

Am I a Jew?

My father, who passed on to me his strongly romantic sense of Jewish history, loved to tell this story about his friend, Thomas Ryan. Ryan was a devout Catholic, the son of an Irish father, and a Mexican mother. He and my Dad were both lawyers, and became friends because they enjoyed discussing religion. They had a mutual respect for each other's traditions. But the real glue of the relationship was Ryan's fascination with Judaism. He loved to ask questions about Jewish beliefs and practices. Ryan was an avid student of history, and he began to suspect that there were Jewish roots on his mother's aristocratic Mexican side of the family; he told my father stories of his grandmother occasionally pointing disparagingly to the oil painting of an ancestor that hung on the wall, referring to him as "the old Jew." Ryan discovered, in his investigations, that his mother's family name was common among *marranos*, Jews who had been forcibly converted in 14th and 15th century Spain, but who held fast to their Jewish heritage in secret. It was these crypto-Jews who were persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition, which doggedly sought to uproot their Jewish practices for centuries, both on the Spanish peninsula, and in the Spanish controlled lands of the New World, including Mexico. Thin evidence; but it was good enough for Thomas Ryan, who converted, in order to reclaim his Spanish Jewish heritage. He lived the rest of his life as an Orthodox Sephardic Jew, a leader in the Spanish Portuguese synagogue, and occasionally, an author of scholarly monographs on Sephardic Jewish history. By the end, Thomas Ryan tended to look down his nose at my father, who was, by comparison, only of lowly Ashkenazic descent!

Telling this tale of the return to Judaism of a single Jew, who crossed the distance of hundreds of years in order to rejoin the Jewish people, always left my father a little choked-up and misty-eyed.

And it's a story that resonates today, on Yom Kippur: Many Mahzor commentaries draw a direct connection between Kol Nidrei and the *marranos* of the middle ages. The prayer is actually many centuries older; but the need to annul one's religious vows of the past year had particular significance for the countless oppressed who were compelled by anti-Semitism to live a life of hiding in plain sight; Jews forced to forswear their allegiance to Judaism at the point of a sword.

Furthermore, Yom Kippur itself asks each of us to make a journey of return, to ask ourselves, what kind of Jewish life have I been living? On the one hand, we begin the Yamim Noraim, on Rosh Hashanah, with the universal theme of creation, and we focus on our individual responsibility as God's partners in maintaining the world. But on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, I think we feel a more particular tug in our guts, too, the pull of covenant, Jewish peoplehood, and of shared destiny. Through the rest of the year, we may choose to define ourselves in a variety of ways: by our professions, or education and social class, by our politics, or by our citizenship; but tonight, we are asked to let these layers of identity fall away in order to reveal ourselves, more fully, as Jews, as part of a community of Jews. The prayers of confession over which we will repeatedly beat our breasts this day- the *Al Het* and the *Vidui*- are confessions of the community; the ancient ritual of atonement that we retell points towards the salvation of the Jewish people; and before blowing the shofar at the end of the fast, we declare, "*l'shanah ha ba'ah b'yirushalayim- Next Year in Jerusalem.*"

The Rabbis make the point with the following pun: Why is Yom HaKippurim, the day of Atonements, a day “Ke Purim- like Purim?” Because on Purim, we put on masks, but on Yom Kippur, we take them off. Of course, I’m not saying that we are *marranos*, hiding our Jewish identities and pretending to be something that we are not, but it is human nature to wear a mask, to present ourselves to the world in a way that doesn’t always match who we are inside. Sometimes it’s because we are not living up to the best that we can be, and so we pretend to others, and to ourselves, to be otherwise. That’s certainly a mirror that Yom Kippur holds up to us today.

But, sometimes we present ourselves in a certain way because we think we need to in order to be accepted. And so we conform to certain social pressures in the public space. For example, in some workplaces, khakis have replaced the gray flannel suit as a uniform, but it is a uniform, never the less. Some office cultures encourage displaying family pictures and conversation about the kids. Others discourage it. We take our cues, and we act accordingly.

And we apply the same calculus to our being Jewish. Ask yourself the following questions: If you own a Star of David necklace, or a Mezuzah, or Chai, how do you calculate when it is appropriate to wear it, or when not? When the Jewish holidays fall on weekdays, do you consider going to work rather than antagonizing co-workers with what you fear may be perceived as an endless demand of Jewish concessions? If you became more religiously observant, would you feel comfortable wearing a kippah at work, or at the supermarket?

