



# High Holidays 2021/5782

## **Rabbi Ain's Sermon – Rosh Hashanah Day I: Jewish Peoplehood is a Mitzvah**

When I work with students for conversion, I often share that there will be a moment where becoming Jewish moves from the academic to the spiritual, from the 3rd person to the 1st person, and then, to the We.

There are moments, I imagine for many of you, where you knew that being Jewish meant knowing you are a part of something larger than yourself, and I don't mean in relationship to God. Not at all. In fact, for many, God might not have much to do with it. Rather, the notion of being a part of an Ahm, being a part of a people, connected across time and space, history and liturgy, is something that can permeate our soul, even beyond DNA but just as much a part of who we are. Entering into, being a part of, and celebrating what it means to be Jewish is something that I feel every morning when I get dressed, Jewishly. You see, when I wrap myself in my tallit, and I look at the tzitzit, I don't only focus on the religious precepts of following God's ritual commandments, but as I wrap myself in my tallit, and I recite the words "that you God have brought us from all 4 corners of the earth," I am enveloped in a sense of peoplehood.

But the question is, what does this mean? Can we feel peoplehood? Can we observe peoplehood? This year, on Rosh hashanah, I would like to suggest, that understanding our place in connection to Jewish peoplehood is a mitzvah just like lighting shabbat candles, studying torah, caring for the sick, and providing for the poor.

So how do we know when we are engaging in the mitzvah of being a part of the Jewish people. For me, the first and most obvious moment was in 1987 when I was 10 years old and I marched, with my parents, in Washington DC to free Soviet Jews. That feeling emerged again many times, but certainly in January of 2020 when thousands of us descended upon lower Manhattan to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge to protest the rising anti-Semitism in the tri-state area. And here we are again, 18 months later, watching Anti-Semitism on the rise and in just over a month, we will bring historian Pam Nadell to speak about the context of Anti-Semitism in American history on the eve of the 3rd anniversary of the Tree of Life Murders.

I want to share a story, that came at one of the darkest moments of our people's history, to bring us into a place to begin to understand how, being a part of a people, is a religious precept, a mitzvah.

The story is told that the Tanach, the Bible, on which Isaac Herzog laid his hand during the swearing in ceremony where he officially became the 11th President of Israel earlier this summer, once belonged to his grandfather Rabbi Yitzhak Halevi Herzog. Rabbi Herzog carried it with him throughout the post-war years during a daring spiritual mission he took through the orphanages of Europe searching for Jewish children.

One day in 1946, Rabbi Herzog arrived with this Tanach at a large monastery which was known to have taken in Jewish children sent away by their parents to protect them from the Nazi terror which had ravaged Europe. Now, the time had come for the children to return home.

The Rabbi turned to the Reverend Mother, thanking her for saving the lives of the children and requesting to receive them back to the Jewish People, now that the war was over. The nun was happy to agree, but asked the Rabbi – "How can you know which of the hundreds of children here at the monastery are Jewish?" After all, it had been a long time since their parents had sent them there, and many had been mere infants at the time.



Rabbi Herzog assured the Reverend Mother that he would know. He asked to gather all of the children in a large hall, ascended the stage, and cried in a loud voice:

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad ! (Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One)

Immediately, dozens of children rushed to the stage, shouting "mama!" and "papa!" as tears filled their eyes. Many were sobbing uncontrollably.

Though few of the children remembered much of their early lives, the sound of the Shema, the most famous prayer in the Jewish faith, instantly brought back memories of reciting these Hebrew words with their parents before bedtime.

This rallying cry, of the shma, is something that I imagine, elicits tremendous emotions. Whether it is a prayer sung to you by a parent or grandparent, words you associate with clergy, a prayer you learned as you were becoming Jewish, the notion of the shma as the eternal creed of the Jewish people is something quite powerful.

Like the words I shared earlier, וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כְּנָפוֹת הָאָרֶץ. וְתוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְאֶרֶצְנוּ.

And bring us in peace from the four corners of the Earth, and lead us directly to our Land,

This story of the young children resonates so deeply.

YES. This is amazing. Think about the stories of our people, over the generations, from Persia, from Ethiopia, from Uganda, from Russia, From Poland, From Italy, From France, from the United States, from Argentina, looking to return home, to Israel.

So with these images in mind, you can imagine why I jumped at the chance to get on a plane this May to go to Israel. Even though I hadn't been on a plane since before the pandemic began AND a cease fire hadn't quite been declared, AND I was only given 24 hours to decide, I said yes, I am coming to Israel with my NY Rabbinic colleagues and UJA leadership, to show up. If you ever needed a definition of what it means to be Jewish, trust me, that is a definition for the dictionary.

