

**This Is Who I Am**  
**Rosh Hashanah First Day**  
**September 10, 2018 ✪ 1 Tishri 5779**  
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During the past year there has been an explosion of articles and books on the subject of identity. "Who am I?" "To What do I Belong?" "Who is a true American? A true Christian? A true Jew?" are questions at the heart of the identity politics that saturate our society on the right and on the left, and complicate our ability to understand and get along with one another. Religion, country, political party, class, gender, color, ethnicity, culture... are topics around which we not only circle the wagons, but argue vehemently, often claiming victimhood or superiority.

In making our case, we create forced choices, forgetting that most identities are complex and nuanced; that modern nationality can make room for many cultures, faiths and ethnicities. We forget that being human is the most multifaceted of identities and that we are all fundamentally in need and in search of the same things.

Identity is under attack today by globalization, the internet, automation, mass migrations, poverty and class conflicts, gender and sexual politics, competing nationalism and tribalism, and the list goes on. How can faith, nationality and shared humanitarian concerns help us to shape identities that enrich us without splitting us apart; that affirm our particularism without fragmenting our universal humanity?

To this concern, I address my High Holy Days' sermons this year. On Yom Kippur eve I will talk about "This is Who we Are." This morning I would like to tell you about "This is who I am."

As Sandy and I travelled through France and The British Isles this summer, we sensed the historic and ever present antagonisms that still afflict much of the world. Standing in awe at the beaches of Normandy and visiting the American Cemetery and memorial in Coleville-Sur-Mer, we lamented at how much our world had forgotten the lessons of the Second World War, the sacrifices of D-Day, the tragedy of the Holocaust. It was overwhelming to learn that 350,000 Allied personnel took part in the D-Day invasion. Of the 156,000 troops who landed on Normandy's beaches, approximately 9,000 were casualties on June 6, 1944. By the end of the campaign, there were over 50,000 dead, 30,000 of these, American. The Normandy American Cemetery holds the remains of over 9,300 heroes and memorializes over 1,500 on the Walls of the Missing.

A few days later in our itinerary we stopped in Belfast. The civil conflict is formally over, but the remnants of resentment and bitterness weigh heavily in the air of this Northern Ireland capital. Catholics and Protestants fly different flags, live in different neighborhoods, send their children to different schools and close gates at nighttime to residential areas separating the religious and ethnic communities.

The recent anti-Semitic vandalism at our sister congregation, Shaarey Tefilla, was a painful reminder that bigotry and hatred exist in our backyard.

In our nation, partisanship increasingly segments our society. Polarization, accusation, acrimony, fill the air. Attacks on the press and on the probity of judicial investigations have raised concerns about the importance of process and veracity as pillars of our society.

The rejection of allies and the embrace of foes and ideologies at odds with American values raise fears across the partisan divide that our moral and democratic moorings are at risk.

This summer's separation and incarceration of immigrant parents and children, was devastating and degrading of our ideals as a nation. Hundreds of children remain separated. Now, the status of even legal immigrants is questioned.

In the Middle East, religious and political divisions exist not only between Israelis and Palestinians. Iran threatens the security of the region and the world. The Syrian civil war embroils Iran, Russia and calls us to caution.

In Israel, the new Nation-State law passed narrowly by the Knesset defining Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish people, has been described by President Reuven Rivlin as "bad for the State of Israel and bad for the Jews" as it challenges the democratic and inclusive nature of the country. The stranglehold of Orthodoxy over the State's political and religious life causes internal strife and has brought tremors to Israel-Diaspora relations.

Some years ago, a prominent Indiana politician, now in higher office, defined himself as "Christian, Conservative and Republican, in that order." Today, in light of what we are experiencing globally, nationally and in the Jewish world, I would like to invite you to reflect with me on what terms and themes define or describe who you are.

(It is said that in presenting his credentials to Prime Minister Golda Meir, Henry Kissinger identified himself as: "I am first an American, then the Secretary of State and then a Jew." Golda Meir responded, "Well, fortunately for you Mr. Kissinger, here in Israel we speak Hebrew and go from right to left.")

Today, I offer you the following template of my identity: "I am a Jew, an American, and a humanist – in no specific order." These are not hierarchical or exclusive categories, rather they are overlapping and reinforcing spheres of identity that enhance, refine and complement one another.

