

## **“Will the real Jew please stand up?”**

I want you to sit back, relax, and close your eyes. Trust me. I won't make you keep them closed for very long. But, try and close them for just a few moments. Take a deep breath. I want you to clear your mind and make a mental picture of yourself. Think about yourself and take a good hard look, with your mind, at yourself. What do you see? Whom do you see standing before you? What are your defining characteristics? Do you like what you see? Before you open your eyes, I want you to take one long last look at yourself. In your mind I want you to pick out two of the most defining things about yourself. Label them. Hold on to them. And when you are ready, slowly open your eyes, and come back to this room.

To be clear, no one thing could ever define who we are, as people. Our looks don't define us, our jobs don't define us, even our personalities aren't just the one thing that defines us. Rather, we as humans are complex and we are defined by the sum of our parts. Which makes me wonder -if you had to pick out two of the many characteristics that define you, which two did you choose? Among the myriad of parts that make up the special design that is YOU, what two jumped out the most? Did it have anything to do with being Jewish?

Being Jewish IS part of what defines you. At least, according to our 2010 world census it is what makes you different from billions of other people on this planet, at this moment in history. While here in Flushing, Queens and New York, we may feel that

Judaism is not always a minority, we are .2% of the world population. Not 2%, two tenths of a percent. We are only a mere fraction compared to the world's 31% of Christians, 23% of Muslims, 15% of Hindus, and even 16% who don't claim or affiliate with any religion at all. Being Jewish is actually a huge part of what defines us, because it is something that makes us so very different from so many other people.

And yet, Judaism is often so difficult for us to define for ourselves. There are lists and lists of ways that a Jew might classify themselves: traditional Judaism, modern orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Renewal, liberal, progressive, chabad, lubuvitch, kabbalistic, etc. etc. And even once you identify as any one of these things, the range of practices from community to community can vary so widely – practices of keeping kosher, dressing modestly, sitting separately, mitzvot as rigid laws vs. ethical guidelines. Defining our Judaism, we who are two tenths of the world's population, can be really overwhelming.

Yet, defining our Judaism is an imperative. We live in a world of classifications and systems, so that we can better understand people, so that we can process data and information as we receive it on a minute by minute basis. But, moreover, by defining who we are and what we believe in, we are better able to take pride in our Judaism. We must define it first for ourselves so that then we can accurately define it for others.

In January of 2002, the United States and much of the world was held in the grip over the fate of Daniel Pearl, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, who was missing in Pakistan. A few days after he was reported missing, a Pakistani group declared that they

had Daniel and gave a 24 hour deadline for their demands to be met. For weeks and months, the world held its collective breath as news reports, police reports, and even a trial of those suspected to be involved speculated on the outcome. Not until May of the same year, five months after his kidnapping, was Daniel Pearl's body found and identified. Eventually, a tape was released of the final moments of Daniel's life as he spoke to his kidnappers. He said, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish. I am Jewish." In his last moments in this world, Daniel recalled the pride and importance of identifying as being Jewish. In the midst of losing his life, he fought to remind us of the very core of what made him who he was – he was a Jew.

Defining your Judaism is not always as simple as recognizing that your mother and father were Jewish too and so, therefore, you are a Jew. While Daniel Pearl's words were inspiring, it is often much more complicated than talking about your lineage. For example, you may have been born to two very religious Jewish parents but you don't practice your Judaism in the same way they do. Or, you might have been born to two Jewish parents who were not religious at all and then you felt inspired in life and decided to explore your Judaism more than they ever did. You might have even converted to Judaism, recognizing a spiritual home within our 3,000 year old religion and our modern system of values, practices, and rituals. No matter what makes you Jewish, your Judaism is not necessarily defined by what you are as much as by who you are.

Less than a month ago, there was an incredibly inflammatory article written on [jewishpress.com](http://jewishpress.com) with a title that read, "It's official: You can be a Non-Jewish Rabbi."

The purpose of this article was to undermine the belief of Reform and Conservative Jews regarding their approval of patrilineal descent. Patrilineal descent is idea that one doesn't just have to be born into Judaism through their *mother's* side – having only a Jewish *father* is perfectly acceptable, too. What the author of this article did, however, was not argue the merits of Jewish law and what it says about defining someone's Judaism. Instead, he personally attacked Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, who is currently the Senior Cantor at Central Synagogue and is up for the position of Senior Rabbi when Peter Rubenstein retires this next year. Rabbi Buchdahl, you see, is the first Korean American woman to be ordained as both a rabbi and invested as a cantor. Her mother, however, is not Jewish. And in the eyes of this author, it means that she herself is anything but Jewish. Now, I have had the good fortune to know Angela's family personally over the last several years. She is originally from Tacoma, Washington where, many of you know, I served the congregation during my first year as a Rabbi. Let me tell you about her family: Her aunt sang in my choir and her uncle served on the board of the synagogue. Her father, Fred, would often take me out for lunch to talk about being a musical Rabbi, and her mother Sulja, a Korean who is not Jewish, would sit and participate at services every Friday night along with her family. Angela grew up in the Union for Reform Judaism's summer camps, including Kutz camp where she learned how to song lead and play guitar. And once she was in Cantorial School at HUC in New York, she decided that she didn't just want to be a cantor, she also wanted to be a Rabbi and spent an extra two years studying as much as she could. To claim that Rabbi Anglea Buchdahl is not

Jewish, is outrageous. To claim that any other person can define what makes someone else Jewish, is offensive. To claim that Reform Jews, by allowing patrilineal descent to be an acceptable definition of someone's Judaism, is opening it's tent too wide and that even our clergy aren't Jewish is just plain ignorant. Just because we happen to define our Judaism on different terms than someone else might does not mean that we are inauthentic. It just means that we have a difference of opinion.