And of course, it was a public statement of support for our larger Jewish family. It was a reminder, I hope, that we are not alone in our desire to be unapologetically Jewish.

And we know what it means to want to be taken in from the corners of the earth, and what happens when we have no place to go. Last week, Rabbi Danny Gordis, in reflecting on the horror in Afghanistan wrote:

The image of these Afghans, abandoned by the world, with nowhere to go, no way to get out, ought to remind us of ... ourselves.

Of course there are no surplus Jews in the world today. AND There are no Jews who have nowhere to go. It's easy to take that for granted, but we shouldn't. It's because this place exists. So part of the way to observe the mitzvah of being a part of the Jewish people is about understanding our connection to the land and state and people of Israel.

Yet that doesn't mean that there isn't anti semitism and so, in response to this, there was a national rally against Hate in Washington where Elisha Wiesel, son of Elie Wiesel said, "Over 30 years ago, my father and other leaders of the Jewish community convened a quarter of a million of us and our allies in Washington, D.C. to show solidarity with Soviet Jewry on Freedom Sunday.

It is now our generation's turn to speak our truth: Neither the millions of us here in the United States nor our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel are going anywhere. We will not bow to terror."



But here is the thing. I refuse to believe that “observing” Jewish peoplehood is only about when people hate us it is also a point of pride, where we can rally together about something positive.

For me, Zack’s bar mitzvah during covid was one of those moments. The kids and their families over the past 18 months could have said, life is too hard, too depressing, there is no “reward” of a party, I am just going to stop practicing. But Zack, and his classmates here at SPS, at Schechter, and around the world, didn’t stop what they were doing, they worked hard and they understood that being Jewish meant celebrating becoming Jewish adults, in community, in a new way. And the community celebrated with him and with them. We all found ways to make video greetings, we used the zoom chat to offer good wishes in lieu of walking around with the Torah, and we celebrated virtually. Do we miss the face to face connection- OF COURSE. But as these students enter the Jewish people as adults, they understood that there are ways of celebrating and marking these moments together, even if it was different from what they expected. They understood that being Jewish can be a moment of celebration.

So what does it mean to be a part of the Jewish people today? Certainly, it can mean being a part of something greater than ourselves. But let’s examine, for a few minutes, what being Jewish means today, to American Jews. Who is the American Jewish Community?

BECKA A. ALPER AND ALAN COOPERMAN wrote an analysis of the most recent Pew Research Center report which was based on a survey of almost 5000 Jewish American adults. Here are some of the key findings:

The size of the adult Jewish population has been fairly stable in percentage terms, while rising in absolute numbers, roughly in line with the growth of the U.S. population. In absolute numbers, the 2020 Jewish population estimate is approximately 7.5 million, including 5.8 million adults and 1.8 million children (rounded to the closest 100,000). The 2013 estimate was 6.7 million, including 5.3 million adults and 1.3 million children.

Like the overall U.S. population, Jews appear to be growing more racially and ethnically diverse. Around nine-in-ten Jewish American adults (92%) identify as non-Hispanic White, while 8% identify with other racial or ethnic categories. Among Jews ages 18 to 29, however, the share who identify as a race or ethnicity other than non-Hispanic White rises to 15%.

U.S. Jews are less religious than American adults overall. About one-in-ten Jewish Americans (12%) say they attend religious services at least weekly compared with about a quarter of U.S. adults who say they attend religious services weekly or more (27%).

A large majority of U.S. Jews (82%) say caring about Israel is either “essential” or “important” to what being Jewish means to them.

So what is the take-away: Andres Spokany, the CEO of the Jewish Funders Networks wrote- No bombshells, no surprises, no Jewish leaders pulling their hair and crying “gevalt.” The Jewish population is growing at the same pace as the general population, and levels of affiliation are fairly stable. Dull. But dull is good!

In that vein, he offers a few “under-the-hood” reflections on this “duller” Pew report, that nevertheless offers enormously valuable insights.

1 – Individualism and radical free choice are central to identity.

We live in a time of radical free choice and individual hyper-empowerment. Today, individuals don’t receive their identity from their family, but they build it through their individual choices. MY OPINION: This might be the case so we need to understand what that means for inclusion and recruitment-it makes our task harder but if we believe in ourselves as a people, then we have to show the values.

2 – No religion, so what?



Around a third of Jews in America claim to be “Jews of no religion.” This is one of the more anxiety-generating findings among community leaders. Yet I don’t get excited about it. First, what does religious even mean in a Jewish context? A century ago, atheist kibbutzniks were draining the swamps in the Galilee and having Shabbat meals, Kiddush and all, at the end of their week. Were they “religious”? THIS IS THE OPPOSITE OF THE FIRST POINT—PLENTY OF PEOPLE ARE CONNECTED TO THE PEOPLE BUT THEY DON’T NECESSARILY WANT TO BE SEEN AS RELIGIOUS...SO-what do we do?

