

Sermon Delivered by Rabbi Ronald S. Roth
Fair Lawn Jewish Center/Congregation B'nai Israel
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The HBO series, now seen endlessly on what seems like every TV station at all hours of the night, *Sex in the City*, touches on a topic I want to address this morning. I am behind the times, since I do not subscribe to HBO and had to wait for the reruns. One of the main characters, Charlotte York, dates, and then marries Henry Goldenblatt, a Jewish man. While dating him, she sees a display of Jewish food at a store, removes a bottle of gefilte fish, looks at it (if it is not a staple in your diet, you have to admit it does look a bit odd) and replaces it on a shelf. Later in the same episode she asks her Jewish boyfriend why he wants her to be Jewish and why it is so important that they have Jewish children. He says he promised his mother and Charlotte is not impressed. The boyfriend then adds that he promised his mother on her death bed that he would marry a Jew, and have Jewish children. That just melts Charlotte's heart and she later converts to Judaism. It may have convinced her, but his emotive desire leaves something significant out.

For that I want to quote from a recent newspaper article. "Word came down from the mountain and lo! It was not inscribed on stone tablets but it was rather a rambling well intentioned conversation. One of the major Jewish foundations [the Bronfman Foundation and believe me it is a major force for important and great work in our community] last month brought together some of the sharpest minds of the Jewish world on an all expense paid trip to Park City Utah, and asked them to study texts, to discuss and to attend lectures on focusing what the Jewish community stands for today and to think of bringing into the Jewish community those at the edge." The question they discussed was, "Why Be Jewish?" Could the character on the HBO series have given a convincing answer to that query to his girlfriend? Can you?

That has become a key question here in America where it is so easy to shed identities. Studies show that many Americans change their religion and there are considerable numbers of Americans who change their ethnic identity as well. For we live in a society where distinctive characteristics of the self are not viewed as fixed. I know that in our community we have Holocaust survivors and those who grew up in Europe some time ago. Had they asked their parents or Rabbi in Poland, "Why be Jewish?" they would have been met with surprise and disbelief. Maybe the reply would have been, "What do you mean? There is no choice." All is open in America.

I bring this question to you today, because as I stand here before you for the first time on the High Holy days, I want to share with you how I would answer that question. I hope that you will find my answer compelling and that you will learn more about who I am. You have honored me choosing me to be your Rabbi. I pray, *bezrat hashem*, with God's help, that I will be worthy of the trust you put in me. As we progress into the future, knowing more about me will help

you understand my values and goals and how projects and programs concretize them.

I sense the positive energy, from the merger of the Fair Lawn Jewish Center and Congregation B'nai Israel. I feel it from the new members we are attracting, from our executive committee, our board, our staff, and the people I have begun to meet at various homes, at dinners and dessert meetings. I also feel the weight of Zaydies cookies I have consumed. That is something I hope to shed by exercising at Parisi's.

So let me begin with my childhood. I grew up in Brooklyn, but I did not have any formal Jewish education as a child. My parents were not observant. My father was not a Rabbi. People in Nashville asked me that frequently, for that is a place where clergy runs in families. Some of you have asked me if I am familiar with synagogues in Brooklyn. I can tell you that did stand outside the Synagogue on Remsen Avenue and Avenue A during the High Holidays with my friends.

To answer the question, "Why be Jewish," let me begin with a phrase from our siddur. You have all said it many times and it is printed just before the beginning of the *amidah*, the central prayer of every Jewish service. It is from the Book of Psalms, chapter 51, verse 17. "*A-do-noi, s'fa-tai tif-tach, u-fi ya-gid t'hil-a-te-cha.* O Lord! Open my mouth and my lips will proclaim your praise." That is the simple translation, but there is more to those words. The Hebrew word for lip, *safah*, is also the same Hebrew word for a river bank. What does a part of my face have in common with the edge of a body of water? They are both borders. Water usually does not cross a river bank, but all the rain this past year has caused some bodies of water to widen and flood. There can also be a positive meaning to the dissolution of a marked boundary. Each of us exists alone, as an individual. There are clear borders to our selves. We are discrete. Imagine if each of us could transcend our narrowness and exist with connections to realms that bring us extraordinary meaning and that stretched our perceived limitations. Then I could translate that Biblical phrase as, "Lord, let me this solitary person living here in one place, let my borders open. Let me and my spirit soar and connect to other places that will enlarge my soul, enrich my life and cross to realms that bring me such joy and meaning that I feel that I have become part of eternity." That overflowing is the essence of what makes me want to be Jewish.

So let me share with you some personal observations of this expansive sense of self that motivates me and brings me meaning. It will be an outline of values and goals and I hope, with your assistance and with God's help to bring to our congregation.

First - May I live beyond by perceived limitations to feel the pain of others and be motivated to repair the world.