Most of us know at least one person whose family changed their name a couple of generations ago, either to try to slip past the medical school quotas of that time, or to advance in a field that was not friendly to Jews, or to simply sound more American. This might even be your story, or

the story of someone in your family. Given how the times have changed, if it were you, would you consider reclaiming your original family name? Why or why not? In short (and here, everyone will draw his or her own line), is there ever such a thing as “too Jewish”?

Journalist Ted Ross shares his own, rather extreme story of living as a modern day *marrano* in his rather compelling recent book, called, Am I A Jew? The subtitle is “Lost Tribes, Lapsed Jews, and One Man’s Search for Himself.” When Ross’s (originally Rosenzweig) parents divorced, he and his brother left their home in New York City to live with their mother. She moved them to Mississippi where they would begin a new life, and where she, a doctor, would practice in a hospital. But here’s the interesting thing. Ross’s mother decided that in their new life, they would stop being Jewish. If anyone asked, Ross was instructed to say that he was Unitarian. He was nine years old. Ross’s mother sent him off to Christ Episcopal Day School, where he studied the Bible, sang in the choir, and even took communion. She eventually remarried, and converted to the Episcopal Church. Ross did not formally convert, but for the next few years, he dutifully kept his secret from his school friends. It was, however, a double deception. On his trips back to New York for vacations, including the occasional Seder with his Dad’s family, he was under orders from Mom not to make any mention of the double life he was living outside of New York. And so, until moving back to New York in high school, he lived this dual life: fake Christian in Mississippi, a secular Jew in Manhattan.

Years later, Ross asked his mother why she decided to take the path that she did. Her parents were both Jews; her father had fled Germany in the late thirties. He didn’t talk about it very much, but when she was twelve years old, she read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. “That was it,” she told her son. “I did not want to be a lampshade. I did not want my kids to be

lampshades. I knew I could not prevent it for me, but at least I could prevent it for my grandchildren.”

“But,” Ross countered, “you were living in an environment where being Jewish wasn’t risky at all.” She replied, “It was post- World War II. I felt that it was risky. I felt that it could happen again. It happened with Torquemada, it happened in France- every western society has killed Jews.” “But that sort of obsession with it, that belief that it will happen again, you understand that that’s totally Jewish, right? That is exactly what Jews think.”

“Ok,” she responded, “so I decided to go in a different direction with it.”

She told her son that once she made the decision, she never looked back. It was that easy. In America, you can change your identity with the seasons as easily as swapping out your fall coat for a winter one.

Unlike his mother, however, Ross never stopped feeling Jewish. But, he asks, what kind of a Jew is he? He is a religious skeptic, and does not adhere to any traditionally Jewish behaviors. Married twice, his first wife was Christian, his second wife is a Buddhist, and as of yet, his two children have no religion. So in what way is he Jewish? What community would recognize him as their own?

To answer that question, Ross set out on a journey that took him literally around the world, from Brooklyn to Jerusalem. Let me tell you about just two of the out-of –the –mainstream groups that he investigated. His first stop was Santa Fe New Mexico, where he travelled in order to meet a community of crypto-Jews. These are Christians who have come to accept that many of the customs that they observe in private, such as lighting candles on Friday night, or putting stones on tombstones, are remnants of a Jewish past that have survived the passage of centuries.

Quite possibly, their ancestors were refugees from Mexico, who arrived in pueblo territory in about 1600, in order to escape the Inquisition. When the Inquisition followed them there, their Judaism once again went underground, but not completely forgotten. Today, many of these crypto-Jews are reaffirming the Jewish nature of their heritage, and some are formally converting back into the Jewish community. It isn't easy. It means giving up the Christian faith that they know, breaking with friends and family who may not approve, and adopting a religious practice that is foreign and not easy to master, beginning with the Hebrew language. And yet, some choose to do this. They are motivated, like Ted Ross, to claim something because it is their right; it belongs to them. Ross, who sees in these hidden Jews a reflection of his own experience, is inspired and heartened by them. Because, if they can claim Judaism for their own, then maybe he can, too. To us, I think their journey poses a challenge: How much dislocation and difficulty would we put ourselves through, if we had to, to claim our Jewish identity?

