

Why Be Jewish? Israel, The World and Me
Yom Kippur Morning, 2014
North Shore Synagogue
Rabbi Deborah K. Bravo

“Atem Nitzavim Hayom kulchem, lifnei Adonai Eloheichem.... You stand here this day, all of you, before your Eternal God – the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every one in Israel, men, women and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water – to enter into the sworn covenant which your eternal God makes with you this day, in order to establish you henceforth as the people whose only God is the Eternal, as you had been promised, and as God had sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹

These exact words were chanted so beautifully this morning at the beginning of our Torah reading. Perhaps, if they were written today, they would read:

Atem Nitzavim Hayom kulchem, lifnei Adonai Eloheichem....

You stand here this day, all of you, before your Eternal God, all Jews alike; the president, executive committee members and board members, the twice a year Jews and Shabbat regulars, the learned and still learning, the member and the visitor, men, women and children, business heads, doctors, teachers and lawyers, dentists, artists, computer programmers and administrative workers, authors, psychologists and building managers, to enter into an agreement with your God, the same agreement your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, made with Me, your God, thousands of years ago.

And the text continues: “v’lo etchem l’vad-chem Anochi koreit et habrit ha-zot. And it is not with you alone that I make this sworn covenant: I make it with those who are standing here with us today before our God, and equally with all who are not here with us today.”²

Thousands of years ago, we stood at Sinai, all of us, and heard these words. God told us then, and God tells us today – the past, present and future of the Jewish people is in our hands.

¹ From Deuteronomy 29:9-12

² From Deuteronomy 29:13-14

And then God says at the end of this morning's reading: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse; choose life, therefore that you and your descendants may live – by loving your God, listening to God's voice, and holding fast to the One who is your life and the length of your days. Then you shall endure in the land which the Eternal One promised to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,"³ and we add: to your mothers, to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

It is hard for us to imagine what it was like to stand there before God, to be handed the Torah, to be given choices. It is hard for us to imagine what it was like to have a slave mentality when leaving Egypt, and now to be free. It is especially difficult for us to understand what it means to make holy choices, and yet that is exactly what we are supposed to do on this day.

We, as a Jewish community, are invited today, no we are required today to make holy choices. We make holy choices each and every day of our lives. We choose what to say, and what not to say. We choose how to act, and how to misbehave. We choose how to bring blessing, and when to give punishment.

When individuals choose to convert to Judaism, we asked them to understand that they stood with us at Mount Sinai, thousands of years ago, when we received the Torah. Jews by choice contemplate that moment at a very critical juncture in the process of becoming Jewish. Jews by birth typically take for granted that we were there, at Sinai, with all other Jews, and that the course of Jewish history rests solidly on our shoulders.

For decades, the rabbi's message on the high holy days was the importance of belonging to a synagogue, and to the Jewish community. That will always be an important message. But I believe, in some ways, we took for granted the notion that Jews feel the importance of belonging to the Jewish people.

³ From Deuteronomy 30:19-2

Today, I stand before you, pleading with you, to feel an obligation to belong to the Jewish people; to be committed to the Jewish people; to be willing to fight for our rights as Jews here in the United States and across the world.

We should never take for granted our Judaism. We are the people of the book. We are *Am Yisrael*, the nation of Israel. We are the inheritors of our land and the students of Torah. We have fought throughout our history for the right to be Jewish. We have been forced to embrace anti-Semitism, hatred, spitefulness and bigotry. These acts of contempt toward Jews should never be forgotten. The ultimate act of hatred, the Holocaust, reminds us never to forget. But most of us are not survivors of the Holocaust, and very few of us have even heard the stories of the survivors first hand. We take for granted our Jewish roots, our Jewish existence.

We take for granted, especially in New York and on Long Island, *challah* in every grocery store, school vacation on Jewish holidays, and Hebrew and Judaic classes in our children's universities. We take for granted specialty stores in our neighborhoods that sell beautiful *chanukiyot* and *mezuzot*, pottery shops with Kiddush cups and Shabbat candlesticks to paint, and kippot available by the click of a finger on-line, with our names nicely printed inside. We take for granted Hillels on college campuses, JCC's and many flights taking people of all backgrounds safely to *Medinat Yisrael*, to the State of Israel. We take for granted... Israel.

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When Jews first arrived in the United States of America, it was not the America we know today. The first Jewish settlers were Sephardic and arrived in the mid-17th century. The large numbers of Jewish immigrants came in waves in the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, and being Jewish, having Jewish things, and observing Jewish holidays and customs was anything but the norm.

