

I had a special bond with my Auntie Lea. She was a beautiful woman, soft spoken with blonde hair and a sweet smile. She was so gentle, and I loved when she would softly caress my hands and tuck me into bed while singing soft lullabies. People used to mistakenly think I was her daughter, and I loved that. My Auntie Lea was a happy, sometimes silly child at heart who loved to be playful and would make up imaginary creatures for us kids to picture watching over us and keeping us safe. If anyone upset us, she would joke that she was going to call the mayor or take a baseball bat and go defend us—funny because we knew that soft and gentle Auntie Lea could never do such a thing. But Auntie Lea had seen terrible cruelty as a child. Born in Belgium, she survived the war as a young girl, being hidden by the nuns in a convent in Portugal. Her mother was a smooth talker and secreted her away somewhere safe, while Lea’s mother hid her own identity, staying nearby to earn money to pay for her daughter’s maintenance. Lea’s young childhood meant hiding her identity, but in young adulthood, she embraced her Jewish heritage as an immigrant (or refugee) in Montreal, taking great joy in her community and Jewish family.

I had the opportunity to go on a French exchange in grade 10 and I chose to go to Belgium, because that’s where Lea was from. I wanted to be even more connected to her. It was 1990. I lived in the very Jewish suburb of Thornhill and attended high school in Unionville, not far away. Before I left, my father suggested that I might want to leave my Jewish star at home. “They’re not so nice to Jews there,” he told me. “They were on the wrong side in World War II.” Being a wise teenager, I pooh-poohed his advice saying, “I’m proud to be Jewish. I’m not hiding it.”

After two weeks living in the small town of Chapelle-Lez-Herlaimont, the only Jew in the massive high school, and already sticking out like a sore thumb as a foreigner, my Jewish star found its way underneath my shirt. I began hiding. This was not the connection I had hoped to forge with my aunt in her country of origin, but here we were.

Today many of us are making these same kinds of agonizing choices—whether to be out and proud of our Jewish identity, or to keep it under wraps, only revealing our true selves to those whom we trust. Suddenly no matter what colour our skin, we are faced with a dilemma—to show up as our full selves, or to check our Judaism at the door. In progressive spaces, Judaism is now relegated to the context of a political standpoint on the Israel-Palestine conflict. So, to reveal oneself as a Jew necessarily means getting into a political discussion and defending Israel’s right to exist—a conversation many of us don’t want to have when we’re trying to celebrate LGBTQ+ community, or feed the hungry, or advocate for racial justice, or march for women’s rights. There is fear and guilt associated with either choice—to come out or not to come out—and so we find ourselves in a quandary. Do we risk our safety and security—physical and emotional—by revealing that

we are Jewish, or do we deny our true selves, feeling that we are betraying our people by not speaking up as Jews?

It's hard to be Jewish now, not just on university campuses but everywhere. We see Palestinian flags on lawns and wonder if that person hates Jews even though it is, of course, possible to advocate for the plight of the Palestinians while also supporting Israel and Jews. We see random people walking down the streets wearing keffiyehs and we wonder why—is this part of their religious or ethnic tradition, or a political statement? Do they care about civilians taken as hostages? Do they see my humanity? Most of us have never experienced such uncertainty and unease before. And folks express that it would be so much easier to be something else; not to have to pay attention to the rampant antisemitism; not to have to feel the pain of the war in Israel and Gaza like so many non-Jewish Canadians do, for whom it's just another news story from a faraway place.

I've been approached by students who are hiding their identities. Medical school applicants erasing all of their Jewish community-related experience from their CVs in hopes that they might still be admitted to medical school; knowing that their Judaism will count as a strike against them, but agonizing as to whether it's worth it to conceal it. People who usually wear a *kippah* in public, now covering their heads with baseball hats instead. These are real dilemmas that even my parents' generation didn't have to contend with in the same way.

With so much fear and focus on the potentially contentious aspects of being Jewish; with so many among us feeling like Judaism is a burden; I fear that in weighing our principles against our safety—which is a legitimate concern in today's world and I would not fault anyone for choosing safety above all else—what I fear, though, is that whatever we choose, the mere fact that we are forced to *make* this choice might also cause us to forget about the gifts, the goodness, and the beauty of Judaism—what we gain from it, and what we offer to the world.

So here we are—a little reminder of why we ought to be proud of our heritage, our traditions, and values. Why am I glad and proud to be Jewish?

