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“Bad Jew” No More!

Since it's Yom Kippur, and we're in confession mode, I have a question for all of us... Raise your hand if you've ever said the words “I'm a bad Jew” or “I'm not that religious” or “I'm Jew-ISH” to yourself or someone else ... Thank you for your honesty!

Let's dig into this statement of quasi-guilt. When we say these words, what do we mean? You don't celebrate certain Jewish holidays? You don't keep kosher? You feel guilty that you grew up Conservative but now don't have a Shabbat practice? Are you mad your child went to Chabad in college? Do you feel weird going to a kosher market because you're just going for the challah?

I get this feeling, this worry that we are “less Jewish” than we are “supposed” to be. Reform Jews and Jewish-adjacent people often feel an authenticity gap. Even me - a rabbi! Many times in rabbinical school, I'd be in a room with other Reform and Conservative rabbinical students on a Shabbat afternoon, and I'd worry they would ask me to lead Kiddish or a Shabbat song and I'd lead it “wrong,” or someone would start talking about a text or a topic I didn't know much about, and I'd feel “less than” in my Jewish identity. I'd get down on myself and feel frustrated, instead of honoring my way of leading or believing that my knowledge, even if different, was adding something to the conversation. In those moments, my mind was saying - those other Jews are more authentically Jewish than you.

What I forgot in those moments, what we all forget in those moments, is that there is not one way to “do” Judaism or “be” Jewish.

On this day of atonement, I want us to include an apology to ourselves - I want to encourage all of us to end the negative self-talk about our Judaism. Instead of feeling less than, let's broaden

the ways we think and talk about ourselves as Jews. Because Jews have NEVER looked, talked, acted the same. And, unsurprisingly, Jews have always been concerned about whether our interpretation of Judaism would last beyond our generation.

Take the story of Chanukah. The books of Maccabees make clear that the Chanukah narrative was not just about an external fight with the Greeks - it was also an internal fight to determine how much cultural influence Greek culture should have upon Jewish life.

In fact, Jews of every time period - we American Reform Jews included - have filtered tradition through the lens of contemporary values. Then and now, there have been Jews who look differently, speak differently, or think differently than others in our Jewish family. This is a good thing! The longevity of the Jewish people is partially thanks to the diversity of the Jewish story. Were Judaism and Jewish people to all have looked one single way, we may not have made it to the 21st century. Some claim "I'm a bad Jew". I say, each of our interpretations of Judaism enriches and enlivens the Jewish story.

This morning, we read Parshat Nitzavim. The text goes out of its way to name and include every stratum in society as part of the Sinai experience. The rabbis of our midrash go further, to include each Jew - then, now, and in the future. Every Jewish soul, and every person who casts in their lot with the Jewish community doesn't just stand at Sinai but is rooted there. Always. In other words: You and I are necessary. You and I are part of the story. And no amount of judgment - from ourselves or from others who would seek to deny that fact - can take that away.

For over 2000 years various writers and thinkers have meant very different things when talking about "religion". Jews have largely stayed out of the discussion because much of our history of persecution is directly tied to our religious identity, and our answer to the question of religion has always been complicated. But around 1750, hoping to lessen the intensity of anti-Semitism and to integrate Jews into European society, Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn tried to claim to the

intelligentsia of the Enlightenment that Jews deserved a seat at the table in the discussion of defining religion. He claimed that Jews need not be a separate, barely tolerated group, but rather integrated as citizen individuals in the public square, while holding individual beliefs - religion - in the privacy of their own homes and community celebrations.

The idea stuck and had global influence - German Protestant thinkers adopted this idea for their own political reasons, the Jews of Republican France relinquished their corporate Jewish identity in exchange for individual citizenship, and even the American experiment held fast to this ideology.¹

However, this definition has largely pushed generations to define religion, including the rich tapestry of Jewish life, simply as a function of what we believe and do in the privacy of our own homes. And secular American culture has often defined Judaism as something that largely does not resemble OUR Judaism.

Instead of focusing our understanding of religion there, I believe many more of us can find ourselves in the confluence of what Israeli philosopher, Dr. Michael Rosenak, split into Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewry.² According to Dr. Rosenak, we can tap into, or distance ourselves from, each of these three aspects according to our particular Jewish journey.