Allow me to reflect on each of these terms: "Jew," "American," "Humanist."

**I am a Jew.** Judaism is my family's legacy and my chosen spiritual path and heritage. It was compelling enough that at an early age I decided to pursue the rabbinate as a vocation, career, and lifestyle. Judaism's wisdom and values, customs and traditions, rhythms and cycles, afford me the personal, familial and communal context to be who I am and share my life with others.

I do not regard Judaism a better religion than any other. It is one path, my path, to being human. I regard any religious claim of divine election, chosenness or superiority to be a harmful and misunderstood remnant of early stages of triumphalist and immature faith. God does not play favorites. Heaven is not a gated community.

Abraham is charged to go forth and be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The prophet Malachi asserts, "Have we not all one parent, has not one God created us..." Particularism does not negate universalism. The whole is more beautiful and dynamic than the sum of its parts. Religions and cultures are ways in which we adorn and texture our humanity. Like languages, they are all part of the grammar of human expression. Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam, or Buddhism or any other faith does not inherently make us better than other humans. Rather, in trying to be better Jews, Christians, Muslims or Buddhists, we optimize our humanity.

Edmund Fleg, expressed it compellingly:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands of me no abdication of the mind.  
I am a Jew because the faith of Israel requires of me all the devotion of my heart.  
I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.  
I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.  
I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not completed: we are completing it.  
I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above the nations  
and above Israel itself.  
I am a Jew because, above all unities, Israel places the unity which is divine.

When Sandy and I were freshmen at Rabbinical Seminary, our teacher, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, challenged our class to consider what term was the most apt synonym for the concept of religion and of Judaism in particular. After a vigorous discussion, Kaplan simply said, "religion" is "responsibility," and he cited Hillel's dictum as his proof text: "If I am not for myself – who is for me. But if I am for myself alone, what am I; and, if not now, when?"

Responsibility to one self, responsibility to one's fellow human beings, and the imperative of action are the essence of religion, of the Jewish way.

This brings me to my second circle of identity – **I am an American.**

I am a Jew by birth, an American by choice. Born and raised in Panama, I came to this country to study. Here Sandy and I met and married. Here we raised our American born children who have given us beautiful grandchildren.

I became an American citizen in Indianapolis in 1987. It was a natural and easy choice. In my mind I was always an American – after all, Panamanians are also "American" – "Latino-Americanos." But it is more than nomenclature. In many cultural and linguistic ways, I am still a "Latino." I still balance my checkbook and do basic math in Spanish and I enjoy Panamanian and Caribbean food and Latin music.

But, it is the documents and values that inspired and shaped American democracy – the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the advocacy of civil rights and the ongoing vigilance to preserve and enhance our constitutional rights of equality and freedom, that I treasure. These values are consonant with my understanding of Judaism – a Judaism grounded in ancient history but enriched by the Enlightenment that gave birth to Jewish Emancipation in Europe and to the Jewish experience in this land, which in the famous words of George Washington, “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” American Jews have fought for the preservation of these ideals so very threatened today by nativist and populist politics that place race, power and privilege above equality, generosity and fairness.

The historic sites, beaches and cemeteries of Normandy that we visited this summer were powerful symbols not only of the battles of D-Day and the armed conflict of the Second World War, but of the values of liberty and democracy, of heroism and altruism that we seem to take for granted. Standing at Omaha Beach and the military cemetery with its graves elegantly ornamented by white Crosses and Stars of David – I wandered and wondered with Kaddish uttered softly on my lips.

The most meaningful gifts I brought for the grandchildren from our trip were pebbles from the shores of Omaha Beach – monuments drifted in by the sea in solemn remembrance of those who gifted their lives to a future of hope. Vigilance is the least that can be asked of us to honor their selfless patriotism and the promise they bequeathed. I have seldom felt more intensely than that day at Normandy what Rabbi Kaplan meant when he said that we live in “two civilizations, the American and the Jewish.” They are ours not just by inheritance, but to protect and enhance.

On the eve of the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11/2001, when these ideals came under attack, I proclaim: I am proud to be an American and a Jew. My loyalty to America and to Judaism can be expressed in similar ways:

“America, right or wrong!  
Judaism, right or wrong!  
When right, to keep them right;  
When wrong to make them right.”

