

Part 1

One of the cutting edge academic pursuits in the United States is about identity and identity formation. Who are we? How is our identity formed? Is it stagnant or does it change? How does our self-perception affect how we act in the world? Is identity predetermined by genetics and family origin or is it learned by our environment as we grow and mature? Can we self-select our identities or does a group confirm identity on us? Am I Jewish because my parents are or because I choose to be? Can I decide if I am Jewish or does the Jewish community define who is Jewish? In many ways, this discussion of identity has huge effects on the Jewish community as it does our society as a whole.

Tonight I would like to offer three mini-sermons that I promise will not add up to more than one. At its very core the High Holy Days are about returning to our core self-that pure essence that defines who we hope we will become. Central to that search are questions about Gd, Judaism, the Jewish community, and the meaning of life. Why do I matter and what matters to me? Or even more basic questions like who am I to me? How do I understand myself? Am I proud to be me? Am I proud to be Jewish or a ger toshav, a non-Jewish member of the Jewish community? Do I think of myself as a Jew? What does being Jewish mean to me? Many of you have heard of the Pew study put out in Oct. 2013 by the Pew Research center, a national fact-finding think tank. At the beginning much was written about the horrors of the findings. Only 30% of Jews belong to congregations. Only 20% belong to Jewish organizations. 44% of all Jews do not donate to Jewish causes. 50% of all Jewish children are not receiving some kind of Jewish education. Only recently have people been examining the challenges as well as the causes for celebration and more important, what can we do differently to address those challenges? For the Pew only reports data-it does not make policy recommendations. That is our job.

According to the recent Pew Study 94 % of all Jews say they are proud to be Jewish. 70% are Jewish with religion as being important. 62% say Judaism is a matter of Jewish culture. 80% say Judaism is an important part of their life.

When we, the majority of American Jews, place ourselves in a bubble and answer honestly about who we are, we define ourselves as proud Jews, enjoying our Jewish heritage and culture. Not because there are walls locking us in, but rather because we have seen the other appreciated and respected alternatives and chosen to honor Judaism. Another new Pew study entitled “How America Feels about Religious Groups”, placed Jews as having the warmest feelings toward their own religion. And yet every Rosh Hashanah we are asked to look deeper, probe harder and search for more. If we were to answer the following questions honestly, what would the answers be? Am I happy with how I practice Judaism? Am I happy with CJC? What would the answers be? What disappoints me? What is missing? What could I do differently? As it is written in Deuteronomy, “I have placed blessings and curses before you. Choose to be a blessing.”

How can you choose to be a blessing if you do not know, at your core, what your spiritual life needs? As we continue in the service feel free to ponder questions like, “What about being Jewish or a member of the Jewish community am I proud of? What am I missing? What could be better? How can I start to address these important aspects of my identity?”

In a moment we are about to recite the Barachu on pp. 62, a prayer that begins with “Blessed is the one who is blessed.” Do I live a life of blessing? Do I know what a life of blessing would look like? For tonight I am here, alive, isn’t that itself a blessing worth celebrating?

Please rise.

Part 2

As many of us know, identity might be self-declared, but it is rarely developed in isolation. Some of our identities are inherited. Others we discover. The question of how much of identity is formed based on our genetics or our environment is an old argument that has never been settled. But it is clear that some portion of being Jewish has to do with the family we came from and the families we create. For Jews by choice, the source of their Jewish identity might not be their family of origin but often, though not always, their home of origin has influenced significant pieces of their spiritual search and spiritual identity if not being Jewish in specific.

As children our task is to sift through our parents' life keeping those aspects that enrich and strengthen us, learning from those which do not. As teens and young adults, we experiment with different rituals and practices, are influenced by peers and life's adventures. As adults, partners and parents, we are entrusted with the task of creating our own family's identity based not only on our individual needs, but also the individual needs of our family members. Not an easy task if you ask me. For some of us, being Jewish has been a unifying force in both our families of origin and families of choice. For others, it has been filled with tension. Statistically, 58% of all American Jews have chosen non-Jewish partners. 39% of children in a household of one Jewish parent are not being raised Jewish. Thankfully 61% are being raised Jewish. As a parent, the question becomes, "is raising a Jewish child a decision I make or is that a decision I leave up to him/her?"

Not that I can control what my child does no matter how important it might be to me. As a parent of two teens and one tween, I am reminded daily of how little say I have and how much say I have both at the very same time. Have we as a family ever sat down and talked about our religious identity? Where Gd, the sacred holiness resides? Do we debate Jewish rituals and what form they could take? Are there Jewish books, music, CDS used in our home? Do we place ourselves in social settings where we will meet other Jews?

Has our Jewish education stopped at the age of 13 or continued throughout our adulthood? Are people happy to see us at the High Holy Days because it is the only time we are present or do we participate throughout the year? Do we remember Shabbat on a weekly basis or just when reminded? What does being Jewish mean to me? What does it mean to us? Is it a religious, ethical or cultural identity or a mixture of all the above? Do you know that 69% of all Jews say being Jewish is about leading an ethical and moral life? What does that mean void of the religion that created that ethics? Do we learn from Judaism when confronted with contemporary challenges or only rely on secular wisdom? How do we determine what Judaism teaches about the many different ethical dilemmas that face us every day? Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan wrote that The Past Has a vote. How can Judaism have a vote if we do not learn what Judaism teaches?

