

**34 Years as a Rabbi: A Reflection on Spirit, Justice and Ethnicity**  
**Yom Kippur Sermon 5779/2018**  
**Tikkun v'Or**  
**Rabbi Brian Walt**

**The Choice to be Jewish**

Like so many of you, I was moved by Diana Levy's eloquent and loving welcome on Rosh Hashanah. Diana gave voice to so many of us who have found a Jewish home here at TVO. She gave voice to those who deeply want to connect with our Jewish identity but are not sure how to do so, to those who struggle with it, to those are not clear if we believe in Judaism, and to those of us in interfaith relationships and are in the process of figuring out what belonging to a Jewish community means for us and for our partners. **Most importantly, she gave voice to the reality that for all of us, being Jewish and belonging to a Jewish community is a choice, an important choice with many important blessings and benefits.** In the past, many Jews may have seen their Jewishness as their fate and destiny with no choice to opt out. Indeed, it may have been impossible to opt out. That is no longer true for most Jews. **Belonging to a Jewish community is a choice. We all choose whether and how we want to embrace Judaism. And we make the choice over and over again.**

Today, after 34 years of serving the Jewish community as a rabbi in three different congregations and in several other capacities, I want to reflect honestly on my own journey, what I truly care about in terms of Judaism, Jewish belief and community. I also want to share my struggles with my own Jewish identity and practice, and why and how I, a rabbi, continue to choose to be Jewish. My own understanding of my Jewishness has changed radically over the past 34 years. My hope is that my personal questions and reflection may help you reflect on your own journey, whether you are Jewish or from a different religious tradition, whether you grew up immersed in Judaism and Jewish community, or with little connection, or somewhere in between.

**The Questions**

I hope that my sharing stimulates reflection on some significant questions: Why are you here in this synagogue today? What is it you care about? What inspires and excites you about Judaism and Jewish community? What, if anything, pushes you away? What is important to you about being connected with this community? These are some of what Jeff Bercovitz calls the big, juicy (JEWsy!) questions that I want to address today. Yom Kippur seems like an important time for such reflection.

**My Religious Background**

I will begin with my own religious background. I grew up in a strong, vibrant, committed, very privileged, and very fearful and insular Jewish community in Cape Town, South Africa. Sea Point, the affluent, white suburb that I grew up in, had a large Jewish population. As a child, I was surrounded by Jews and immersed in a Jewish community.

My identity as a Jew was central to my life - it was my primary identity. I was unquestionably and thoroughly Jewish. Except for two kids who lived a few houses from us, all my friends were Jewish. In Habonim, my Zionist youth movement, we exuberantly belted out a silly song written

by our counsellors who were probably all of 16 years old, “we’re young and white and Jewish, our blood’s a little bluish, through the ages our voices ring out loud.”

For most South African Jews our identity as Jews meant that we were deeply connected to Jews and Jewish people, more than to Judaism as a spiritual tradition. At its core it was a tribal and ethnic identity. We were especially deeply committed to being Jewish after the Holocaust, and were strongly connected to Israel and to Zionism which we saw as a necessary and redemptive response to the genocide of European Jewry. Israel would guarantee Jewish safety and survival. For most of us, being Jewish did not mean necessarily that we believed in or had a relationship to God or were bound to Jewish law. Only a small portion of the community were really Orthodox. We were culturally Jewish, in ritual practice much more traditional than American Jews. We belonged mostly to nominally Orthodox synagogues but lived more like Conservative Jews in the United States. I was raised with a prejudice against Reform Jews.

In the South African Jewish community, Judaism and Zionism were fused. **For many of us, Zionism was our Judaism, Zionism was our God!** My siblings, my mother and I all spent significant time in Israel, each of us for at least a few years. When I was 17 years old, I was a secular, socialist Zionist and made aliya to Israel immediately after high school. This was already my third trip to Israel as I had spent three months in Israel after the 67 war when I was in 10th grade and another visit in 12th grade. Shortly after arriving in Israel I was a regular student of Political Science and History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

This is a not so brief description of the Jewish milieu in which I grew up - a Jewish community deeply committed to Jewish peoplehood, to the survival of the Jewish people which would be ensured by Zionism and the State of Israel.

As a young person, my Jewish identity was central part of my life and I was deeply troubled by Apartheid and by the silence of the Jewish community, particularly its rabbis and communal leaders, in speaking out against Apartheid. When I studied the words of the prophet Amos in my Jewish school:

*Spare Me the sound of your hymns,  
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.  
But let justice well up like water,  
Righteousness like an unfailing stream (Amos 5:23-24)*

I was overcome with joy that this was part of my heritage and my tradition. This was a Jewish spiritual teaching I enthusiastically embraced. It spoke directly to our reality as Jews in South Africa. I believed fully in Amos’ God and the religion that placed ethics at the center of our spirituality.

