

Longing to Belong...

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, 10 *Tishrei* 5778 – Kol Nidre – Mount Zion, St. Paul, Minnesota

I was in 7th grade when my teacher at St. Mary's Country Day School in Hillsborough, North Carolina, asked me and my classmates to stand one by one and state aloud our religion. I will never forget the fear I experienced. Not because I was Jewish. Not because of any latent anti-Semitism. Rather because at that moment, I did not belong to a synagogue and I felt uncertain about my identity. I knew I was Jewish but my family attended the local Unitarian Church, a home to many Jews especially at that time. When I stood at my desk, my cheeks flush, and stammered out something about Judaism and Unitarianism, I felt a burning longing in my heart to truly belong.

Everyone has some moment of being on the outside of a group not feeling like one belongs. That is when we need someone on the inside to help bring us in, to feel at home.

I am grateful that Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, North Carolina was there for me and for Rabbi John Friedman who graciously embraced my search and enrolled me in confirmation. I am grateful that my parents supported me fully every step of the way. If I am honest about my journey, it was always less about a spiritual struggle and more about seeking a place where I felt like I was part of a large family. I suddenly had ancestors stretching back millennia who had wisdom, stories, and traditions, and cousins who lived around the world, a connection I could fully embrace in my travels. If it were not for that synagogue in North Carolina, I don't know where I would be today.

It is not so easy for synagogues in 2017. We are three generations from the events that forever shaped what it means to be a Jew, the Holocaust and the founding of Israel.

Our Jewish narrative is less focused in the 21st century even if the essential truths of our morals are strong and we find meaning within the cycles of life in the synagogue: births and funerals, b'nei mitzvah and weddings.

Life at Mount Zion is vibrant and we do not take it for granted. Our current strength is the sum total of hundreds of individuals and families making a choice to be here, and within that group, a significant subset committing time and talent to make "being here" really matter.

In some ways it is counter-cultural to join or stay joined to a synagogue, to invest resources in institutions that build community. We all know of family or friends who choose not to affiliate or who no longer feel the need to do so. They are just fine without the organized Jewish community. They may feel Jewishly engaged watching a movie, reading, attending cultural events, eating certain foods, pursuing justice based on their values, or celebrating Jewish holidays with family or friends. They may feel that the synagogue did its job with their kids and the kids are now grown. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with these momentary connections. This is a reality - a privilege of modern life - of voluntary belonging. It is symptomatic of the many forces in modern life that are tearing away at the social fabric of belonging. Columnist David Brooks suggests four major factors:¹ global migration, economic globalization, the internet, and cultural autonomy. He gets that we like our autonomy, but he poses this question:

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html?mcubz=1>

“In a globalizing, diversifying world, how do we preserve individual freedom while strengthening social solidarity?”

Many people want to be free, not tied down to commitments. Lives are full, but in the quiet moments for those connected but not so connected, there may be times when communal ties do not feel as strong as perhaps desired. There may be some voice inside, like Saul Bellow’s “Henderson the Rain King”, that says, *I want, I want, I want.*

If I am being honest with you, I worry that some of our kids, let alone our adults, think of Judaism as an activity, not an identity. When the activity is over, there is no need for a synagogue. There is a huge difference between being able to declare “I am Jewish” and saying “I have Hebrew school on Wednesdays and Sundays just like I have gymnastics or Karate on Mondays and Thursdays. We don’t just go to Hebrew School like we go to the gym. We attend because our sense of real grounding in this world is from our Jewish identity that provides us with narratives, morals, and rituals. They give us purpose and a connection with other people. As a colleague of mine, Rabbi Ari Rosenberg points out, journalist Daniel Pearl’s dying words were not, “I played soccer as a kid.” They were, “I am Jewish.”

