

### **Why I am Proud to be a Jew**

One of the joys of being a rabbi is guiding people through the conversion process. Some of my students come to Judaism with little background in the tradition. They are simply drawn to it for a variety of reasons. Typically they explore other religions first, and after not finding what they are looking for, they check us out. Others are connected to Jews in one way or another and have slowly gravitated towards Judaism. And then there are those who discover Judaism in their family history and in this quest they find more than they expected they would.

No matter the reason someone converts—and I know there are many Jews-by-choice in this room right now—I always get this one comment from a Jew-by-birth about the convert after they learn of their decision to join the tribe. They say, “Why would they want to join *us*?!?” This question, as you probably realize, is not so much a question as it is a joke. (Can’t you just hear Jackie Mason saying this in his stand-up routine?) Why would someone want to join a group who has enemies around the world, as rough of a history as almost any people on earth, and matzah as a dessert treat? There is no logical explanation!

Jews have been persecuted around the world for countless generations. And this continues today. We see the ugly resurgence of Western European anti-Semitism and the continued Jewish hatred coming out of the Middle East. This year we saw thousands of anti-semitic attacks in all but one continent. (Although I’m quite certain the emperor penguin of Antarctica will one day join the chorus.)

We are definitely not immune here in the Land of the Free where bigotry and hatred continues to rear it’s ugly head. White supremacist Nazis were marching down the streets in Charlottesville, VA just last month chanting, “Jews will not replace us!” while carrying Nazi flags and saluting Hitler. Parades of Nazis even passed a synagogue during shabbat morning services and shouted “Seig Heil.”

According to the Anti-Defamation League, “Anti-Semitism is a global phenomenon with more than one billion people holding anti-Semitic views.”<sup>1</sup> What is perhaps more striking is that a large percentage of these people have never even met a Jewish person.

People who join our ranks generally see beyond all the negativity. I usually ask them if any of this matters to them. They are proud of their decision. They see something special, meaningful, and unique about Judaism that eclipses all this hatred. But do all of *us* see this too?

Think about this for a moment. Why are you proud to be a Jew, or part of the Jewish community? Why choose to live a Jewish life? All of us make the same choice, even those born Jewish. We choose to identify and live as Jews. No one is forcing us. So, why are we proud to be Jewish?

In a world where anti-Jewish attitudes are raging, why should we be proud to be part of the people who bear the burden of all this hatred and criticism?

Webster’s dictionary defines “pride” as “a reasonable or justifiable self-respect; a delight or elation arising from some act, possession, or relationship.” Why is it a delight to be in relationship with Judaism? And what is the justifiable satisfaction of simply being Jewish?

Every now and then I receive forwarded emails from my parents by way of their Jewish friends. You’ve seen them too. They remind us that 22% of all Nobel Prize winners are Jewish, despite our minuscule physical presence in the world. They tell us how Israel is the international leader in developing water desalination technologies for third world countries. They tell us that Jews invented the cell phone, the traffic light, the polio vaccine, virtual reality, discount stores, lipstick, the theory of general relativity, and the ballpoint pen.

Are these reasons to be proud of being part of the Jewish community? Did we have anything to do with these accomplishments? Does vicarious pride

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)

count? I'm not so sure that finding satisfaction in the achievements of other Jews is a meaningful way of expressing pride in who we are.

I admit, it feels good when I read about the accomplishments of other Jews. I love reading about Sandy Koufax sitting out the World Series on Yom Kippur and Hank Greenberg "defeating" Hitler with each home-run. Learning about Israel's technological achievements does fill me with a sense of joy. Natalie Portman winning the Academy Award was thrilling. There's also Einstein, Freud and Justice Brandies. After all the persecution, look what my people continue to accomplish. It's all remarkable.

But this is not enough. This vicarious pride is not enough to sustain our connection to Judaism. So let me ask you one more time, "How would you articulate why being Jewish, or connected to the Jewish community is a badge of honor worth preserving?"

As we enter the New Year and reflect on our relationships with our loved ones, our community and with God, perhaps we can also reflect on our relationship with our heritage. We can ask ourselves why it is a source of pride and meaning in our daily lives. This is a personal quest and I hope each of you will be able to come up with your own answers.

Here are some of mine, in no particular order.

I am proud to be Jewish because we are taught to "never forget." This can be onerous at times, but it keeps us grounded as we remember our roots and the road we've travelled. We bring the past with us and we call upon it to guide us in the future. Recalling events that shaped us provide Jews everywhere with a shared history and a compassion for others suffering around the globe.

I am proud to be Jewish because of the emphasis Judaism has on learning, on educating our youth and on asking questions. A line from the Shema, our central declaration of faith, is, *V'shinantam l'vanecha* "And you shall teach them (these words) to your children." The whole point of a Passover seder is to teach our narrative in a way that will resonate with each child. This value on learning and thinking critically is clear when no one is pressured to believe in any one ideology. Rather, we are free to ask

questions, refute the rabbis and even God. It is not frowned upon to wrestle and challenge even the most widely held beliefs. Judaism emphasizes the importance of thinking for ourselves. It also preserves and places the utmost respect for divergent opinions.