We Jews have assimilated and acculturated over the past several centuries, exactly as our forefathers and mothers hoped we would do. We went from fighting for our rights as Jews to establishing Judaism and Jewish centers in every corner of this great land. As Reform Jews, our early years were spent striving to be more similar to our non-

Jewish neighbors. In later years, we swung the pendulum back and endeavored to bring more ritual, prayer and meaning into our lives.

Today, our immigrant mentality is gone. For good and for bad. We are no longer concerned with getting Jews into politics, allowing Jews in the country clubs, or getting Jews to serve as academics in prestigious universities. We have accomplished all of this and so much more. For the mere two percent of the population which defines us here in the United States, we are represented sometimes ten-fold, sometimes more, in all aspects of American life.

And yet, with all of that success as Americans, many of us have lost our connection to the Jewish peoplehood. We are a people like no other. Being Jewish is not so easily defined by race, religion or culture. It is not simply one of these but all of these, and more.

I remember reading an article a few years ago by Dr. Erica Brown about peoplehood. In searching for it recently, I was reminded of her claim that sometimes striving to define peoplehood can be tiring. As she says: “we are born into a legacy of demands and tensions that we can accept or reject, but our own escape does not mean that others are willing to let go of us.”⁴

We all need to realize that belonging to the Jewish People is not something that is simply tiresome and with obligation; it is also a gift, a precious, timeless, worthy gift; and we need to be thankful for the gifts which we are given, each and every day. Sometimes, we forget the gifts we have been given... until we are suddenly reminded.

This past summer, we were frequently reminded of the reason we must embrace our identification with the Jewish People. Though we should not be surprised by the repeated anti-Semitism we witnessed throughout Europe, we are still shocked, and hurt, and troubled. It is but one reminder, an important reminder, of the importance for the existence, establishment and survival of the Jewish People.

How appalling for us to hear, and to read about, and even to witness acts that chill our bones, reminding us so strongly of the 1930's and 40's, and Nazi regime, and hatred that took on a whole new meaning. And yet, are we really surprised? We know that

⁴ From Dr. Erica Brown's "The Shelf Life of Jewish Peoplehood", The Jewish Week, 01/25/2011.

history has the capability of repeating itself. Jewish store-owners being harassed and businesses being attacked makes us shutter and think of Kristallnacht all over again.

Today, a deadly mixture of neo-Nazism, extreme Muslim Jew-hatred and a kind of intellectual snobbery we haven't seen in decades is routing its evil head once again. When people ask me if it is safe, as Jews, to travel to Europe, I take a deep breath and answer simply that we need to be careful, to make wise decisions, and to protect ourselves and our families.

Though I do not believe another Holocaust is around the corner, I do believe we need to take seriously the tenor of the world in which we live, and to realize that what can happen in Europe can happen anywhere. We Jews on Long Island might be content to say that Judaism and the Jewish people aren't going anywhere; we are strong, we are invincible, we are indestructible.

But who we are only matters in the context of the world in which we live. We are only human. We do make a difference. We must care about our Judaism, the Jewish people and the future of our Jewish heritage. We should never assume that Judaism will always be here for me, if I don't work to assure its limitless and unending place in this world.

Many of you have probably heard of Martin Niemöller, a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. Niemöller is perhaps best remembered for the quotation:

*First they came for the Socialists,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

Then they came for the Jews,

*and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—
and there was no one left
to speak for me.*

Anti-Semitism, unfortunately, is not going anywhere. Hatred for Jews and many others based on religion or belief is rampant right now. Our decades of living carefree are over. Waiting for others to fight the fight is never the way for us to live.

While Europe was becoming an anti-Semitic and hate-filled place this summer, Israel was a shooting range and target practice for Hamas. Many of you know that sometime in the middle of the summer, I installed the red alert app on my phone. I wanted to understand what the Israelis were experiencing every time the missiles were fired, each time their lives were put at risk, and it was, simply put, frightening.

There is no question that the conflict in the Middle East is complicated and troubling. There is no question that the Jews in Israel have difficulty getting along with one another, often to a level of embarrassment and discomfort. There is no question that we today cannot solve the problems of Israel and her enemies.

I suggest three simple actions I would urge each of to consider in this New Year, as we contemplate the events of this past summer and the possibility of what might be in the future.

1. Be a Proud Jew – A Proud Member of the Jewish People.

In a place where it may seem easy to be Jewish, and therefore anonymous as a Jew, or unconcerned; in a place where it might be easier to let others do the dirty work rather than putting some time and energy into our Jewish world; in a place where I could easily let others teach my children, care for the Jewish world and speak out on Jewish matters – DON'T! Be a proud Jew, a proud member of the Jewish people. Don't wait for others to take care of your Judaism, because some day, there might be no one left to do so.