There is a piece of art by Ken Aptekar in the Jewish Museum in New York. I see it every year with Mount Zion’s 11th graders during their five-day exploration of Jewish identity and tour of immigrant and modern New York. The work is called, “I Hate the Name Kenneth.” Kenneth was the closest his parents could find to his Hebrew name Chaim, the artist explains. The art piece has photographs of his two grandfathers, both named Abraham, both from Eastern Europe. One changed his name to Albert to succeed at Ford motor company where he retired as a Vice President in the tractor division. The other never changed his name, worked at a bicycle shop near a synagogue and called Kenneth, “Mein Kenny”. Whenever the text is about this grandfather, Kenny is pictured within a full picture frame, completely connected to his family and identity. When the artist says he hates the name Kenneth, the words are literally outside the frame in the piece, rejecting in some not-fully-articulated way, his Grandfather’s assimilation and his turning too far away from his Jewishness. Aptekar reclaims his ancient-new, Jewish identity fully-framed.

Seeking a full-framed Judaism does not always mean that people are ready to embrace community. Who knows what belonging means to Aptekar? The actress Sarah Jessica Parker suggests in an interview for a book “Stars of David”², that she wants to belong but needs the Jewish community to be less intimidating. Parker, whose father was Jewish, is married to Matthew Broderick whose mother was Jewish. She says, “I said to Matthew, ‘If we went to this temple next door, where would we begin? In temple, it seems like you have to know what you’re doing. And it intimidates people; it certainly intimidates me. And I keep saying, ‘I’m not a religious person,’ but I know that’s not true; I know that I believe that there’s somebody who watches over us and he or she takes care or not, or teaches us. I really do-strangely enough-kind of cling to that. And I think that Matthew is as deeply religious as I am, but he’s cynical about it because he’s seen that it can be so harmful....” “Frankly, I have always just considered myself a Jew,” she continues, “Maybe I feel Jewish because my mother is very skeptical of organized religion in general and being a Jew felt more cultural to me.” For Parker, when she

² Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk about Being Jewish, Abigail Pogrebin (Broadway Books: New York), 2005, pp 146-53.

considers her Jewish identity, it is located in questions and nostalgia, but not currently within a Jewish community.

Two weeks ago, a Jewish slam poet Andrew Lustig came to Mount Zion from Brooklyn to be with our teens. He is young, engaged in the Jewish community, finding his own way in. He recited his poem "I am Jewish" which has been viewed nearly a 1/2 million times on YouTube.³ His sense of belonging is in his lived experiences:

I am the collective pride and excitement that is felt when we find out that that new actor, that great athlete, his chief of staff ... is Jewish

And I am the collective guilt and shame that is felt when we find out that that serial killer, that Ponzi schemer, that wife beater ... is Jewish...

I'm never asked if I have horns or a pot of gold, if I rule the world or why I killed Jesus. I am asked where my black hat is, if I really get eight presents on my Christmas, why my sideburns aren't super long, and if I've really never tried bacon

I am asked what a Gefilte Fish is. I say, "I don't know. I don't like it. Nobody does. But we eat it because it's what we do."

I am asked if my dad's a lawyer. I say "No ... my mom is ... my dad's an accountant"

I am asked if my grandparents were in the Holocaust, as if it was a movie. "Yeah, they were. But luckily they were also on Schindler's List"

I am on JDate and not Match.com because, well ... it's just easier that way....

Andrew Lustig, Sarah Jessica Parker, Daniel Pearl, and Ken Apter each found meaning in different ways by embracing their identity and saying, "I am Jewish."

When they expressed their sense of belonging, there was this existential, timeless connection to something greater than themselves. At once it was visceral and tribal.

This desire to belong is programmed into our DNA, social science teaches. Throughout history, we have lived as tribes. Even when we exert our autonomy and leave the fold, or stay within but don't work to strengthen the community, we often return in moments of adversity. In times of fear, we become a tribe again.

Now alas seems to be such a time. We have heard anti-Semitism sanctioned in our highest office. We have seen anti-Semitism embedded in many progressive causes for years which too often use anti-Zionism as a cover for anti-Semitism. We have even heard the Prime Minister of Israel putting political sensibilities before condemning anti-Semitism in Hungary and the United States.