Does that sound masochistic? No. Imagine a child who is born and feels no pain. That is a handicap. He or she will not bring a hand away from touching a hot coffee pot. Eli Wiesel was once asked to answer a question about what being Jewish means to him and he wrote for the American Jewish Committee that he has a sense of fear and trembling as he is judged by his creator at this time of year. He speaks of living as a creature of God who has seen the worse depths of humanity at Auschwitz and continues to write the following:

To be Jewish is to recognize that every person is created in the image of God and that our purpose in living is to be a reminder of God. A Jew must be sensitive to the pain of all human beings. A Jew cannot remain indifferent to human suffering whether in the former Yugoslavia, in Somalia, or in our won cities and towns. The mission of the Jews has never been to make the world more Jewish but to make it more human.

Those words are a reminder of the dimensions we must stretch to attain. Today we are concerned about the genocide that continues in Darfur. Some will say that one message of the Holocaust is "Never Again," and they are correct. We need to recall the past. But sadly there are those who learned another lesson of the Holocaust. Genocide can succeed if you chose to exterminate a group of people that most of the world does not care about. Better yet if they live in a remote part of the world. It is Africans today, as it was Cambodians some years ago and our people during the Holocaust. Others who are in need include those in our own nation and in Israel who do not have enough to eat, those who suffer with AIDS or are homeless, to give just a few examples. That is why I have been and will continue to stress that the mitzvot of tzedakah, of giving to those in need, and of *gemilut chasadim* actual deeds of loving kindness.

We celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel this year. Just last week Israel agreed to grant citizenship to refugees from Darfur. A country full of people who had to leave their home to find shelter teaches the world to take in those in danger today. That is an inspiring example to all of us. I have often said I am not as charitable by nature as I have been in writing checks to UJC, this congregation and other causes, but I know I need to stretch myself when I help others. So first I pray that I expand myself to hear the cries of those in need and work to repair the broken places of the world.

A second expansion - Lord, expand my boundaries so I will find great and deeper connections through your mitzvot to both my immediate and larger family.

As many of you know I have two children. There are many American rituals that parents perform. I recall some years ago, taking my son to his first baseball game. It was a Triple A Nashville Sounds game at Hershel Greer Stadium, the only baseball stadium with a scoreboard shaped like a guitar. Other rituals I remember include watching my children learn how to drive and feeling nervous as they pull away in the car on their own for the first time, graduations from various schools and leave takings as they began to live independently.

I have followed a ritual with my family that I was not familiar with in my own childhood. When Shabbat begins, at the Friday night dinner, children approach their parents and the parents bless them. From the first Shabbat after Gabe was born and then adding Deena as well, I have said the words that were first said by Jacob to his grandsons. For my son, "May God bless you to be like Ephraim and Manasseh." For my daughter, "May God bless you like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel." Then I recite the words that were said by the Priests, the Cohanim, when they blessed the people gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem. These words are in the Torah itself in the Book of Numbers. "May the Lord bless and keep you. May the Lord be gracious to you. May the Lord cause His countenance to shine upon you and grant you peace" These are words that

were not said in my family for many generations. In my genealogical research I found only one traditional relative. In some of your families this ritual may also have been lost for generations. It is a reenactment of an ancient rite. Imagine those who said and heard those words in the past. Moses first heard them from God, transmitted them to our ancestors, and they have been written in every Torah scroll. How many families say them on Shabbat today? I am not just reenacting a past ritual. I am also doing as Jews do today all over the world. By following the traditions of Jewish life I feel ties to the past, to the entire Jewish world, to the future, to my children and to all Jews.

A sociologist, Samuel Heilman has written, that being Jewish

...means overcoming essential loneliness and helps me avoid becoming trapped in the evanescent present. It allows me to share in the great chain of being that begins somewhere in the primordial past with Abraham and Sarah and passes through one of the most remarkable series of development in human civilization.

I believe rituals can help us feel that chain of being. I have introduced many programs in my previous congregations to encourage people to add mitzvot to their lives. These have included shaking the lulav on Succot, enhancing the Seder with old and new rituals, and following the traditional Friday night pattern before and after the meal.

A third enhancement: O Lord enlarge my soul to feel your presence most immediately. How often in our lives do we feel the presence of God in a direct way? It is something we may strive for and yet not attain, and it may come to us in an unexpected moment.

I can think of times when, even at the synagogue I felt God's presence. I say that because sometimes when I speak to people about feeling God's presence, often their synagogue is not mentioned. Perhaps it happened at the birth of a child, or when they felt awe seeing a wonderful sight outdoors in nature. Let me describe one scene I recall. We had developed a new type of Friday night service at my synagogue in Nashville. I named it Music City Shabbat. As you probably know Nashville is called Music City. We created a CD using various people from the music industry to encourage the congregation to learn new and old the melodies for the Friday night service. We sent each member of the congregation the CD. We held Music City Shabbat services about once a month with the members of the congregation who were on the CD leading the service. One Friday night when it was a time of year when sunset was late, we began the Kabbalat Shabbat service, welcoming Shabbat with musical instruments. We had a piano, a flute, and a violin to accompany us. We put them away just before we began the actual evening service for Shabbat. That week, the music, and the praying, were just right. I sensed a transformation. We were touched by the presence of Shabbat and God. By the time services ended I was still in Nashville Tennessee but in fact I felt that I was in a very different place than I was when the service began. It was a place of tranquility and peace. I hope to help us together sense God's presence in prayer.