Firstly, Judaism affirms life. In the midst of a war raging, it's important to remind ourselves (and others) of this. What does it mean that Judaism affirms life? Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg teaches that the cosmos is moving from chaos—*tohu vavohu*, a chaotic void (Gen. 1:2) in the Torah's language—to order, Shabbat in the Torah's language. He writes, "This perception of the world goes against the grain of daily human experience, in which the order we create in our lives is constantly disintegrating. In our creaturely experience, the neat, orderly desk of the morning is overrun and disheveled by day's end, while best-laid plans often go awry... Thanks to the remarkable expansion of consciousness made possible today by knowledge of physics and geology, we can see in the pattern unfolding over billions of years the emergence of an infrastructure of order that

has finally resulted in a planet capable of sustaining life, which developed into sentient life and, eventually, into human life. This insight—the operation of this trend toward ‘ordered chaos’—is what the Creation story seeks to communicate.”

We see that the world is moving from nonlife to life. With each day of creation, its complexity increases as does the complexity of living things. Living creatures don’t appear until day 5 and when they do, it’s first the swarming things in the sea, then amphibians and birds follow. Latest to appear on the scene are the land animals and then humans.

On the individual scale, our personal experience is the opposite—our existence goes from life to non-life. From order to disorder - it’s called entropy in physics. As soon as we are born, we begin to die. So how can we contend that the Jewish way is to focus on life? It’s because our tradition wants us to look at the big picture and see it from God’s perspective. “...a thousand years is like...a [brief] watch in the night,” so says Psalms. The big picture is the move toward life. Judaism insists that we move in a direction of life, order, progress, in a universe that often appears to flow the other way. We call God *melekh hafetz ba’hayim*—the Ruler who delights in life. “Life expands thanks to an unseen, hidden power of a magnitude greater than the force of death and decay, continually pumping energy into life and its nurturers. To put it into contemporary scientific language,” Greenberg teaches, “the infrastructure of reality and the interaction of natural forces, at least in this planetary system, favors life and enables it to grow and develop. This is the rhythm and balance of forces built into the Creation by the Creator.”

Why does this outlook make me proud to be Jewish? Because it is optimistic; it is affirming. It is an outlook that says no matter what is happening to me individually, the perspective we bring from our sacred tradition is vitalized and growing; it is future-focused and confident. We don’t dwell on death or seek it out as a test of our faith. Rather, we seek life. *Uvachartem ba-chayim*—therefore choose life, our Torah tells us. We are told that the commandments, the mitzvot, are for living—*vachai bahem*—that you may live by them. And the Rabbis take that Torah verse and expand on it saying, “*v’lo lamoot*” and not die by them. Thus, even in fulfilling God’s commandments, we are to embrace life at all costs.

This focus on life offers a sense of mission and purpose (my second reason that I love being Jewish), and this gives meaning to my life. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. Our People extends all the way back to Sinai and beyond—thousands of years. Our ancestors wrote and studied the same texts, uttered the same words in prayer, spoke the same language for centuries. We are grounded in an ancient tradition that is both old and timeless, worthy of preserving for all time. It is imbued with wisdom that has anchored us and has driven us forward to lives of purpose. I feel proud and blessed to be part of this ancient people that keeps renewing itself and making itself relevant in each generation. Because we are not just about looking back. Since we are focused on life, we are always looking forward and we bring our traditions forward with us into our future.

Flowing from this is the third reason that I'm proud to be Jewish—that our tradition expects us to be engaged in perfecting the world. *Tikkun olam* isn't just a trendy buzz word, it's our duty. It's not a choice. It is incumbent upon us to make this world better. We don't get to stand idly by while our neighbours bleed; we cannot remain indifferent to human suffering. We have responsibilities to one another—not just to Jews but to everyone and the whole world. This gives meaning to our lives. This gives purpose and importance to our existence. We're not just counting the days until our final birthday; we're making every day count. We are focused on life. And because we're looking at the big picture, we know that each of us doesn't have to fix everything all at once. As the Rabbis tell us: "*Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*-- It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to stop trying." As long as we are striving toward improvement, we are doing our duties. Just like on this day of Yom Kippur—we are making resolutions and plans to improve ourselves, but we know that change is gradual. It's whether we are headed in the right direction that counts.

