How Lucky We Are

Shanah tovah.

Nearly a year ago, during *Simchat Torah*, I found myself standing in the middle of a very large circle, slightly out of breath. We had unrolled the Torah completely around the room. Congregants stood shoulder to shoulder, each holding the edge of the parchment with their fingertips, as I took everyone on a journey through the story of the Jewish people—from Creation to Abraham and Sarah; from Joseph in prison to Moses at Sinai; from wandering through the wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land.

And for a moment, I just stood there and looked around. Here we were. In Bellingham, Washington. Holding a Torah scroll containing words Jews have carried for thousands of years. Words studied in Babylon. Chanted in Spain. Interpreted in Poland. Hidden in Iran. Carried across oceans. Read by generations who could never have imagined us. And now those words were literally in our hands. I remember thinking four words:

How lucky we are.

I have been thinking those words often ever since that night.

I thought them again a few months later while wandering with Nicole through New York's Lower East Side, along streets where generations of Jews built neighborhoods, synagogues, newspapers, schools, and dreams. And so much of that Jewish story is still there: bakeries that have been feeding Jewish families for generations, synagogues that still open their doors, Hebrew still visible in storefront windows, mezuzot still affixed to doorposts. More than a century after Jewish immigrants made those streets their own, Jewish life is not merely something that happened there. It is still being lived. And as I walked those streets, I kept thinking how fortunate I am to belong to a people with a story this rich—and to know that somehow, it is my story too.

Those words returned to me this summer as I looked at photographs of my son traveling through Israel with forty-five other Jewish teenagers, beginning to form his own relationship with our ancestral homeland.

Imagine living as a Jew in almost any other era. And now, in 2026, my son is walking the streets of Tel Aviv, eating falafel, and browsing an open-air market by the beach for an Israel-shaped necklace for his sister, seemingly without a care in the world.

How lucky we are.

And I know. At this particular moment in Jewish history, “lucky” may sound like a strange word.

Lucky? Really?

After October 7. After years of painful headlines. After rising antisemitism. After attacks on synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses. After hearing Jewish students and faculty describe feeling isolated on college campuses. After endless arguments about Israel that have divided friendships, families, and communities. After watching political candidates and longtime public officials increasingly distance themselves from Israel, as though the only Jewish nation has become the world’s singular villain.

Lucky? Yes.

Not because those things have not happened. They have.

Over the past several High Holy Days, we have spoken honestly about all of this together. We have talked about antisemitism. We have talked about Israel and Zionism. We have talked about the loneliness, anxiety, and disillusionment many Jews have felt in this moment.

We must continue to confront the dangers facing the Jewish people. But if danger becomes the primary way we explain Jewish identity—especially to our children—then we allow antisemitism to organize Jewish life from the outside in. I refuse to give antisemites, conspiracy theorists, or those who simply misunderstand us that much power. Outsiders should never have the privilege of defining the Jewish life we choose to live.

Because beneath all that threatens Jewish life lies a more important question: What is it about being Jewish that makes me feel so fortunate in

the first place? What is it that has survived all of this—and that, after thousands of years, still binds us to one another?

What, exactly, are we part of?

That question is more complicated than it may sound. Judaism is certainly a religion. It includes prayer, ritual, theology, sacred obligation, and a search for God. But Judaism has never fit neatly within the category of religion alone.

Even our own Reform movement once tried to define Judaism primarily as a religion. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform famously declared, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community."[1] For Jews eager to establish themselves as full citizens of their countries, that formulation made sense: Americans by nationality, Jews by religion.

But over time, Reform Judaism itself came to recognize that the definition was too small. By 1976, our movement was describing Jews as an "uncommon union of faith and peoplehood,"[2] bound by language, land, history, culture, and institutions.

Over the last few years, writers such as Dara Horn and Ben M. Freeman[3] have helped me find language for something Jews have understood, in one form or another, for thousands of years: Judaism is not simply a faith practiced by individuals. Jewish identity encompasses something much larger.

