

**How Are You Jewish?**  
**Yom Kippur Morning**  
**September 23, 2015 ✨ 10 Tishri 5776**  
**Rabbi Hal B. Schevitz**

Last year at Hanukkah, Torah on Tap, Beth-El Zedeck's young adults group had a celebratory dinner at Shapiro's. In addition to lighting the Menorah and feasting on deli sandwiches and potato pancakes, we had a conversation on assimilation, acculturation, and how we integrate Jewish life with the larger culture in which we live. This important issue was also faced by our ancestors who lived in the Greek empire over two thousand years ago at the time of the first Hanukkah. It has become particularly relevant for Jews in America over the past several decades.

During our conversation, one young woman shared that she was recently asked by a non-Jewish friend, "How Jewish are you?"

This is an all-too-common question between Jews and non-Jews, and even among Jews themselves. On one particular occasion, I was having a conversation with a man I had just met. Upon hearing that I was a rabbi, he told me, "I'm not very Jewish," with the tone and demeanor of a person who was confessing some kind of transgression. I listened intently to his story as he told me how he never went to synagogue and had not celebrated any holidays since becoming a Bar Mitzvah.

The question "How Jewish are you?" or the statement "I'm not very Jewish" are problematic because they frame Judaism quantitatively. A Google search for the phrase "How Jewish are you?" provides links to websites that feature silly quizzes, asking a series of fact-based questions which, when completed, spit out an answer that categorically determines your level of Jewish knowledge. Don't worry, I aced them all.

A person who asks "How Jewish are you?" seems to be asking about one's level of observance, how strictly one follows Jewish ritual practice, or even one's religious movement affiliation. The question ignorantly assumes that someone who adheres to a certain standard of practice is more authentically Jewish than someone who does not.

These standards seem to focus primarily on keeping Kosher and refraining from certain activities on Shabbat. The conclusion already embedded within the question is that Orthodoxy is more valid than other expressions of Judaism.

A few months ago, someone told me that he defined himself as a "bad Orthodox Jew." This person is active in the Jewish community, celebrates the holidays with family, and attends an Orthodox synagogue. However, he admittedly drives and works on Shabbat and eats in non-Kosher restaurants. The conversation led us in other directions, but I wanted to ask him why he held fast to the "Orthodox" label. Is this a desire to adhere to his notions of what an "authentic Jew" is, even though he does not practice as such?

There is no such hierarchy in Judaism. One's Jewishness is not determined by one's level of observance, knowledge, or religious movement affiliation. It is determined by ancestry and commitment, or conversion. The answer to "How Jewish are you?" is actually quite simple: if you were born to a Jewish parent and live a Jewish life, or converted to Judaism, then you are nothing less than 100% Jewish.

This question is not adequate because it demands a simple and concise answer. Good Jewish questions should have complex answers that warrant further questions and explanation. Instead of “How Jewish are you?” let us ask the question “How are you Jewish?”

We live at a time when American Judaism is undergoing serious changes. The Holocaust is becoming a more distant memory. We are splintering over how we view Israel and her constant struggle for peace. Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism are on the rise around the world, and on college campuses here at home. Jews of the millennial generation attend Jewish institutions with less frequency, but still crave spiritual fulfillment and a moral compass. Now, more than ever, we need to reevaluate how we construct and present our identity.

For hundreds of years, we were defined as “the other.” Separated into our own communities, we were able to practice Judaism in an insular way that allowed for continuity. Over the last two centuries, that has changed dramatically. The greatest gift the Jewish community received in America was the opportunity to fully participate in its civic and economic life, despite being a numerical and cultural minority. This has raised the continual challenge of having to determine who we are on our own terms.

How are you Jewish? There are no simple answers, only the invitation to exploration. Being Jewish is a complex matrix of ancestry, choice, belief, ritual practice, cultural participation, community engagement, and possession of a body of knowledge. The Jewish People are not just an assembly of believers, but a community of doers, and Judaism is the doing. It is the way we express our cultural and religious behaviors and beliefs.

Each of us lives out our Judaism in different ways. Some make synagogue and ritual the center of their Jewish life. Others are dedicated to Jewish communal organizations. There are those who are committed to social justice and improving the lives of those who live in the greater Indianapolis community. Many connect to Judaism primarily through their advocacy for the state of Israel. Still others find Jewish pleasure in eating bagels and lox on Sunday mornings, or playing softball in our community’s summer softball league. For many of us, all of these play some part in how we are Jewish.

Last night, in his sermon on forgiveness, Rabbi Dennis shared with us the story of the altercation and later reconciliation of Juan Marichal of the San Francisco Giants and John Roseboro of the Los Angeles Dodgers. During a game on the afternoon of August 22, 1965, while standing in the batter’s box, Marichal’s ear was clipped by a ball that catcher Roseboro threw back to the pitcher.

This morning, I would like to share a story about the pitcher on the mound that afternoon, and the choice he made later that same season. The pitcher was Sandy Koufax.

This Yom Kippur marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sandy Koufax’s decision not to pitch the first game of the World Series. Game 1 was scheduled for October 6, 1965, to be played in Minnesota against the Twins. Koufax was the best pitcher in baseball that year, and after the season was over, he easily won the Cy Young award, baseball’s highest pitching honor. He later became the youngest player inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Koufax was already a hero to Dodger fans and Jewish kids, but his decision 50 years ago made him an American Jewish Icon, and an image of Jewish pride in a larger American culture. For decades, he was the benchmark for Jewish guilt on the High Holy Days: “If Koufax could sit out Game 1 of the World Series, surely you can miss a day of work or school to come to services.”

There have been several myths created among the Minneapolis Jewish community, each claiming that Koufax attended their synagogue that Yom Kippur. The truth is that he probably did not go to services at all, but rather stayed in his hotel room. He was a shy and modest person, and did not want to draw attention to himself.