First, Judaism. Rosenak defines this term as the scope of theology across time and space, including belief-claims about God, Torah, and Israel. This is what many of us might call the “religious” part of the tradition. This religious understanding of Judaism, according to Rosenak, is not prescriptive, but rather encompasses a diversity of beliefs and non-beliefs influenced by Jewish text and tradition, along with external discussions of theology and faith.

¹ Rabbi Jesse Paikin, “Is Judaism a Religion (Part II),” January 12, 2022, in *Shoot! Expansive Jewish Questions & Diverse Ideas*, podcast, mp3 audio, 35:50, <https://www.shootpodcast.com/episodes/episode3-is-judaism-a-religion-part-2>.

² Michael Rosenak, "Education for Jewish Identification: Theoretical Guidelines," *Forum on the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel* 28-29, (Winter 1978): 118-129.

By contrast, Rosenak defines the second term, Jewishness, as the encyclopedia of customs, languages, practices, and culture. It generates the dialogue between those inspired by Jewish sports or Jewish politicians; those interested in the Holocaust and those interested in Israel; those on team latke or team hamantaschen, and it animates our call to social justice. It means some of us have a favorite melody for Hashkiveinu from summer camp, and when we make choices about our food practices, we incorporate a wide range of ideologies that may involve Kashrut, or not.

Finally, we engage on a third level, that of Jewry: the sense of peoplehood and affinity and community that is as likely to happen at the Greek Theater or Saul's Deli on a Friday evening as it is to occur in synagogue. It's the sense of safety we've cultivated over centuries when we're in the same space as others who can speak our language, or claim some common history or experience. I will still encourage you to attend more Shabbat and holiday services, but gratefully, that is not the only place where you can find Jewish community and connection in our society today.

The impact of this expanding understanding of Jewish expression and engagement was affirmed by a recent Los Angeles Jewish community study – the largest ever commissioned. Although many were bracing themselves for data proving that Jewish organizational engagement is declining – which it is - there are other numbers that remind us the sky is not falling.

This survey teaches us that on the whole, Jewish community engagement and confident Jewish identity is on the rise, it just requires us to expand our understanding of these terms. The individuals in the survey who identified as “ritual Jews” were just as likely to make positive statements about their Jewish identity as those primarily connected to Jewish organizations or who felt a deep sense of Jewish-law-based obligation.³ In other words: this survey concluded that a strong Jewish identity has little to do with observance level.

³ <https://studyofjewishla.org/>

I share this framework of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewry and the results of the LA population survey because I believe it's time to have a more proactive conversation about what it means to be a member of this people. And I'm ready for that conversation to have a richer vocabulary or ranking than simply "good" or "bad". Our people have too rich a tradition, too deep a well of wisdom, too long a history, for our self-assessment as Jews to be simplistic.

Because **you** are not simple— and neither are your value commitments.

Case in point: When I hear these words of quasi-guilt as a proxy for: "these are the Jewish rituals I don't do" or "these are the Jewish laws I break," or "that community of 'religious Jews' is foreign to me," or "these are the beliefs I'm 'supposed to' believe but I don't, **in the next breath**, I hear stories about the individual taking care of a parent or grandparent regularly, or showing up for dozens of weddings of friends and family, hosting holiday meals at their home, or participating in one of our synagogue's many social action programs, and on and on.

My response... This too is Judaism! These beautiful, thoughtful actions are aspects of the ethical Mitzvot that are so significant they came to be known as the "rabbinic ten commandments." and we even find them in our siddur. The words come from the Mishnah and begin - "elu dvarim sh'ein lahem shi'ur": these are the things that are without measure. These ethical and personal acts of kindness that you are already doing ARE Judaism. They are authentic expressions of Judaism - even to those Jewish individuals whose lifestyle seems so far away from our Jewish identities. Those other ten (plus a few hundred) commandments are significant too, but what Judaism values is not a tally of how many mitzvot you check off in a day or a year.⁴

We are reminded of this idea in our Yom Kippur Haftarah as well. The prophet Isaiah, witnessing a community of observant Jews beating their chest and fasting on Yom Kippur while ignoring hungry people right at their feet, admonishes them severely with his decree - This is not the fast

⁴ Thanks to Rabbi Angela Buchdahl for this idea to include the text of Elu Dvarim in this sermon.

that God wants! Instead, Isaiah urges us to “share our bread with the hungry, take the poor into our homes, and not to ignore our kin.”⁵ Essentially, our most sacred text is telling us - it’s not about the number of hours or times of your prayer, it’s about the sincerity, and how well your actions mirror your words.