4 – Philanthropic and communal interventions work.

A generation ago, intermarriage was a factor of demographic decline. But now we see among intermarried Jews between the ages of 25-49 who have children, 70 percent raise them Jewish because instead of shunning, institutions have found ways to welcome. There might be boundaries, sure, but they aren’t expressed in punitive, pariah terms, as they once were. I THINK IT IS BEYOND INTERMARRIAGE-PJ LIBRARY, JEWISH CAMP, YP, BOCO-meet people where they are!

5 – The death of our relationship with Israel has been greatly exaggerated.

82% of American Jews say that Israel is very important to their identity, Pew reports. True, many Jews are critical of Israel policies, but the average American Jew is more sophisticated than we give them credit for: Their dislike for a specific government doesn’t affect their overall attachment to Israel.

6 – But other links are fraying.

If people feel closer to Israel and Israelis than we thought, they still feel farther from other Jews in their communities than we feared. The creation of a communal “public square” is critical in a context in which Jewish sub-communities are becoming siloed. Welcoming diversity is not only important when it comes to intermarried families or Jews of Color, but for other groups, like Russian-speaking, Haredi, Sephardic and Latino Jews.

With the fraying showing its seams, we need to make sure to appreciate this concept of peoplehood.

So the question is, are we even still a people? Does that moniker still work? I believe that it does and one way that I think we sustain that feeling each year is through the most common Jewish observance, and no it is not fasting on Yom Kippur. It is having a seder and lighting chanukah candles. Both of these actions are a reflection of our commitment to tell a story of perseverance and survival and peoplehood, NOT victimhood. We talk about how we were freed, not how we were slaves.

Rabbi David Hoffman recently shared the story of when in 1961, the New Yorker commissioned Hannah Arendt to report on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

In her analysis, Arendt played down the evil of individuals like Eichmann in these atrocities, explaining their barbarism away as the work of bureaucrats. Strikingly, though, she indicted the behavior of the Jewish councils (Judenrate) who were forced to collaborate with the Nazis in the ghettos.

Professor Gershon Scholem, accused his friend Arendt of treason against the Jewish people.

Scholem, indeed, attacked Arendt’s lack of “balanced judgement.” But Hoffman doesn’t think that is what infuriated him since Scholem said. “There is something in the Jewish language that is completely indefinable, yet fully concrete – what the Jews call Ahavath Israel, or love for the Jewish people.

Ultimately, Scholem didn’t want an even-handed presentation or equity. Scholem wanted love.

Scholem wanted Arendt to relate to the Jewish people with love that would engender empathy and compassion and generosity.



Arendt refused.

“How right you are that I have no such love,” she shot back at Scholem in her response to his letter. “I have never in my life ‘loved’ some nation or collective- not the German, French, or American nation, or the working class or whatever else might exist. The fact is that I love only my friends and am quite incapable of any other sort of love.”

Arendt explained her connection to the Jewish people as follows: “I belong to this people.”

Hoffman wrote: Healthy love does not blind us to the faults of our beloved. On the contrary, because I love them I am invested in their well-being.

Because I love the Jewish people, I hold them to higher expectations. Because we passionately love the Jewish people, we should want them to live up to our Torah’s high ethical demands.

The Jewish people – particularly at this moment in history – needs our love. It needs more than membership or “belonging.”

We are engaging of course in this same conversation as citizens of this country. In reflecting on some of the terrible realities of the founding of America, David French, an evangelical Christian and Conservative Columnist, writes: But we love our country anyway. Why? Not because it is always great—or even always good—but because it is our home. Its citizens are our neighbors. It is our national family. As with any family, loving our family means knowing our family. And yes that means telling our full story, the good, the bad, and the ugly. It means hearing from admirers and critics alike. We should approach history with a sense of curiosity and security. You won’t make me hate my home. You can, however, motivate me to preserve what is pristine and repair what is broken. You can make me proud of the beauty and sorry for the injustice.

So teach it all, French says. Good and bad. Ugly and beautiful. Teach it all and understand that the greatest form of patriotism doesn’t depend on cultivating a national narrative but rather in appreciating our obligations to our national home. History lessons shouldn’t be designed to create patriots. They should be designed to educate citizens—secure in the knowledge that well-educated citizens are most apt to learn to love their nation well.

For as Rabbi Hoffman taught, our Jewish brothers and sisters need our total existential investment; they need us to offer critique from a place of empathy; and the Jewish people needs us to place its joys, needs and challenges at the center of our lives. It needs us to be one. LIKE THE SHMA.