We are Jews.

Members of an *Am*.

As in *Am Yisrael.*

A people.

Horn has described an *Am* as a "joinable tribal group bound by shared history, homeland, and culture." This ancient idea of peoplehood predates the tidy modern categories of religion, ethnicity, nationality, and race. Long

before the modern world began sorting identity into separate boxes, the Jewish people already existed as something more expansive.

To be part of an *Am* is to be bound together by more than belief. We share a story and a history, a language and a homeland, memories and traditions passed from one generation to the next.

And the Torah itself gives us a remarkable word for what we have received.

Morashah.

An inheritance.

"Torah tzivah lanu Moshe, morashah kehilat Yaakov."

"The Torah that Moses commanded us is an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob."[4]

The verse speaks specifically about Torah, but I think that word—*morashah*—offers us a way to understand the larger Jewish inheritance as well.

Morashah carries more weight than our English word "inheritance." It is something entrusted to us and passed from one generation to the next. Parents to children. Teachers to students. One generation of Jews placing something precious into the hands of the next.

In fact, the Talmud tells us that this verse is among the very first a Jewish child should learn to say.[5] Almost as if our tradition wanted every Jewish child to know, from the very beginning: This belongs to you.

It becomes ours because we belong to the family. You may not know much Hebrew. You may not pray often. You may have questions of faith. You may not yet realize how precious any of this is. It is still yours.

And like any inheritance, it can be neglected. It can be misunderstood. It can sit unopened for years. But it never ceases to be yours.

Still, what we inherit is never only a possession. It is also a trust. Each generation receives it from those who came before and must decide what to carry forward.

What we have inherited is extraordinary in its breadth.

It begins with stories. Abraham leaving everything familiar in search of something greater. Ruth choosing loyalty and belonging. Rabbi Akiva discovering that it was never too late to learn. The mystics reimagining the cosmos after the expulsion from Spain. Several dozen families gathering on the sand dunes outside Yafo to allocate plots of land for a new neighborhood that would soon become Tel Aviv. Eliezer ben Yehuda reviving Hebrew as a language of daily life. Holocaust survivors rebuilding Jewish life after unimaginable loss.

We inherit the ordinary faithfulness of generations of grandparents who lit Shabbat candles, told family stories, made chicken soup when someone was sick, and somehow believed Judaism was worth handing to us.

We inherit ideas that changed the world. That every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. That every person possesses inherent dignity. That rest is holy. That learning is lifelong. That asking difficult questions is not a threat to faith but one of its greatest expressions. We inherit not just beliefs, but a way of understanding what it means to be human.

We even inherit words that do not quite translate.

Shalom: Not just peace, but wholeness.

Teshuvah: The courage to return.

Hineni: "Here I am." Fully present. Fully accountable.

And Yiddish gave us *schlep*—because "to carry something somewhere while making sure everyone knows how inconvenient it is" is apparently too complicated for English.

We inherit a rhythm unlike any other—a calendar that refuses to let life become one endless Tuesday. Every week, Shabbat reminds us that productivity is not our identity. Every autumn, these Days of Awe remind us that human beings are capable of change. Time itself becomes sacred.

And, of course, we inherit food. Because if Jews have discovered anything over the centuries, it is that life is always easier to digest with brisket, *bourekas*, or *rugelach*. Every loaf of *challah*. Every dish that somehow tastes different when someone else in the family makes it. Food is not just food. It is memory and it is identity.

My parents would never have talked about raising me as part of an *Am*. They were just raising a Jewish family. Certain foods appeared on certain holidays. Certain jokes made sense in our house. Israel mattered. Jewish history mattered. Going to shul mattered. Serving the community mattered.

At the time, all of it felt ordinary. Only later did I understand that this is how civilizations endure: through thousands of such acts repeated from one generation to the next. Saying *kiddush*. Telling a story at *Pesach*. Showing up. Hidden inside those everyday moments was an extraordinary inheritance.