The second group that he investigated was closer to home: the unaffiliated, young, urban, mostly single Jews, who represent the main target group of some of the best funded innovative outreach efforts today. Jewish Sociologist Steven M. Cohen argues that for this demographic, Judaism “operates in a competitive marketplace for what is essentially leisure time.” Funders such as the Bronfman Foundation have responded with programs such as Reboot, whose goal is to package Judaism in hip, eye catching social events. A couple of years ago, for example, Reboot held the first Sukkah City event in Union Square, in Manhattan. Sukkah City was an architectural design contest in which internationally prominent architects were invited to design the Sukkah of the future. Now a Sukkah is a simple dwelling, partially open to the sky and temporary by design, that reminds us of both the divine protection that our ancestors felt as they wandered in the desert, as well as the field huts that gave our ancestors shelter once they were settled in the land

of Israel, as they gathered in the fall crops. A Sukkah evokes both a sense of fragility and gratitude, and, for me, at least, a direct intimation of God's presence in nature. But the twelve winning designs that were erected at Sukkah City were something else entirely: Massive contemporary works of art that would eventually be included in a coffee-table book, called: *Sukkah City: Radically Temporary Architecture for the next Three Thousand Years*. The event was a raging success, lots of young Jews gathering together, engaging partially at least with a traditional Jewish holiday that they may or may not have known or cared about before. It felt hip. It was art. It felt relevant. And it was Jewish! Ross even considered buying his own Sukkah, something his family of course had never done. Reboot's organizer, Roger Bennet put it this way: "If Judaism disappears it will be because it has stopped being meaningful to its target audience....you can't command people to be Jewish or to do Jewish stuff or to trick them into doing Jewish stuff. You can make sure that being Jewish is relevant and meaningful and speaks to its time and place. You can control that. You can't command people to return to their ghetto."

True as far it goes, but Ross recognizes, as do you and I, that Judaism has to be more than what keeps me entertained at the moment, or what I can conveniently schedule into my iCalendar on a free Sunday afternoon. If that's the kind of Judaism we are headed for, then it signals a new form of crypto-Judaism, in which Jewish identity is not driven underground by anti-Semitism, or even by Jewish self hatred; it is simply marginalized to a small corner of our consciousness by our indifference, and by our preoccupation with other things.

A serious Judaism makes demands of us. It is the lens through which we make ethical decisions, commit ourselves to social justice, bring blessing into the world. It is the framework that endows our days and years with holiness, but only if we make the commitment to mark time's passage in

our homes and as a community through our Sabbaths and Festivals. It gives us a *derech*, a path, through which our personal lifecycle events, joys and losses can be experienced in a context of community and of transcendence. It can endow our lives with a sense of purpose, spiritual connection, and obligation. It takes work and effort. In contrast, Judaism as a slickly packaged consumer product appears rather trivial.

In the course of Ross' journey, he befriends and spends Shabbat with orthodox Jews in Brooklyn and meets with Ethiopian Jews in Jerusalem. But there is no spiritual epiphany. He learned a lot about Jewish history, philosophy and practice, but in most ways, is essentially unchanged. Still an outsider looking in, Ross neither discovered a faith that could trump his religious skepticism, nor a traditional community that he could yet call his own.

As Ross concludes his story, Sukkot is approaching, and he toys again with the idea of buying a Sukkah. Still uncertain about where he fits in, he's not even sure what he would do with a Sukkah. But Ross has learned this: In the 21st century, who we are, is no longer a given. Our identity is something that we actively claim, or shed. And, even the power of the Kol Nidre melody cannot pull us back to our Jewish core unless we choose to walk through these doors to hear it.

Asking the question, "Am I A Jew," requires taking a step. Sometimes that first single step seems like crossing a chasm. And this is something that has never changed. Among my favorite verses of Torah come from Moses' final address to the Jewish people, near the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. He says: "*Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not to baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'who among us can go up and get it for us, and impart it to us that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond*

the sea, that you should say, 'who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, to observe it."

My friends, we are entering a New Year. Before the gates of Neila close, ponder what your first Jewish step into 5773 will be. Perhaps this is the year you sit in a sukkah, either your own or a neighbor's or the synagogues'. Or maybe this is the year you purchase your first etrog and lulav and celebrate the holiday here together with your family and friends, with unmitigated joy.

Make this the year that you take that Adult Education class, or join our beautiful Shabbat morning community, or volunteer for the Caring Committee, or any number of other venues here for helping both others and yourself. Or, make this the year you travel to Israel. Come with me on our Temple trip this winter and I will personally take you by the hand and introduce you to the places and people that I love.

In the end, Ross's first step is to buy a nylon, pop-up, pre-fab Sukkah, just large enough for his small patch of yard. He enters it and sits cross-legged on the ground. He waits. He listens to the ambient sounds of the city street. And then he ponders on the metaphorical homelessness that his mother subjected him to, and how this Sukkah just might represent a return to his original home. Am I A Jew? The question and the answer, Ross muses, represent "a process of continual, conscious, purposeful *becoming*." There are so many possible first steps. And whichever one you choose may lead you back to the Judaism that is yours to claim.

L'Shannah Tovah tikateivu v' tichateimu