In my very first sermon at TVO in 2008, I spoke about the troubling silence of Jewish leaders in the face of injustice.

*“In our community we often asked painfully why governments and others didn’t act forcefully during the Holocaust. I realised, the question was not only about them, it was also about us. Would we speak up? What would it mean to be a Jew, if we didn’t speak up? What does it mean to be a Jew, if we don’t speak up?”*

From the time that I studied Amos, the spiritual/ethical obligation to speak up - to pursue justice and righteousness for all - is at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. Spirit and Ethics was and is at the heart of my Jewish identity.

In the South African Jewish community we paid lip service to ethics as the center of our faith but in reality there was a wall/a mechitza between religion and politics, between God and Justice. There were many reasons for this - fear of anti-semitism, self interest, prejudice and racism - but I always knew, even as a young person, that this separation of religion and politics, justice and spirit, was counter to the very essence of Judaism.

Spirit and justice was a central part of my life when I was a rabbinical student and a deep commitment when I was ordained as a rabbi at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. I was deeply connected to Israel and felt a spiritual/ethical obligation to actively support justice for all in Israel/Palestine, an ethical commitment that has been central to my rabbinate. My activism focused on supporting Israeli peace and human rights activists and organizations and participating in American Jewish organizations like Breira and New Jewish Agenda that challenged the unquestioning loyalty in the Jewish community to the policies of the State of Israel.

When I was ordained as a rabbi, I knew that I could question almost any Jewish practice or belief but that if I ever questioned Israeli policy, my job could be on the line. **Because belonging and ethnic loyalty was the primary expression of Jewish identity for so many Jews, support for the State of Israel was the religion of American Jews.** I have navigated this territory carefully and feel so deeply appreciative for the commitment of this community to an open conversation about these issues.

I lost my first pulpit as a result of speaking out about the ethics of Israeli policy, the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in particular. I created Mishkan Shalom, a congregation that was based on a Statement of Principles - spiritual and ethical values that included a commitment to Zionism along with an acknowledgement of the suffering to Palestinians and support for Israelis and Palestinians working towards justice and reconciliation.

Having a statement of principles as the foundation for membership was unusual in a liberal congregation. It meant our liberal synagogue was not for every Jew - our synagogue did not place ethnicity, Jewishness, as the primary foundation for our congregation. Any person was welcome at any of our programs or services, **but membership was reserved for those who affirmed our basic Statement of Principles. We were a community bound by a commitment to a shared religious and ethical vision.** Spirit and ethics were the center of our community not ethnicity or belonging. And over the years here I have encouraged us here at TVO to create a clear set of values that guides our congregation. Agreement to these values is not a requirement for membership but it does guide our congregational life. Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "Being Jewish is not just to be, it is to stand for." Yes, I believe that Judaism, even liberal Judaism is and must be about standing for something.

In 2009, when I was invited to speak in a synagogue in Santa Cruz, I gave a talk entitled, **Ethics trumps ethnicity!** For me, it took a lot of courage to make that statement, but it is my truth. It meant I had finally admitted to myself that my Judaism was based on ethics not on belonging. For me Judaism was a faith with ethics at its core.

I had just returned from leading a Rabbis for Human Rights trip to Israel and the Occupied West Bank. The trip was dedicated to supporting those in Israel and on the West Bank who were working towards the Israel that fulfills the vision of Israel in its Declaration of Independence: *The state of Israel will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex.*

The trip changed my life. Finally after decades of an inner struggle, I realized that the structural and systemic discrimination against Palestinians that I saw in Israel on that trip, and in all my previous trips to Israel starting from 1970, was the inevitable result of the creation of a state where Jews were privileged over non-Jews. Until then I had thought the problems in Israel were flaws in the Zionist dream that could be corrected. Home demolition, expulsions, destruction of villages and many other injustices that I had personally witnessed and read about were not isolated incidents they were part of a pattern of discrimination. Now I had to admit something to myself that I had been too scared to acknowledge; the injustice inflicted on the Palestinians was a direct result of Zionism itself and the demand for a Jewish state. I realized that although I still had - and have to this day - deep personal connections to Israel, to Israeli Jewish culture and to Israeli Jews, I was no longer a Zionist in that I believed that Israel should be a state of all its citizens, where all have equal rights. I believe this as a Jew based on the teachings of Judaism. I also realized that even though I had been an activist, I had silenced myself for many years on issues related to Israel because of my sense of belonging to the Jewish people. I had not spoken certain truths about Israel because I knew in our big family, the Jewish People, that was impossible. It was a conversation that we could not have.

