

Our Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah focus on the figures of Abraham and Sarah. Their lives are fundamental to our tradition. Their journey forged the identity that is described and codified in Torah and Jewish practice.

Imagine that you are Abraham and Sarah, trying to forge or nurture an identity. You leave your parents' home and your birthplace to cut off ties with your past. You leave everything and travel to a new place where you redefine yourselves by creating a new way of life based on a relationship with God entirely different than any religious practice in the world around you.

As your family, as the family of Abraham and Sarah, grows, its family celebrations, traditions, and stories grows into Jewish Peoplehood. Their family rituals, customs, and favorite meals grow into a Jewish Practice. Their sense of awe at the Universe and its creator becomes Jewish Faith. They wrestle with the question of how do to define right and wrong? How to balance autonomy to make decisions about ourselves versus responsibility to others? This becomes Jewish Ethics.

Thousands of years after Abraham and Sarah set off on this journey, we, their descendants, are the inheritors of a Judaism which contains those four elements of Peoplehood, Practice, Faith, and Ethics. While traditional Judaism encourages us to embrace all aspects of our tradition, we also realize that individuals choose to live meaningful lives by selecting elements of the tradition that speak to them. We as individuals might not embrace all four aspects equally. We might not believe in the faith, we might not be interested in the practice, we might not be drawn to the peoplehood.

As a congregation, we believe that a community of Jews ought to be engaged in a lifetime journey of Jewish discovery. We believe that along the way you will slowly and continually enrich your Jewish practice, as you discover the significant and philosophy at the heart of Jewish tradition.

Our Jewish rituals and traditions can be very sticky. Sometimes rituals adhere long after the reasons have been forgotten. We believe that recovering the reasons for the rituals leads to a thoughtful and powerful renewal of Jewishness. Consider the following story:

500 years after Spanish and Portuguese Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity and ultimately expelled, finding their way to Brazil, Amsterdam, Mexico, and the American Southwest, small clusters of people are finding each other through genetic tests that indicate Jewish ancestors. They find common stories of candle-lit dinners on Friday nights; Easter dinners, minus the ham, eaten in the basement; a stew with a certain Mediterranean flavor, a certain way of slaughtering an animal, a custom of placing a stone on a grave.

An Israeli physician went to Madrid for a medical conference. He made the acquaintance of a Spanish colleague. During a break in the proceedings, his new acquaintance suggested showing him the nearby Catedral de la Almudena, the city's largest Catholic church, to which the Israeli gladly agreed. As they entered the cathedral, the Spanish doctor crossed himself and muttered something under his breath. Afterwards, the Israeli physician asked him what he had said.

"Oh," was the answer, "just some words that my family always says when we enter a church."

"What are they?"

The Spanish doctor was embarrassed. "They're not really Spanish," he said.

"But what are they?" the Israeli persisted.

"They're *sakes sakenu taeb tabenu*," said the doctor. "Just don't ask me what they mean, because I don't know. I was taught to say them as a child and I do."

The Israeli physician didn't recognize the words, but a friend to whom he told the story did. In chapter seven of Deuteronomy, we read a passage regarding Canaan's idolatrous inhabitants:

“The graven images of their gods you shall burn with fire, . . . for they are an abomination to the Adonai your God. Neither shall you bring an abomination [*to'evah*] into your house . . . but you shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abominate it, for it is a cursed thing.” [Deuteronomy 7:26] “You shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abominate it” in Hebrew is *Shakets t'shaktsenu v'ta'ev t'ta'avenu*—the very same *sakes sakenu taeb tabenu* of the Spanish doctor!

There are many stories about Spaniards, as well as Latin Americans and Hispanics in the American Southwest, practicing strange customs that are, unbeknownst to them, relics of Jewish life from the period of the Spanish Inquisition and before. A Jewish family in Inquisitorial Spain converts to Catholicism under duress while continuing to observe Judaism in secret. To keep its neighbors from suspecting its conversion of being a ruse, it regularly attends church services, which causes it shame and guilt for betraying its ancestral religion. There is one thing it can do, however, to ease its conscience. Each time it enters a church, it whispers *shakets t'shaktsenu veta'ev t'ta'avenu*, “Thou shalt utterly detest it and thou shalt utterly abominate it,” thereby proclaiming its loyalty to Judaism and letting God know that it is acting under protest and has not forgotten God's commandment from Deuteronomy 7.

Time goes by. The years pass. At some point, after several generations or several centuries, the descendants of the converted family become sincere Catholics who no longer remember their Jewish roots. When they now cross themselves upon stepping into a church, they do so in piety and reverence. Yet one thing has remained with them: the mysterious words they were taught by their parents to say at the church door. They no longer pronounce these words correctly. They no longer know what they mean. They would be shocked if they did know, for they naturally assume them to be an affirmation, in a cryptic language they do not understand, of their Catholic belief. *Sakes sakenu taeb tabenu*: a devout Catholic family's heirloom declaration of faith! Remarkable!

I marvel at the power of a religious ritual that endures over time, the stickiness of a ritual which the family cannot shake off. You participate in Rosh Hashanah services and other aspects of Jewish life because there are selected aspects of our ritual which you find sticky. You are a descendant of that Abraham and Sarah I mentioned earlier that forged a new path and a new religion and passed it on, through hundreds of generations, to you.

I want to invite you to spend time this year digging into Peoplehood, Practice, Faith, and Ethics. I want to unpack the stickiness of our rituals and practices, our sense of peoplehood, our faith, and our ethics. We'll have groups meeting on Sunday mornings, Thursday afternoons, and the occasional Thursday evening to engage in a program called Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism. Watch the synagogue email or newsletter for details and information about signing up. The curriculum comes from the Shalom Hartman Institute, a highly regarded institute of Jewish thought and education serving Israel and North America. The curriculum is pluralistic and rigorous and thoughtful. The goal is to engage you and provoke you to think seriously about the big questions at the heart of Jewish tradition. Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism presents our customs in a way which will invite you to make considered choices for yourself. Each lesson will be self-contained, so you can come in at any time and there is no commitment to participate in the entire series of classes. I just want you to dip your toe in and try it out. You can pick and

choose from the topics that intrigue you. It's a new year, a time to focus on new projects, invest in renewing yourself. Rosh Hashanah is about examining and caring for your inner life. Abraham and Sarah changed themselves and changed the world. I guarantee that when you immerse yourself in the richness of Jewish Peoplehood, Jewish Practice, Jewish Faith, and Jewish Ethics, you will change yourself and the way you think. You will live a richer life. And maybe you, too, will change the world, or at least your small piece of it.