Another expansion: Lord I pray to expand and confront myself through Jewish study.

At one time in my life I rejected Judaism because I thought that in order to be Jewish one had to take a literalist view of the Bible and reject modern science. One had to believe that the world was less than six thousand years old and that the stories in Genesis were literally true. I recall speaking to Rabbi Morris Goldfarb at the Cornell Hillel when he took a Bible and pointed out that after Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, they hide from God and God asks, "Where are you?" Now didn't God know where they were? Rabbi Goldfarb pointed out that the Bible is not meant to be a literal truth about the origins of the world, but Divine stories to teach us how to live. God wanted to know the moral position of Adam and Eve and not their exact longitude and latitude. I never thought of the Bible in that way. My mind was expanded to reject childish notions of God. Jewish study should cause us to develop our minds and question our assumptions.

Another simple example of study is from one of my favorite texts. In *Perkei Avot*, the *Ethics of the Fathers* we read the following phrase (1:15), "Greet every person with a cheerful face." So, I ask you who said that? Now if you know a bit about Rabbinic Judaism you recall that there were two great scholars and schools of learning in the first century of the Common Era. One was based on the teachings of Hillel and one on the teachings of Shammai, two polar opposites. The most well know story about them is how a non Jew who wanted to learn came to Shammai and asked him to teach him everything about Judaism while standing on one foot. Shammai drove him away, hitting him with a ruler. Hillel, asked the same question by the same person said, "What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow person, the rest is commentary. Now go and study."

So which of the two said, "Greet every person with a cheerful face"? It was Shammai, and that is why I love this text. Shammai was not by nature a welcoming, warm, and cuddly person. He did not go around hugging everyone in sight. He was born with crabby genes. How could he say this? My interpretation is the following. Here was a person who thought to himself, I have a reputation for the being unfriendly and I know that is wrong. I have even acted that way. I want to teach the ideals of our tradition and I hope it will affect me. He was challenging himself. We don't know if he was able to act differently, but he teaches us to strive to perfect ourselves through the study of his words.

Finally, Lord, I want to expand myself to feel in my life invisible lines of connection. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has said, "Suppose there is something going on in the universe which is to ordinary everyday reality as our unconscious is to our daily lives. Softly but unmistakably guiding it. Yet, every now and then on account of some 'fluke' we are startled by the results of its presence. We realize we have been part of something with neither consciousness nor consent. (*Invisible Lines of Connection*) Let me describe such a moment. Some years ago when I was learning about Judaism, I wanted to find out my Hebrew name. My father had passed away, and I asked my mother. She had my brit milah certificate, signed by the *mohel*, on the day I was circumcised in a metal box where she kept valuable family papers. She found it, but the ink was blurry. I brought it to a Rabbi who read my name as *Yisrael Yechiel*. *Yisrael* is of course Israel and *Yechiel* means "Long live God". I wanted to know who I was named

after. I visited all of the various cemeteries where every ancestor of mine who immigrated to America was buried. I read the tombstones, in various parts of Queens and Long Island. I risked my life by driving on the Interboro Expressway, where many cemeteries are located. I did not find even one ancestor with a name even remotely resembling *Yisrael Yechiel*. I mentioned this to Beth Weiner who at the time was the cantor of my congregation in Nashville. She said it was easy. Since I had no deceased relatives to name me after and since I was born after the creation of the State of Israel, the mohel must have said to my father or my father himself must have thought, "Why not name the child, *Yisrael* - Israel and Long Live God!, in honor or the rebirth of our homeland." That sounded like a valid theory. A few years later I visited my father's brother, Jack Roth, in Miami. I told him the story about how my father or the mohel must have named me at my brit after the new State of Israel. My uncle looked me right in the eyes and said, "Ronnie, you're father never would have done that." It doesn't matter. For whatever the reason I am *Yisrael*, Israel, and I can exclaim *Yechiel*, Long live God. I am the first one in my family who walked on the land of Israel after two thousand years of exile. I am the one who found connections to God, our people and our Land. I became what I was named. I have reached a point of overflowing and connecting. I want to help you find moments when you sense those invisible lines.

I hope that some of what I have found to answer that question "Why be Jewish?" will translate into concrete programs in the future. I do not want to say exactly what they may be, but I hope that together with God's help we will be able to expand beyond our limits to feel the pain of those in need and reach out to help, to find the mitzvot of our tradition that connect us to the past and present with great meaning, to study to expand our understanding of Judaism, to feel God's presence and know of those times when our consciousness is connected to the infinite, and to find our paths converging in the land of Israel.

Why be Jewish? Because my prayer has been answered. Lord, let me, this solitary discrete individual living here, let my borders open. Let me and my spirit soar and connect to other places that will enlarge my soul, enrich my life, and allow me to cross to places that bring me such joy and meaning that I feel that I have become part of eternity. Amen.