While I understand that ethnic identity gives one a sense of connection and protection, a Judaism based on ethnic identity/tribal affiliation is quite likely to devolve, as it often does, into loyalty to our group no matter what. For too many Jews, Jewish identity is only about belonging.

**Belonging to the Jewish people had become an ultimate issue, replacing God/Spirit or ethics/Justice as the center of our faith.** In the Diaspora most Jewish resources are invested in getting Jews to affiliate, to belong and be loyal to our tribe. The mainstream Jewish community has different terms for this focus: Jewish survival and Jewish continuity to name two. It also has massive programs that promote this vision. Birthright, the program by which hundreds of thousands of young Jews get an all-expenses paid trip to Israel, is to promote Jewish peoplehood mainly by increasing the number of Jews who marry Jews and by fostering connection and support for Israel which is the has become center of Jewish life.

For many Jews, support for Israeli policy is a form of tribal loyalty. The consequence is that Jews who disagree with Israeli policy are seen as disloyal. Rather than have a discussion of ethical issues in a Jewish context, those who disagree with Israeli policy either silence themselves because they want to be included in the community, or are silenced or excluded from

the community. As a result, **Ethnicity trumps Ethics**. This is why our congregation's commitment to an open discussion of these issues is so important. It creates the possibility of a rich and respectful Jewish ethical discussion across passionately held differences.

For me belonging or ethnicity is the most complicated part of being Jewish. I am deeply conflicted about belonging. As a Jew I love Jewish music, language, literature and culture. When I meet someone who speaks Yiddish or Hebrew I feel a connection through a shared language. But these connections are not sufficient by themselves unless it also binds us in a shared ethical and spiritual vision. Sadly, too often, it doesn't.

It is about what people do, how they act, what they believe in that is critical, not their ethnicity or even their religious affiliation. I feel a profound sense of connection to the relatively small number of Jewish communities that uphold values I care about. I also feel a deep sense of belonging when I am with people of other faiths who share a commitment to Spirit and Justice.

An additional problem for me in terms of belonging is that I, and others who think like me, are excluded from so much of the Jewish community. Even though I am a rabbi, I live on the edges of the mainstream Jewish community. Many Jewish communities believe that Jews like myself who support freedom, equality and justice for Palestinians, and who support boycott, divestment and sanctions as a nonviolent tool for change, should not be included as members of the community. This is painful to me but I will continue to speak out because my Jewish spiritual and ethical tradition requires me to support the equal rights of all people. If ethnicity were the most important value of Jewish identity, I would just support my tribe, my people and its state. Then, Ethnicity would trump Ethics. When ethnicity trumps ethics you get the Nation State bill recently passed by the Israeli Knesset that effectively makes Israel an ethnic state. The nation state bill is the dark side of ethnicity.

And, I believe that chosenness is as well. Mordechai Kaplan and the Reconstructionist movement made the categorical rejection of the idea of the Chosen People a central tenet of Reconstructionist Judaism. I passionately support this position. The Jewish people is a special people with a particular history and culture, but we are not an exceptional people. Exceptionalism of all kinds is an illusion that separates people from one another and that is always potentially hurtful to those not part of the in group. For example there is tendency to view Jewish pain and oppression as worse than any other oppression. No matter how one tries to re-interpret chosenness, by emphasizing the extra responsibility of being chosen, or by claiming it is a random act of Divine Grace, it is an idea that separates Jews from others and that has generated racist ideas about Jews and Jewish souls as superior in some important Jewish texts and in certain Jewish religious movements. And, the idea of Jews as a The Chosen People is an especially problematic idea in our time when it has been tied to the idea of Promised Land to justify the dispossession of the Palestinian people to create a Jewish state. When Ben Gurion was asked by Lord Peel in 1937 on what basis the Jews could claim the land of Palestine for a Jewish state, he responded, "We have the deed, it is in the Bible!"

It is time for a new universal Judaism that rejects and fundamentally reinterprets Chosen People and Promised Land as universal concepts that apply to all. All people are chosen, and the

Promised Land is a world of justice and peace for all. This universal vision of Judaism is one that excites me.

This universal Judaism would welcome any and everyone who wants to commit to bringing Jewish spiritual values and ethical practice into their lives, regardless of who they are in relationship with, regardless of how many Jewish ancestors they have, or whether one or many rabbis deem them to be Jewish. Jews have widely varying levels of engagement with Judaism. We welcome all, whatever their level of engagement. A universal, spiritually and ethically based Judaism would encourage an engagement with Judaism that will bring joy, holiness, meaning, ethics into our lives. I also don't mean to reject the possibility of conversion to Judaism. A person who wants to be Jewish would naturally want to learn and may want a ceremony by which they are welcomed into the community. I am suggesting that this not be a requirement. An individual can choose to be Jewish, without any authorisation by a rabbi.