I love that our prophetic tradition pictures a time when nobody is suffering, when there is no war or oppression, when nobody is poor or hungry or in need of any support. Our efforts today have a real effect. We change the trajectory of the world; we make a difference; we shape the future. The prophets envision a time when life will triumph as Isaiah says, "God will destroy death forever," (25:8), when unlimited prosperity will prevail, such that everyone's needs can be taken care of. We'll overcome oppression and there will be true equality under the law. Every person is infinitely valuable, so war must be eradicated. Isaiah envisions a time when we will overcome war to the point where we won't even need to keep weapons around and we'll beat our swords into ploughshares.

This Jewish vision is a hope backed up by a commitment to act. It says that ultimately, we will band together to repair the world and overcome all its ills. We collectively can overcome all sorts of sicknesses and develop cures. We can overcome inequality in society and build democratic and equal justice, but also in our personal lives, we can take every act that we have and live it on the side of life, making choices in our individual lives that support life in general. This doesn't only mean having children or adopting them, but it can mean teaching them or supporting programs that help them—and this is only the tip of the iceberg. Making choices for life also means how we care for our planet, the kinds of foods we choose to put in our bodies, the kinds of words we use to build others up rather than to tear them down. All our actions and choices are meant to point toward life and the future. Every word we speak, every action we take can either be on the side of life and quality of life, or its opposite.

Even in this terrible time of war, we are still focusing on life. We are focused on the lives of the innocent civilians stolen from their homes and from their families. We are focused on the lives of all those Israelis who live in terror of the next attack, missiles

constantly raining down on them from Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. In striking the enemy, we take pains to reduce casualties where possible, and we mourn the loss of innocent life. Daily in our prayers, we pray for the protection of our soldiers and importantly we pray, “May God give them wisdom, insight and understanding so that they **not** destroy the innocent with the wicked.” Because it is our Jewish value to focus on life. And even though The State of Israel isn’t perfect, and sometimes fatal mistakes are made, and innocent people are killed, including Jewish or Israeli ones, I am still incredibly proud to be Jewish and to be on the side of life.

A story is told ... about Louis Brandeis, a graduate of Harvard Law School, a member of the New York Bar and, ultimately, a Supreme Court Justice at a time of explicit quotas and overt discrimination against Jews in the legal profession. On the occasion of a speech before the New York Bar Association (a quite inhospitable environment) Brandeis took the podium and said, “I am sorry I was born a Jew.” His remarks were greeted by stunned silence, then scattered applause, which turned into an enthusiastic ovation. As the applause quieted, Brandeis continued, “I’m sorry I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had had the privilege of myself choosing to be a Jew.”

Because yes, it’s really hard to be Jewish right now, but it’s also really great. I get an average of two calls a week from people who want to convert to Judaism! That’s incredible! People see the beauty and magic of Judaism, and we should too.

We have some work to do to make this world safer for Jews and for all people. We need to enlist the help of others from different communities who feel the same way. Until that time, we may feel the need to protect ourselves and hide our true selves until we know that it’s safe. That’s a natural response to danger and fear. But let’s not confuse that fear for inferiority. Judaism is beautiful and meaningful and life-affirming. People jump through all kinds of hoops to join our religion and culture and community. Let us never take it for granted. It is worth choosing to be Jewish every day—because that is what we do when we walk in these doors, when we sit down at our Shabbat table, when we stand up for the oppressed, give to the poor, and march for equality. When we do these things, we are choosing to show up in this world as Jews who have hope in tomorrow, hope in life, hope in humanity, and hope that one day we will no longer have to choose between our safety and our visibility as Jews in the world.

I am so proud and excited to be your rabbi at KBI because together we are going to build a place that affirms life, joy, and goodness; that supports a Jewish life of mitzvot and Torah, love of Israel and holiness that we can all be proud of. Where we learn together in this safe space and make Jewish choices to support our ultimate values, working to make this world life-affirming for everyone, we will experience that pride and joy that is itching to show itself.

Our Judaism is not a burden. It is a gift. My Auntie Lea knew it and lived with joy and gratitude despite the hardship and fear she had experienced. She saw beauty in the world and always expressed her love to her fellow human beings. Lea used to say, “The older you get, the more life experience you have and the more confident and comfortable you feel in your skin.” She always looked ahead towards life, towards growth and hope, and we must as well.

This year of 5785, let us embrace this incredible treasure we have been given and show the world—and remind ourselves—of the beauty, goodness, and blessings that Judaism has to offer.

Kein y’hi ratzon.

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