SO- here is the thing, it is ok if we aren’t 100% comfortable with all of the different parts of our story or the different parts of who make up our people. We are people, we have our strengths and weaknesses, our challenges and our opportunities. We know that we need to grow and change and learn.

But we need to appreciate that the thread that can bind us is the thread of love and obligation. The thread, like the tzitzit on a tallit that are woven together and brought close to us for the Shma. . The love between the Jewish people and God, as reflected and refracted in Torah, should also extend to one another. But it isn’t enough to just belong, though I believe that belonging is also a religious precept, what we are being challenged to understand today, is that with belonging, comes more obligations to engage with our stories—good and bad. And observing being part of the Jewish people is taking on the counter cultural obligation of caring for a community at times more than you care for yourself. As I have thought back over the several months as we watched the vaccine rollout, I realized that one of the reasons that I think our community understood the importance of getting a vaccine is actually not just because it helps each of us, but because it helps all of us. And even if that often flies in the face of the American ethos of rugged individualism, there is something to be said about the concept of Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh BaZeh, all of Israel



is responsible for each other, and that doesn't only mean as Jews but as people. A basic tenet of Judaism is being accountable for the lives of others. I am excited this year to explore this more deeply as I teach a class organized by the Hartman Institute on Jewish peoplehood, on the fact that we are dedicating at SPSTalk to this conversation, and that we will have programs with Jews living around the world.

But being a part of a people isn't all about recalling the pain, or standing together when things are hard- it is also about when we see one of our own 'making it' beyond our borders. This summer, Israel's national baseball team was interviewed by the campers at the Ramah Sports Academy before heading to Tokyo for the Olympics. It was the same week that two different Orthodox young men were drafted to the MLB-one to the diamondbacks and one to the nationals. Let me add, that Jared played the kid from HAFTR, and he proudly was hit by a pitch :)

So if Jewish peoplehood is a mitzvah, how do we observe it?

LEARN OUR STORY

TELL OUR STORY

SHARE OUR STORY

BE OUR STORY

In a book called *The Things They Carried*, a book about Vietnam by Tim O'Brien, I read "43 years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes, remembering will lead to a story which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity.

So-

Be present. Be active. Learn about who we are. And delve in even if you think you know a lot. If you think you know Jewish history, learn liturgy. If you are comfortable in shul but don't know about the values of tzedaka learn that. If you know why to give tzedakah but haven't thought about what you might believe about God, explore that. But most importantly, show up. And share it, proudly with others. Each of you count. And our community counts on each of you.

At the beginning of this sermon, I talked about Israeli President Herzog's inauguration-I would like to return to that:

Earlier this summer when preparing for Bougie Herzog's inauguration, immediate past president, Reuven Rivlin put on his kippah when he heard, Mickey Levy, the speaker of the kneset, include in his prepared remarks the "Priestly Blessing" This might not be a big deal to any of you but Herzl did not put on a kippah at the Zionist Congresses, and David Ben-Gurion didn't put on a kippah even at the creation of the state. But a kippah is a symbol today not just of religious piety but of communal connections and, in the words of Rabbi Daniel Gordis, "The old-guard's almost-rabid-secularism of yesteryear has given way in Israel to a warmth to tradition among many, even among those not observant. The old anger at the Jewish tradition, which Hayim Nachman Bialik and others argued was the reason that the Jews were weak, has softened.

I have one more story of a kippah to tell you about- I want to tell you about an IDF soldier, Michael Levin. I have told you about him before, so this is an epilogue. Michael grew up outside of Philadelphia, active in the Jewish community and the Conservative movement. Ramah, USY, Nativ-a gap year program. His room looked like a typical teenage boys room-complete with posters about sports and music. And a picture of the three paratroopers at the Kotel in 1967. Inspired by that poster, by their story, and by being a part



of the Jewish people, Michael knew that for him, fulfilling the mitzvah of being part of the Jewish people was making aliyah and enlisting. He was killed in the second Lebanon war in 2006. This summer, a second documentary was made about his life and death. It was called the green kippah. It showed the green kippah that he wore, under his helmet, out to battle. His parents were able to retrieve this kippah even after his death, and years later, just recently, were able to come to Israel and meet those three paratroopers that had inspired their son. But when they met, the three men apologized, they said they felt guilty, for it was because of them that Michael joined. His father said, no, don't feel guilty—you are symbols for what it means to have hope and a sense of freedom and resilience. You are symbols of what it means to be a part of the Jewish people.

And so, when we look at our kippot, when we look at our tallitot, when we look at our flags, when we look at each other, when we do what we should which is see ourselves in each others stories, because we are inextricably connected, at the moments of pain and the moment of joy, the moments of agreement and the moments of disagreement, we are bound up, together, as one.

Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.