The center of this universal Judaism is Spirit and Justice not ethnicity or peoplehood. This is the Judaism I love and that is the heart of my Jewish identity.

Lastly, I want share just some of the many Jewish ideas and spiritual practices that I love that would be at the heart of this Judaism.

Here are a few examples:

**Shma:** I love that the most important Jewish prayer practice is the Shma morning and evening. Listen Israel/ all you wrestlers with God, Being/what is, was, will be, is our God, Being is One. Every day begins and ends with the proclamation that everything is one. Everything is connected, and we are all responsible for one another and for mother earth. And as Rabbi Yael Levy teaches, Know this truth and Act accordingly!

**Ten Commandments:** I love that the Ten Commandments begins with the statement that I am YHVH/Being, your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of slavery. The God of the Jewish People is about liberation for all and freedom from oppression.

**In the Image of God:** I love the Jewish notion that every human being is created in the image of God and that every human life is unique and of infinite value. Every human life! Maybe we can expand it to all life.

**Gratitude:** I love the Jewish blessing bracha practice of expressing gratitude 100 times a day for the blessings of our lives.

**Shabbat:** I love that Judaism sets aside a full day of not doing but just being. A day to joyfully celebrate the mystery of our lives with friends and family.

**Exodus:** I love that the foundational story of Judaism is the story of the Exodus from Egypt, that the Torah says 36 times that you shall not oppress the stranger, the widow, or the poor. Remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt. And I love Pesach!

**Tzedakah and Gemilut Hasadim:** I love the mitzvot/sacred responsibilities of tzedakah/acts that promote justice and gemilut hasadim/interpersonal acts of love and kindness.

I love that the word in Yiddish for a human being is mensch. Mensch means more than just a person, it means a decent person, a person who has integrity, who is kind and compassionate.

This is only a small part of what I treasure as the foundation of a universal Judaism based on spirit and ethics.

What is it that you love about Judaism? What is it that you care about? I am sure you can add many, many more ideas and practices, old and new. And how do you think about the relationship between Jewish ethnicity and Jewish spiritual and ethical values. What is the relative importance each in your life?

An exciting universal prophetic Judaism is flourishing on the edges of the mainstream Jewish community. Young Jews are creating new synagogues, new organizations and new ways of praying and acting as Jews. And I love that at Tikkun v'Or we are experimenting with some of these ideas and are engaged in an open conversation about all issues, including the difficult ones.

So my friends, as you sit here on Yom Kippur I invite you to think about what it is that excites you about Judaism. What is it that you care about? I shared with you my thoughts in the hope that it will stimulate you. I know that some of you will disagree with some of the things I have said and I hope the disagreement will not make you feel unwelcome and I truly hope it is an opening for a conversation. I know it is hard to hear your rabbi say something you really disagree with.

Will the Jewish people survive if it is so universal? Truth to tell, I don't know. I know that for me the survival of the Jewish People is an important but not ultimate concern. My primary concern is whether Judaism can inspire Jews to be more loving, more compassionate, more joyful, more present to every day of our lives as an opportunity to be in touch with the Source of all/ with God. I care whether Judaism can inspire Jews to be more courageous in our efforts to pursue justice for all, to love mercy, to act justly and to walk humbly with the Spirit of all. I care whether Judaism nurtures a commitment to the we, in the most expansive way, rather than the I. I think if this is the case, it is quite likely that Judaism will not only survive, it may thrive. I am deeply grateful for all the learning and commitment that was passed down to me as a child and I believe that a Judaism with fewer walls/mechitzas that stands for something important has much more chance of survival than a Judaism that is just focused on Judaism as an ethnicity.

This year I will be doing a second version of the class on *This we believe, This I believe* where we will study and discuss key Jewish ideas. It will be an opportunity for each participant to write a statement of their own relationship to Judaism.

May we over the coming year have lots of opportunities to share what is most important to us about our Judaism. May we learn from one another and may our shared understandings and commitment to one another allow us to explore passionately held differences with respect, love and openness.

May the ethical and spiritual values and practices of Judaism enrich our lives, bringing us joy, meaning, connection and love.

May we also act individually and collectively to do what we must to turn our people, our country and our world in teshuva towards justice and peace for all and to dramatic teshuva/acts of repentance and repair that will preserve mother earth, our endangered and sacred home.

I wish you all a year of blessing, good health and joy.

G'mar Chatima Tova! May all be sealed in the Book of Life, Blessing and Peace!