. As Jews we are fortunate that our faith is not one that asks us to check our brains at the door, to blindly accept and question not.**

***Adraba* – just the opposite! Our particular brand demands that we question and challenge the faith propositions that have come down to us through the generations. Each of us must dig the wells of faith and belief on our own; it is not enough to inherit them. This point our liturgy makes clear. It is not for nothing that the prayer known as the “Avot and Emahot, the first prayer of the Amidah, contains the clumsy syntax**

**“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” They answer: to teach us that each of our patriarchs and matriarchs had to find their own way to God, to own it and earn it by way of study and learning and their own lived experience. For Jews, faith is not delivered to us on a**

**silver platter; we must cultivate and wrestle with it throughout our lives. It is for this reason that the name Yisrael, Israel, means “the one who wrestles with God and prevails.” In allowing ourselves to make room for the mysterious, the numinous, the super rational, a power that calls us to live righteously, we make room for something greater than ourselves. When we do so we often find within us reservoirs of strength which can help us through some of the most difficult chapters of our lives, including coming to terms with our own demise and the loss of loved ones.**

**A Judaism that speaks to us intelligently and pragmatically about the concerns and reality of guilt and sin, remorse and return, of love and hate, of good and evil, free will and predetermination, of hope and despair, and so much more is a religion that is eternally relevant and meaningful and necessary.**

**To be on the journey, to grapple with the great existential issues that confront us all, to leave room for something bigger than yourself, is to fulfill the command of the psalmist who wrote:**

**"Search for a presence larger than yourself, seek without ever stopping to know God's essence."**

**All of this ultimately brings us back to Mark Twin and the last line of his ode to the Jews:**

***But what is the secret of his immortality? Judaism remains ever relevant and meaningful because it has the ability to reinvent itself in every generation, to evolve yet hold fast to eternal truths, including connectedness, righteousness, and holiness.***

**To be connected, to yearn for rootedness in a common culture, and feel a bond of familiarity with our fellow Jews affirms our unshakable commitment to *Am Yisrael*, to the Jewish people. To see within Judaism a pathway that leads to *menschlichkeit*, a set of values and ideals that shape our character and mold our destiny, as well as the voice of conscience which calls us to righteous living and to repair the world, this affirms the eternal truths of Torah, *Torat Yisrael*, the Torah of Jewish wisdom. And to know you are not alone, that an eternal**

**spirit is at hand to reside within us, reminds us of the eternal longing  
for God, for a life of holiness, *Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*.**

**I conclude with a poem written by a former congregant when I was  
a student Rabbi in Winter Haven, Florida, by the name of Kate Cohen  
Heery:**

### **A Wish For My People**

**Can we look back through eons of time  
And find the core of our Jewish spirit?**

**Can we find the Abraham in us—  
The daring to make the leap from  
The security of a visible and known idol  
To an unseen, awesome power,  
Often frightening in its portrayal.**

**Can we find the Joseph in us –  
The friend to dreams,  
Able to unlock their wisdom  
And save a people.**

**Can we find the Moses in us –**

**The sculptor of mountain stone**

**Into laws for living,**

**Giving a people its Tao,**

**Its way of life.**

**Can we find the Joshua in us –**

**The courage that claimed us a land.**

**Can we find the Ruth in us—**

**The love, loyalty and devotion**

**That joined a woman to a people.**

**Can we find the Saul, the David, the Solomon in us—**

**The power, wisdom and humility**

**Of the first worldly kings**

**To know that they served a greater king,**

**Unifying a growing people to a common purpose.**

**Can we find the Esther in us—**

**The beauty that took a hardened ruler's heart**

**And melted it into a love for her people.**

**Can we find the Isaiah, the Jonah,**

**The prophet in us**

**That knew how to listen to unspoken words  
And look at unseen images,  
Giving us both warnings of destruction  
And visions of a healing world.**

**Can we find the Einstein in us—  
The genius that made the secrets of the universe  
Into his toys and taught us  
That we truly have dominion over all the earth.**

**Can we find the six million in us—  
The life whose flame can be so fleeting,  
But burns with intense desire  
In every cherished moment.**

**My people, do you know that  
All of these most loved Jews live in you  
That you are the vessel of a mighty spirit  
That nothing has been lost;  
That we are unstoppable as you heed  
Both the call of our nation  
And the whisper of your inner most being.**

**May the words of John Adams, Mark Twain, and Kate Cohen Henry  
remind us to be ever mindful of the beauty and value of our Jewish  
heritage and with the words of the Siddur let us proclaim:**

**Rejoice O Israel, how great is our lot, how awesome is our faith and  
how beautiful is our heritage and let us say Amen.**

**Speaking of Why Judaism: I will be teaching a 3 Session Course for  
CKT members and the larger community, all Sunday mornings,  
October 31, November 7 and November 14, based on Rabbi Cohen's  
book.**