In an interview with ESPN in the year 2000, Koufax said, "There was no hard decision for me...It was just a thing of respect. I wasn't trying to make a statement, and I had no idea that it would impact that many people."

Koufax pitched Game 2 of the Series, where he and the Dodgers lost 5-1. He threw a complete game shut-out in Game 5, and another shut-out in Game 7 as the Dodgers won the Series and Koufax earned the Most Valuable Player award. Despite his dominant performance, Koufax is remembered not for those games he played, but for the game he chose not to play 50 years ago at this season.

Since I began teaching religious school fifteen years ago, I have asked the students on the first day of class, "What did you do over the summer that was Jewish?" Most students share ritual practices like lighting candles or preparing for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some tell me they went to Jewish summer camp, eager to share because they also say that they kept kosher for a month and went to services every day, practices that are not part of their regular home routine.

Every year that I have done this exercise, there is at least one student who shares something different. This year's seventh graders followed the same pattern. One said, "I visited a nursing home. That's Jewish too, right?" It made my day.

Visiting the sick or feeding the hungry are not usually the first things many of us think of when it comes to living a Jewish life. But actions like these, interpersonal mitzvot, are at the core of what it means to be Jewish. We need to expand the way we perceive our Jewish actions and the language we use to describe them. Chances are, we are behaving Jewishly in many ways, but not identifying their Jewish context.

For example, when we make a donation or give to a charity, many of us say we do it because it is the right thing to do. Instead of calling it "charity," let us use the term "Tzedakah," which literally means "the right thing to do." By being attentive to the way we speak, we can see how Judaism informs our actions in ways we might not have realized.

There is an important term that we have ceded to the Orthodox and jettisoned from the lexicon of liberal Judaism: Halakhah. It is usually translated into contemporary English as "Jewish law," but that is a major misunderstanding of the word. The term "law" appears cold and impersonal. Following the law means doing something that is required of us to avoid punitive measures. It does not necessarily enhance our experiences, give us meaning, or move us to live better lives.

Halakhah actually means "walking." It is derived from a verse in the Torah that exhorts us to walk in God's ways. To walk in God's ways means to be compassionate and merciful as God is compassionate and merciful. A Jewish legend says that "walking in God's ways" means to live according to God's attributes, and cites stories from the Torah of how God clothed the naked, visited the sick, comforted mourners, and buried the dead. The prophet Micah reminds us "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God" (6:8). It was only much later that Halakhah came to be identified with the strict performance of Jewish ritual.

The often talked-about 2013 Pew Survey of the American Jewish community presented results that, at first glance, might seem contradictory. On the one hand, when asked what is essential to being

Jewish, the top three answers were “remembering the Holocaust,” “living an ethical and moral life,” and “working towards justice.” “Observing Jewish law” was eighth out of nine.

On the other hand, seventy percent of those surveyed attended a Passover Seder, and over fifty percent fasted on Yom Kippur. Although lighting Hanukkah candles was not in the survey, it is still one of the most widely celebrated rituals. While observing Jewish law is no longer considered an essential piece to being Jewish, the observance of certain rituals and customs remains as vital to being Jewish as living a moral life.

Halakhah means walking a path of meaning and purpose, living a life that works to make the world around us a better place and tuning in to the sacred moments and rhythms of our lives. Halakhah is not a fixed system of practice but a continuous journey that we can shape, and will lead us to discovery and purposeful living.

Both Jews and non-Jews alike often ask, “What do Jews believe?” Unlike Christianity and Islam, which have a more fixed doctrine or creed, Judaism rejoices in different understandings of God and varied interpretations of our most important foundational stories. Ours is a tradition in which beliefs do not exist as abstract articles of faith, but are evident in, and informed by, our values and our actions.

We believe in justice, and are called to act justly. We believe in compassion, and are called to act compassionately. We also believe in the power of rituals to connect us to our people and God, and so we cherish ritual. A Hasidic teaching suggests that the word “mitzvah” is not derived from the Hebrew for “command,” but rather from an Aramaic word that means “to work together.” Doing mitzvot, then, is the way to connect with other people and with God.

Where to start in walking the path of a meaningful Halakhah? It has been said that 95% of life is showing up. Beth-El Zedeck offers many opportunities to show up and engage in Jewish learning and practice. I encourage you to look at our adult and family education brochure, which features a wide variety of offerings for all levels and interests. Rabbi Dennis’ adult questions/mature answers, Cantor Melissa’s Holy Rollers, my Shabbat morning Torah Study, and Rabbi Sandy’s Judaism and the arts program are just a few of these.

Talk to your children and grandchildren about what they are learning and doing in religious school. Those in the post-college, pre-children demographic are invited to join our monthly Torah on Tap events where we engage in candid conversation about Jewish perspectives on issues facing young adults in the world today. Show up at community gatherings hosted by the JCRC or the Federation. Become involved in civic and interfaith opportunities. These are but a few ways to enter this year’s path, your journey into Halakhah.

Yom Kippur concludes this evening with Neilah, the only time in our yearly liturgy for this service. As the sun is setting on this very long day, we dim the lights and raise our voices one final time in the hope to start anew. It is one of my favorite moments. Neilah means “closing,” and it alludes to the closing of the High Holy Days’ “gates of repentance.”

But Neilah has another meaning – to put on one’s shoes, as in “to buckle,” or “to tie laces.” As the day comes to an end and those symbolic gates begin to close, let us put on our shoes with intention, lace them up with purpose, and resolve to take those first steps on our new path in the year ahead. The Halakhah we create; the path we walk; the journey of discovery we take; these are the answers to the question: “How are you Jewish?”

G’mar Chatimah Tovah – May you be sealed for good in the New Year.