And none of us will connect to all of it in quite the same way. I have come to think of Judaism as a vast house with many rooms. We may feel at home in some and less drawn to others. We do not have to inhabit every room for the house to belong to us.

And this is what I wish more Jews understood: You do not have to be particularly religious to discover how astonishing this inheritance really is. Too many Jews have spent much of their lives standing outside this vast house, convinced that unless they love every room, they have no right to enter. But no one says you have to spend equal time in every room. I certainly don't. Jewish meditation? Beautiful room. I'm glad it's there. I just don't spend much time in it.

Some of you will find yourselves at home in Torah. Others in Israel. Others in social justice, in history, in music, or in prayer. There are many ways into this vast Jewish inheritance. You need only find the one that allows you to begin—or deepen—your relationship with Judaism.

The older I get, the more I realize that one of the deepest responsibilities of a rabbi is not simply to teach Judaism. It is to help people discover why Judaism is worth loving. Because when you come to love something,

commitment has a way of following. So does the desire to learn more. And after fourteen years of serving this congregation, I have become convinced that a deeper connection to Judaism genuinely enriches people's lives.

I've watched Jewish wisdom steady people through grief. I've watched Shabbat become a refuge for families whose weeks had become far too busy. I've watched children discover pride in who they are, and people find language for life's biggest questions when they needed it most. Judaism does not make life easier. But I do believe it makes life deeper.

So on this Erev Rosh Hashanah, I want to ask just one thing of you. This year...

Open one more door. Enter one more room. Choose one area of Jewish life and take it seriously this year. Read a Jewish book that stretches you, not just one that confirms what you already think. Learn enough Hebrew to understand a prayer you have been reciting for years. Create a Shabbat practice in your home and protect it from the rest of the week. Deepen your relationship with Israel—not only through headlines, but through its people, its literature, its music, and its complexity. Preserve a family story before it disappears. Take on one Jewish obligation that asks something of you—tzedakah, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, showing up for someone who is grieving. Invite people to your table and make Jewish life happen there.

And if you have spent years standing at the edge of Jewish life, choose one place this year where you will stop observing from the doorway and step inside. You do not have to know the whole house. Just open one more room.

My friends, that is what Judaism is: a *morashah,* an inheritance lovingly handed to us across more than three thousand years. Consider what had to happen for that inheritance to reach us. Generation after generation chose not to let it disappear. They copied books by hand. They carried Torah scrolls across continents—my family Torah included. They rebuilt communities after destruction. They taught children. They lit candles. They asked questions. They kept telling the story.

The fact that we are sitting here tonight, still receiving that same inheritance, is nothing short of remarkable. Perhaps even miraculous. And maybe that tells us something about this extraordinary *Am* to which we belong.

Maybe that is what I mean when I keep saying,

How lucky we are.

Not lucky because Jewish history has been easy. It certainly hasn't. Lucky because, against the odds of history, this people—our people—refused to let its story end. Lucky because each generation believed that what they had received was worth preserving. Lucky because tonight that same inheritance has reached us.

I don't know what this new year will ask of us. None of us does. But I do know this: whatever it asks, we will be better prepared to meet it if we know more deeply who we are.

And now it is our turn. Not just to receive it, but to explore it. To cherish it. To question it. To add our own chapter. And one day, to place it lovingly into the hands of those who come after us.

How lucky we are.

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[1] https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/

[2] https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/

[3] Dara Horn's *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (W. W. Norton, 2021), along with her subsequent lectures and conversations, and Ben M. Freeman's Jewish Pride trilogy—*Jewish Pride: Rebuilding a People* (2021), *Reclaiming Our Story: The Pursuit of Jewish Pride* (2022), and *The Jews: An Indigenous People* (2025)—have strongly influenced my thinking about Jewish peoplehood, pride, belonging, and the importance of telling our own story.

[4] Deuteronomy 33:4

[5] Sukkah 42a