America, Judaism, and for that matter, any identity we cherish, are not abstract realities out there to which we simply conform. They are what we, along with others, make of them and what they, in turn, make of us.

Finally, I am a **humanist. A liberal, secular, humanist.**

There was a time when the word “liberal” was worn as a proud label, and when the terms “secular,” and “humanist,” embodied societal values of honor and dignity. Now, “Liberalism” has become a closet designation, a political liability. It is time to reclaim and to redeem these terms. They are not epithets of derision but badges of honor.

A liberal humanist is one who cherishes freedom of thought, who believes in the use of science and reason for the benefit of humanity. A liberal is one who believes in the human potential for improving the conditions of life for all. Liberal means advocate of human rights; liberal means generous, free from narrow prejudice.

“Liberal” is not necessarily the opposite of “conservative” in the intellectual or religious sphere. My Conservative rabbinic mentor and a great American liberal, Rabbi Robert Gordis said that a liberal is one who believes that “all legitimate ends are compatible with one another.” Liberal denotes openness – an open mind, an open heart, an open hand.

Writing in 1980, Leonard Bernstein lamented that the term “Liberal” was becoming soiled by a “... backward-looking impulse toward tyranny.” He reminds us that “Liberal” comes from the Latin “Liber,” which means “free.” “Liberal” gives us the word “Liberty” – the heart of the American experiment. Three decades ago, Bernstein wondered about the possibility of the return of tyranny to our nation. “Tyranny? In our free, beautiful, democratic republic? Yes. It is possible and even probable, which is why we must constantly guard against it.” In the Jefferson monument in our nation’s capital are inscribed these words: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal vigilance against every form of tyranny....” Let us never abdicate that vow.

Secular humanists are portrayed in today’s politics as villains who encourage pornography, abortion and the separation of church and state, enemies of the family and of America’s most cherished patriotic values. My teacher, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, wrote that “secularism” is not a rejection of religious faith. “Secularism” is fully consonant with the best of Jewish religiosity and faith.

The word secular means “of this world; of this time.” The God of Genesis proclaims this world to be good, very good. Under Greek thought, religious philosophy became dualistic. It separated “body” from “soul,” this world of flesh and sin from an ideal “world to come.” Yet, in the best of our Jewish religious heritage, the secular (worldly) and the religious (spiritual) remained inseparable.

*Tikkun olam*, means making this world a better place to live in this *saeculum* – this age. Mending the world is a “secular” concern at the heart of religious faith. Judaism bridges the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the material in an integrated lifestyle and worldview.

Lately, when I'm given to worry about the state of our country, the future of the Jewish people and of this world of ours, I am reminded of the words of Walt Whitman over a century ago (Maria Popova, [Brainpickings](#), 7/26/2018):

"Though...I fully comprehend the absence of moral tone in our current politics and business, and the almost entire futility of absolute and simple honor... against the ...greed of worldly wealth ..., I still do not share the depression and despair ... which I find possessing so many good people."

Whitman invites us to take a "telescopic," long-term view of progress and social change." He confidently believed that: "In nothing is there more evolution than the American mind. Soon it will be fully realized that ... the state cannot flourish (nay, it cannot exist,) without..." "the sane, eternal moral and spiritual- esthetic attributes" of American democracy.

Whitman challenged us to realize that the advance of democracy is neither linear nor guaranteed. It takes place in leaps and backward steps; in ebbs and flows. But, if we are vigilant, it advances nonetheless. The novelist Zadie Smith reminds us that "Progress is never permanent, will always be threatened, must be redoubled and reimagined if it is to survive."

So, once again I ask each of you to think of what are the terms, the ideals and values that define you, to which you can say – "This is who I am." We need a sustained, respectful, thoughtful conversation that will renew, heal and strengthen us as individuals, as people, as a nation.

Camus once remarked, "In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer." As we transition from this summer into a New Year, I commend to you a Judaism and an American patriotism that testify to the best of humanist values:

- To believe that we humans are partners of the divine in the ongoing process of creation;
- to believe that our highest human ideals can be realized in this world;
- to believe that we have the power to transform "what is" into "what ought to be;"
- to believe that democracy and liberty's values are redeemable and redemptive...

These are my heartfelt wishes for this New Year.

Shanah Tovah!