

**Rabbi Joshua Beraha - "I Am Jewish"**  
**Yom Kippur 5783 Family Service**  
**Temple Micah, Washington, D.C.**

Daniel Pearl was a journalist. Many of you will remember his story.

In 2002, Pearl followed a lead to Karachi, Pakistan where he was taken hostage by Islamist jihadists who claimed he was an American spy. Nine days later, the terrorists murdered him.

In a video filmed just before his tragic, horrifying murder, Daniel Pearl said, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish."

Twenty years later, we continue to ask— what was behind his words? What would Pearl tell us about his Jewish identity were he still alive today? But maybe a better question to ask is what do *we* understand those words to mean, because in his absence, *his* question is *ours* to consider. What does it mean to be a Jew? This is the question *par excellence* for 21st century American Jews. Who are we and what do we mean when we say, "I am Jewish"?

Here's my answer, which can be divided into three categories: ethics, God, and ritual.

**One, ethics. I am Jewish, and to be a Jew is to exist within a deeply rooted ethical system.**

As a dad, I often think about how I can raise my kids to be *menches*. I want them to learn to be morally scrupulous and to uphold human dignity. I want them to look outward and feel compelled to work for the day when all of us will sit under a vine and under a fig tree and none shall be afraid.

To be part of a Jewish community is to carry a set of morals that have been passed down for generations, that have been *lived in* through the generations. We are the inheritors of a framework for life that guides us, but also that *asks something of us*. Care for the orphan and the widow. Leave the corners of your fields for the poor. Love the stranger. Fight tyrants like Pharaoh. Cherish freedom and the responsibility it brings.

Our rabbis didn't just ask "how should we behave?", they debated the matter, and debated it some more, and spawned a conversation about human behavior that's lasted centuries. Jewish ethics has deep roots—in the human experience, and in history. These ethics shape who we are. As the theologian Byron Sherwin so eloquently put it, "Rather than concentrating on *things* of beauty, Jewish teachings focused on the creation of *people* of beauty... the goal... to create one's own life as a work of art."

## **Two, God. I am Jewish, and to be a Jew is to have a sophisticated notion of God.**

I understand many people today no longer *believe* in God, to which I say, “uh, huh, tell me more,” because in Jewish thought, belief is not central. The Israeli writer, Amos Oz, said “our story is not about the role of God, but about the role of words. God is one of those words.” Put differently, the word “God” is part of the Jewish conversation and we use “God” as a lens through which to understand our world, which is why our literature is overflowing with metaphors for God. In the book of Isaiah, God’s power is compared to the screams of a woman in active labor. Elsewhere, God is also a shepherd, a creator and destroyer. God is a parent, a liberator and lawgiver. Perhaps the best summary of the Jewish God comes when Moses asks God, “what’s your name?” and God replies *ayeh asher ayeh*, “I will be who I will be.”

Believe or don’t believe? That’s not the question. God is a symbol that stands for the human quest to make sense of what exists beyond our selves. If there’s any doctrine in the Jewish understanding of God, it’s that, as individuals, *we are not the center of the universe*. (Pause) But of course, that’s just one Jew’s opinion. At the synagogue down the street they might have a different view, which calls to mind the joke about the Jewish man who goes sailing, is shipwrecked, and lives for years entirely alone on a deserted island. When he’s eventually saved, his rescuers ask him why he hung a Star of David on a certain tree. The man replies, “That’s my synagogue. It’s where I pray.” His rescuers then ask, but what about *the other* Star of David on that tree over there? “Oh, yes,” the man says. “That’s the synagogue I’ll never set foot in.” Our sophisticated notion of God stems from the complexity of a textual tradition that’s multi-vocal and allows for my opinion, and yours.

**Three, ritual. I am Jewish, and to be a Jew is to have a wellspring of rituals that beautify our lives.** If there’s one word that captures our modern predicament it’s “untethered.” We live as if there’s no gravity to ground us. To paraphrase Leon Kass, even as we are highly educated, sophisticated in the arts and sciences, emancipated from prejudice and superstition; even as our living standards are incredibly high and we have an abundance of opportunity, we still find ourselves “more than a little befuddled about how to act and what to think.” It could be otherwise for us—I think— if we explore how our lives might find an anchor in Jewish ritual.

I love these words from Byung-Chul Han. “Rituals stabilize life.” Rituals stabilize life by turning the world into a reliable place. “They are to time what a home is to space: they render time *habitable*.”

Can you picture a highway with no lanes? This is life without ritual. Not only do rituals stabilize life, they give it direction. They are like blazed trails that show us the path of our ancestors, and the way forward. The other trails lead to a life of hyper-communication and over consumption but rituals—like the Sabbath— counter those forces like a durable levee.

The example of Shabbat is a good one, if not for its frequency (we celebrate it weekly), than because it's the Bible's gift to Western Civilization. Yom Kippur is a good one, too, a day to consider our personal, and humanity's, unfulfilled potential. What a gift, and I hear there's more.

**Ethics, God, and ritual. How to live, how to talk about living, and what to do along the way.**

These areas of thought are behind my words when I say –“I am Jewish.” (Pause)

Before I close, I want to say—I know people have their hang ups about religion. For many people today, religion has a bad name. I often think about the people who Pew calls “Jews of no religion.” Religion's bad name calls to mind the writer, Jay Martel's, satirical piece, “One Star Yelp Reviews of Heaven”? Like—*“Could use a lot more sensitivity with the intake procedures. Everyone's, like, ‘We're all so happy, we're bathed in God's grace for eternity, tra-la-la.’ I just died, man. Have a little compassion.”*

I can imagine the same for Judaism. *“Judaism— three and a half stars, mainly because it's really confusing. Are we a religion or culture? And why can't any rabbi give me a straight answer about anything? But IMHO the noodle kugel is not to be missed, and of course the matzo ball soup.”*

The thing is, of course, Jewish tradition, and how it coheres with our lives, cannot be measured in stars, or at all. Instead, our traditions have to be *lived in* and *experienced*. We're free to move around the furniture and replace a few old couches if we wish—heck, redo the floors, gut the kitchen!--but Jewish tradition will be strongest when we are able to say the words, “I am Jewish,” as if they were our last, and know for ourselves what they mean.