2. Don't Simply Listen to the Media – Educate Yourself

We witnessed this summer as news outlets, traditional and modern ones, shared varying perspectives on the Middle East and the Conflict between Israel and Gaza. We watched as Israel was blamed for having the Iron Dome, while pictures of dead Hamas children were thrown on to the covers of every paper world-wide. Any death is a horrible thing, and death of children is that much worse. But we were at war, and there were casualties of war. We learned after the fact that some of those pictures were staged by Hamas, so the world would have sympathy for the Hamas leaders and their followers.

This will happen again. I only urge you – don't believe what you see, or what you hear. Research. Ask questions. Use your minds. Be sure that you are establishing your own opinion of what is happening in the Middle East, and not what others are feeding you.

3. Register to vote for the World Zionist Congress

This year, in addition to paying attention, learning and caring, there is something very concrete we can do to help Israel and Jews across the world. Every five years, the World Zionist Organization convenes a Congress whose representation is determined by democratic elections amongst the international Zionist political parties. Between congresses the Zionist General Council convenes annually for discussions on pressing matters on the agenda of the Jewish people. Participation in one election is effective for five full years, and ends soon. Our “party” is ARZA, the American Reform Zionist Association.

What is the World Zionist Organization? Established in 1897, the WZO is often called the Parliament of the Jewish people. It was convened by Theodore Herzl in Basel and since its inception, its goal, was to unite the Jewish people and bring about the establishment of the Jewish State.

The WZO is a global organization supported by the Jewish National Fund, the Jewish Agency for Israel, United Jewish Appeal and the Government of Israel. Why is it so important? As with the Israel Knesset elections, whoever wins the most votes receives the most important positions and control of budgets, and so it is with the World Congress elections.

Over the past five years, ARZENU, on behalf of the Reform Movement in Israel, uses

its power to impact the Jewish Agency budget allocation for religious streams.

ARZENU tries to prevent or limit the size of budget cuts to the streams of Judaism, and has been tremendously successful. Over the past five years, the Reform Movement in Israel received allocations of approximately \$5 million annually to spend.

Why should we care? This money goes to help the liberal community in Israel and across the world, an ever-growing population, to have a voice. It supports many Reform measures, including issues of Women of the Wall, officiation of Reform rabbis at weddings, conversions and funerals, salary for Reform rabbis, buildings and land for Reform synagogues, and much more.

In general, the mission is about:

- unity of the Jewish people and the connection to Israel
- a democratic and egalitarian state according to the vision of the prophets
- aliyah and settlement in Israel
- the centrality of Israel to the Jewish world
- Disseminations of Jewish culture and education
- Hebrew language
- Fighting anti-Semitism

If Israel and these issues are important to you, then pledge to vote now, and vote sometime between Jan 15 and April 15, 2015. Simply complete one of these pledge cards on your seat or at the table in the lobby by the Israeli flag, and you will be reminded to vote. In order to vote, you must simply

- be 18 or older by June 15, 2015
- be Jewish
- be a resident of the United States (to vote thru ARZA US)
- Pay a registration fee of \$10, \$5 if you are under 30

If you would like more information about WZO, ARZA or the election, please see the table in the lobby or go the website www.reformjews4israel.org. We MUST continue to have a voice around this table, to move our important agenda forward.

One final story. Many years ago, I was privileged to participate in a yearly confirmation retreat at one of our Reform Movement camps with a local Reform synagogue. Each

year, the then senior rabbi of the congregation would come into a dark room, as the retreat was about to end, and he would throw down a rope in the middle of the circle of students. He would then explain to them that this rope was given to him by a man, a congregant who had gone to Europe in 1945 and helped free the Jews and end the war. It was a whip that was actually used by the Nazis to keep Jews in line.

This rabbi would then bring out a beautiful yet very old Torah scroll, one that was saved during the Holocaust. He would then describe that the rope is not the reason we care so deeply about Judaism and the Jewish people. The Torah, that is why we are Jews; that is what pushes us to be the best Jews we can be.

Today, we respond emotionally to anti-Semitism and anti-Israel behavior and rhetoric. Often, the negative actions of others are what urges us, what compels us to be Jews. We should be proud to be a Jew NOT because of the rope, not because of the hatred, but because of Torah, because of Israel, because of the promise of a better tomorrow.

Pay attention. Pay attention to where we have been. Pay attention to where we are now. Pay attention to where we are headed for tomorrow. And by all means, pay attention to Israel.

Atem Nitzavim Hayom.... We all stood on Sinai. We all received the Torah. We were all promised Israel. Let us take our covenant seriously. Let us pay attention to our gifts, so they will always be ours.

Kein Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will. May it be our will.