It's time to own our identities and the Jewish things we do **as Jewish**, without taking them for granted or pushing them aside as “less than”. Own the aspects of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewry that mean the most to you - with all their joys and oys. And push yourself to strengthen and expand your identity - Elu Dvarim includes encouragement to attend the house of study morning and evening and to pray with sincerity, and ends with “and the study of Torah leads to them all, because it encompasses them all.” Increasing your Jewish literacy, spirituality, and understanding are powerful ways to deepen our daily lives, understand the why behind the what, and connect us to the generations before and after us. So if study or Jewish education or regular prayer isn’t yet part of your adult Jewish life or you are seeking more, consider pursuing it with us this year.

Identifying Jewishly and naming our points of connection with our tradition can feel heavy, and for many of us, it is a choice. Being Jewish and living Jewishly requires something of us because, for most of us, our Judaism is not visible on our physical selves. Many of us carry other identities that we cannot hide or remove, and we understand the stakes of what it means to hold those identities in the public sphere - for good and for challenge. So too with our Judaism - choosing to be Jewish out loud means facing anti-Semitism or judgement, but I hope that does not become a reason to push away from your Jewish connections. The stakes are high, but future generations are looking to us to lead with pride.

And Jewish pride need not be reserved only for those who perform Jewish ritual in a particular way, but also for anyone who acknowledges when Jewish values emerge in their daily actions or who makes Judaism their own. Judaism is not a religion that values one experience over

⁵ Isaiah 58:7

another - our Judaism shines equally when we pray in Temple or on our own, when we light Shabbat candles, when we treat the unhoused person we pass on the sidewalk with care, when we reach out to someone who has lost a loved one, when we celebrate Jewish artists and athletes, when we react strongly when we read about Israel in the news, when we strive to perfect our challah recipes, when we passionately disagree, and when we work to be the best versions of ourselves. This too, this all, is Judaism.

What about your Judaism are you proud of?

I remember being so proud as a young child that my Judaism meant that my family created Mitzvah Day at my childhood congregation and we spent weekends as a family at the food bank or packing books to send to children in the Philippines and we donated to important organizations instead of getting gifts at least one night of Hanukkah. I knew that non-Jews did acts of service too, but I also knew that our Jewish identity drove my family's deep engagement in social justice and social action work. And I was equally proud of my Judaism when learning about leadership, group dynamics, program design, and deadlines as a youth group board member in high school. And I was equally proud of my version of Jewish when I prayed passionately and loudly at the Kotel in Jerusalem with Women of the Wall, as Haredim attempted to drown us out with whistles and shouts. This too, this all, is my Judaism.

We all, self included, could have done more to engage our Judaism in the past year. The gates are still open - add these reflections to your confessions. But let's not stop there or feel limited by what we are "not" in our Jewish identities or let someone else's voice speak for the Jews because they look or act "more" Jewish to us. Instead, let's have an honest and nuanced conversation about how we might claim our Jewish identities in a world where it sometimes feels challenging to do so. We have become so accustomed to ethical monotheism, or using the popular phrase "spiritual but not religious" that we may forget that spirituality and religion can actually be connected.

Our lives are deeply Jewish. So let's name it. Let's own our identities and find ways to push ourselves out of our complacency or feeling not enough. The shofar reminds us each year that it's time to wake up - to alert ourselves to what can be. Affirm your Jewish authenticity and, I hope, find your place within our collective community that helps you best express yourself. Because the messy, complicated, ever-evolving mixture of tradition, history, culture, and peoplehood, is for all of us.

Atem Nitzavim. I stand here today, adding my distinct thread to the tapestry of our tradition that transcends time and space. I belong here – exactly as I am.

So does each one of you.

Anachnu nitzavim - **we** stand here today.

Gmar Chatima Tova - May you be sealed for a good year in the book of life.