In a moment we are going to recite the prayer Tiku Shofar on pp. 98. This prayer announces the blowing of the shofar tomorrow morning. What could be more archaic than hollowing out a ram's horn and blowing it? What could be more powerful than the ongoing blow of tekia gedolah? What could be more Jewish than waiting all year for this mysterious cry? The shofar is curved, has nicks and scratches on it; each one unique in its color, shape and sound. The shofar has been created in nature and enhanced by human ingenuity. Tomorrow when we hear the shofar cry, may we remember our most sacred gift-our life - our most holy enterprise-enhancing that very same spiritual life-dare I say, that Jewish life.

Part 3

At the end of August, Jerry Kiewi emailed me an article entitled “The Optimist Movement” by Rabbi Joshua Rabin. This article described his proposed response to the previously mentioned 2013 Pew Study. In Jerry’s email he wrote that one could probably substitute Reconstructionism for Conservative Judaism and not change the meaning of the article. I would carry it a step farther and suggest one could replace Conservative with American Jewish community and not change much of the article.

Rabbi Rabin’s basic premise was that we had a choice of how we responded to the Pew Study-as a pessimist or an optimist. He quoted Professor Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of PA who wrote, “How do you think about the causes of the misfortunes, small and large, that befall you? Some people, the ones who give up easily, habitually say of their misfortunes: ‘It’s me; ...it’s going to last forever; it’s going to undermine everything I do.’ Others, those who resist giving in to misfortune, say: ‘It was just circumstances; it’s going away quickly anyway and, besides, there’s much more in life.” Rabbi Rabin was encouraging us all to be optimistic, reclaiming the hope that the American Progressive Jewish community will be revitalized not by luck or even divine intervention, but rather by us taking advantage of these contemporary challenges and meeting them head on.

As a result, he suggested we all follow his five step plan: four of which could apply to CJC as it could any conservative congregation. The first was to stop scapegoating. As he wrote, we are all in this together. Those affiliated blame the unaffiliated. Those without discretionary funds blame those with. None of this solves the problem. It just makes us all feel bad. It is a fine line between blaming and changing our behavior, but finding that fine line is exactly what working together as one community calls for. The second suggestion that he had was to learn from the two places of Jewish growth: Chabad and independent minyanim.

Instead of viewing them as stealing our congregants,---study their successes and see which ones naturally fit into our own identity of who we are and most important who we hope to become. The third was to not leave the young and emerging adults behind. For a very long time, the suburbs like Howard County or Columbia assumed that people did not live here until they were in their 30s at least. And yet for the last five years we have had a huge increase of adults in their 20s returning to Howard County. Isn't it time CJC provided events and programs geared to their needs? Finally, he suggested that we be ok with a 360 degree analysis. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about taking a good hard look at ourselves. If we continue doing the same thing, how can we expect a different result?

Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of the birth of the world, an acknowledgement that the miraculous, planet earth exists: Oxygen, water, solid land, plant life, animal life, human beings exist today here on planet earth. After spending some time this year traveling through the 1700s and 1800s, I remind myself that I am so grateful to live today in this country with all its confusing dilemmas and challenges. And with all the confusing findings of the PEW study, 78% of all Jews still celebrate Passover-a Seder over 3000years old. 62% fast on Yom Kippur, a ritual almost as ancient as the Seder. More individual Jews are reading Jewish books, attending Jewish classes, studying Judaism on line and/or taking Jewish university classes than ever before. But most, most important, for the first time, being Jewish in the United States is truly a choice.

Within Jewish prayer is a strong tendency to express gratitude. Sometimes the language is so flowery and verbose we find it sounds trite and simplistic to our contemporary ears. And yet viewing the glass as ½ full is anything but trite and simplistic; learning to appreciate what we were given and what we have accomplished gives us a positive foundation to build on. What are you grateful for? What did you accomplish this last year? Who helped you? Have you said thank you? What have I gained from the Jewish community? How has CJC fed my soul and body?

Rosh Hashanah is also about being honest with ourselves. What more is there still to do? What can I do better? Have I taken full advantage of being Jewish and a member of our Jewish community? Is there more I can learn? Have I shared my concerns or volunteered to correct the mistakes? Do I value the Jewish community enough to place it on my list of donations or is dues enough? What is my relationship to the whole?

After all, as part of tomorrow morning's service we will recite the prayer Hayom Harat Olam- "Today is the birthday of the world." Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explained "you are not fixed by your past." May we believe there are solutions. For if we do not, we know we will never find them.

The question becomes what do we choose to do? We are so glad that you have chosen to celebrate the creation of our world as we know it with us. May the creation of our Jewish world in the coming year be filled with exploration, spirituality, innovation, laughter, learning and honesty. May we actively engage in the creation of the Jewish world our children will be proud to be part of. And may we have the opportunity to be a blessing for many more years to come. And let us all say amen.

Please rise for the aleynu on pp. 1202. We will be reciting the first paragraph on pp. 1202 and the first two lines on pp. 1204 in the traditional nusah and then switch to the tune of ayn od. Please rise.