In some ways, I am saddened that rising anti-Semitism may yet strengthen Jewish life in America. Saddened, because that is what my rabbinic school professor Rabbi Kravitz predicted. "Don't

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJe0uqVGZJA>

worry, anti-Semitism will come back and when it does, so too the Jews to shul. This has never sat well for me. Many years ago, when I took over teaching confirmation for a rabbi in New Jersey while he was on sabbatical, I discovered that the entire curriculum was about the Holocaust. It was so clear to me then as it still is today, that I don't want to teach, "be Jewish because someday they will be after us too; be prepared." I want to teach my love for Judaism, to instill its ethics, values, and faith.

The truth is belonging to community is a basic human need. The Jewish psychologist Andrew Maslow developed a hierarchy of human needs. He places "belongingness" right after the physical needs of caring for our bodies and the need for security.

Belonging does not have only one path. There is a range of engagement. Last month, the Dean of Harvard Divinity School suggested there are five dimensions.⁴

1. First, according to Rev. David Hempton, is that to which we belong, not just affiliate with, should have some morally compelling reason for its existence I call this the ethical component of belonging.
2. Belonging to an institution, as with belonging to a family, involves the acceptance of our own frailties and those of others in a spirit of generosity and mutual forbearance, even when we fiercely disagree with and irritate one another... I call this the human component of belonging.
3. We cannot belong anywhere where we know people in our community are being ... diminished or treated with disrespect. ... [If others are feeling diminished, you feel diminished as well and act to help others.] I call this the social justice component of belonging.
4. A true sense of belonging comes only with a sense that our deepest longing for belonging is shared by everyone. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that that is "part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong." ... I call this the universal longing of belonging.
5. Finally, we can't belong anywhere if we don't want to belong, and take on the responsibility and commitment of belonging. As long as we are content to stand aloof from community with a critical spirit of detachment and disengagement, we will never belong. We may achieve a kind of smug self-satisfaction that way, but we will never discover the warmth of heart and spirit that belonging brings. I call this the responsible component of belonging. Belonging is a powerful word. It resonates with self-acceptance, with community, with a sense of home—of somehow being where we are meant to be, and where we can flourish individually and corporately. Belonging is deeply ethical, transformatively human, connected to social justice, rooted in a universal longing, and is something that every one of us must take responsibility for. Belonging is a beautiful word. It is worth striving for. It should be who we are."

I want to ask a hard question: Do you feel like you belong?

⁴ <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/09/07/hempton-belonging-harvard>

I pray that the answer is yes. I hope you feel your longings, your personal journey, brings you here in a way that feels like home.

For many of us, it is because our Jewish identities feel fully-framed in this space, in this community.

For others, it is supporting our Jewish loved ones and, finding community within a group of people who care.

We all want our days to be filled with meaning just as we imagined our ancestors in their small, tight-knit communities. We implore in our prayers: *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*. “Renew our days as in the past” as the normal translation reads. But it really means, “Renew our days in this time just as you God helped our ancestors renew their own days in their time.” Help us feel that our lives are filled with the same meaning and belonging our ancestors experienced.

To put it another way, a poetic feeling of experiencing home, the poet Mary Oliver writes:

Coming Home

When we are driving in the dark,
on the long road to Provincetown,
when we are weary,
when the buildings and the scrub pines lose their familiar look,
I imagine us rising from the speeding car.
I imagine us seeing everything from another place--
the top of one of the pale dunes, or the deep and nameless
fields of the sea.
And what we see is a world that cannot cherish us,
but which we cherish.
And what we see is our life moving like that
along the dark edges of everything,
headlights sweeping the blackness,
believing in a thousand fragile and unprovable things.
Looking out for sorrow,
slowing down for happiness,
making all the right turns
right down to the thumping barriers to the sea,
the swirling waves,
the narrow streets, the houses,
the past, the future,
the doorway that belongs
to you and me.

"Slowing down for happiness / making all the right turns[.] the past, the future, the doorway that belongs to you and me."

May we find in this liminal moment of renewal, a real, ancient-new home that is worthy of our fully-framed belonging. May we each, in whatever way we need, return to this place of meaning.

Sermon Anthem: Return again/Hashiveinu.