I am proud to be Jewish because our tradition places greater emphasis on the present than it does on the future. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught: “If you have a sapling in your hand and someone tells you the Messiah has arrived, first plant the sapling and then go out to welcome the Messiah.”<sup>2</sup> How we act today can have great consequences in the future. So it is better to focus on completing our tasks now than pray for what may or may not come to be.

I am proud to be Jewish because we are commanded to see every human being, *b'tzelem elohim*, as created in the Divine image. Rich, poor, black, white, trans, queer, straight, handicapped, Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, young, old, stranger, Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, climate change denier...each person is equal and created with the spark of the Divine, no matter how dim it might seem.

Furthermore, Judaism does not profess to have all the answers or to be the one true faith, but just one of many ways to worship and live life.

I am proud to be Jewish because our tradition teaches us that Jews-by-choice are dearer to God than Jews-by-birth. Just because you were born into the family does not give you more rights or preferential treatment. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Anyone who casts aspersions on the Jewish status of a Jew-by-choice is in violation of one of the most important laws in the Torah: not to oppress the convert.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, seeking new members is not our goal. Should someone express a desire to join us, we take this commitment seriously and create a lengthy, but meaningful path to honor this journey.

---

<sup>2</sup> Avot d' Rabbi Natan

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 23:9

I am proud to be Jewish because the mitzvot provide us a guide to live our lives in the public and private spheres. They give us the tools to make both important and everyday decisions. They remind us that every moment can be sacred, from waking in the morning to seeing a rainbow to enjoying an afternoon snack. I love how Reform Judaism sees the laws of kashrut as an invitation to transform the most mundane acts into sacred experiences.

I am proud to be Jewish because Shabbat reminds us to be grateful and to slow down in an ever-rapidly-changing world. Emails and phone calls can wait. The strike of the match and the smell of freshly baked challah are our pause buttons in life. Shabbat truly is a “sanctuary in time.”

I am proud to be Jewish because God can be found in our sacred texts, in a blade of grass, in a conversation, or in the actions of a stranger. A Jew can have a meaningful Jewish life even if he does not believe that God plays any role in it.

I am proud to be Jewish because Judaism teaches simultaneously that we are each unique and special but also no greater than dust and ashes. Humility is a core Jewish value.

I am proud to be Jewish because while the Talmud teaches us *kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*<sup>4</sup>, “all of Israel are responsible for each other,” we are equally responsible to our neighbors and fellow citizens of the world.

I am proud to be Jewish because of the importance we place on community. We mourn together. We pray together. We study our texts together. We bring in the New Year together. We atone for our transgressions together.

We are here for each other whenever and wherever needed.

In 2014, Max Sternberg of California, and Sean Carmeli of Texas, died serving the State of Israel. Without many family members present to bury their sons, social media sites called on Israelis to show up and each funeral had close to 30,000 attendees.

---

<sup>4</sup> BT Shevuot 39a

I am proud to be Jewish because of the emphasis Judaism has on *tzeddakah* and *tikkun olam*. We are here for such a brief time, yet our tradition demands that we look out for the well-being of others and our environment even more so than our own needs. In times of deep poverty we still do what we can to help those less fortunate.

I am proud to be Jewish because of the great value we place in humor and joy. Seinfeld's Jewish dentist, Tim Whatley, tells Jerry while he's cleaning his teeth, "Jerry, it's our sense of humor that sustained us as a people for 3000 years."

It's fun to be in a Jewish community. We turn everything topsy-turvy on Purim. We dance around with the Torahs on Simchat Torah. We smile as our children watch Elijah "sip" from his wine glass. We celebrate all significant moments of life with blessings and community.

I am proud to be Jewish because we value a life of meaning over a life of ease.

I am proud to be Jewish because we are commanded to be on the path towards holiness. We acknowledge there is no end to this path. Rather, it is a sacred journey to live the best versions of ourselves. And when we miss the mark, we acknowledge our mistake and get right back on course. Anyone can turn their lives around so long as they take the *teshuva* process seriously.

I can not tell you why you ought to be proud to be part of the Jewish community. What I do know is that Jewish pride requires more than vicariously identifying with someone else's Jewish accomplishment. I encourage you to spend some time during the High Holy Days formulating an answer, or a list for yourself. Have this conversation as we celebrate the unfolding of yet another year in the existence of our people.

Our answers can be a gift to the next generation. I wish I knew why my grandparents were proud to be Jewish. Two of them lost scores of relatives in the Shoah. They could have given up. Two of them had very assimilated

families. What were they holding onto and why? I hope that someday, my descendants will understand why I wear my heritage as a badge of honor.

For if we hold fast to it and speak of its beauty often, then the generations to come will be proud inheritors of a tradition that spans great distances in time and space.

*Ken yehi ratzon*, may this be God's will.