Being Jewish is always about a difference of opinion. There's a reason why the old saying, “ask two Jews and get three opinions” really resonates with us. And that's true of how we define our own sense of authentic and religious belief, personally, as well. That's why synagogue life can be so challenging at times. We all have different opinions on how we should practice, ritualize, and educate ourselves on matters relating to Judaism – from anything as small as which yad to place on the Torah to bigger decisions like what curriculum to implement or how to observe holidays. But that's also the reward of communal Judaism, we get to celebrate and define for ourselves what our community can be – how we welcome the stranger, how we celebrate beautiful life cycles together, how to create meaning in our daily spiritual lives. Discouraging the authenticity of someone else's religion comes out of a place of fear and ignorance and a lack of confidence in your own belief system. It's easy to put others down in order to make yourself feel better. But what really takes courage is defining, for yourself, what truly matters. What really matters is accepting your own faith and your spirituality as being authentic and having the courage to proudly embrace it.

A famous story is told of a Rabbi named Zusya who loved God with all of his heart and soul and who treated all God's creatures with respect and kindness. Students came from far and wide to study with this gentle and wise Rabbi. Zusya often said, "Listen to the still, small voice inside you. Your *neshamah* will tell you how you must live and what you must do." One day, when Zusya was old and sick, his students came quietly in to his house to be with him. "Rabbi Zusya," they cried, "How can we help you?" "There is nothing you can do," answered Zusya. "I'm dying and I am very frightened." "Why are you afraid? You have led such a good life. You have believed in God with a faith as strong as Abraham, and you have followed the commandment as carefully as Moses." "Thank you," replied Zusya, "but this is why I am afraid. For if God should ask me why I did not act like Abraham, I can say that I was not Abraham. And if God asked me why I did not act like Moses, I can say that I was not Moses. But if God should ask me to account for the times when I did not act like Zusya, what shall I say, then?" The students were silent and understood this final lesson – to do your best is to be yourself and to live up to your own definitions, not the definitions of others. To embrace your own authenticity is frightening, because it means you are accountable for your own actions, and beliefs, no matter what they might be.

Most of us here, tonight, would identify as being Jewish – even if we don't close our eyes, picture ourselves, and think of it immediately – we still know that being Jewish is part of what defines who we are. Whether or not we come to synagogue twice a year, or every week, we are all Jewish, despite what anyone else might think about us. We all

authentically believe in many of the teachings and values of Judaism, even if we question them sometimes. We believe in the communal aspects of Judaism and the beautiful and painful narrative that our religion has woven throughout history. Time and again, our people were challenged and we resisted and rose to the challenge of persistence in identifying who we are as Jews. But it takes work. It takes work to remember that we are authentic, even if other people don't understand our authenticity.

This notion of defining our own authenticity reminds me of one of my favorite stories: There once was a bear who felt the cool breezes of the fall, looked at the falling of the leaves, and knew that it was time to go into a cave and hibernate. So he did. But while he was sleeping peacefully in his cave, a large factory was built, right over the cave itself. The factory operated throughout the long, cold winter as the bear slept.

When spring came again, the bear awoke and went to the entrance of his cave, and was shocked to find that the grass, trees and flowers were all gone. He didn't know where he was, for now he was in the middle of a factory. As he stood there, wondering what to do, a man came out of the door. "Hey, get back to work," said the man. The bear said, "I don't work here, I'm a bear." The man laughed and laughed. "That's a funny excuse for not working, saying you're a bear!" "You're not a bear. You're just a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat." And he took the bear to the General Manager. "I'm just a bear," said the bear. This made the Manager angry, so he took the bear up the chain of command, all the way to the President of the company. The Bear said to the President: "Please don't tell me I'm a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat, because

that is what all the Vice-Presidents, and the General Manager said.”

“You can’t be a bear,” said the President. “Bears are only in the zoo. They’re not in factories and that’s where you are. So how could you be a bear? In fact, I’m going to prove to you that you’re not a bear,” and the President put the bear into his car and took him to the zoo. “Is he a bear?” the President asked the Zoo Bears. The Zoo Bears said, “No, he isn’t, because if he were, he’d be inside this cage with us. We think he’s just a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat.” The President nodded, put the bear back into his car, and went back to the factory. They put the Bear to work on a big machine with lots of other men. He worked on the machine for many, many months. One day a long time after wards, the factory closed down and all the workers left.

The Bear had no place to go. He happened to look up at the sky and see the geese flying south. He felt the cool breeze of the fall. He saw the leaves falling from the trees. It was time to go into a cave and hibernate. He walked over to a nearby cave and was just about to go in when he stopped himself. “But I can’t go into a cave and hibernate. I’m not a bear. I’m just a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat.” He had been told so many times that he was a silly man that he felt it must be true, that he no longer was a bear. So he sat there. Because he didn’t know what a man who needed a shave and wore a fur coat should do if he were freezing in the snow. The bear was lonely and sad. Then suddenly, as if by instinct, he got up and went into the cave. It was warm and dry. He sank down and went to sleep, just like bears do when they hibernate. So even though the foreman, and the manager and the vice presidents, and the president and all the bears in

the zoo said he was just a silly man in a fur coat, he knew, deep down, that he really was a bear. He just had to figure it out for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Some of us are like the bear. “You can’t be Jewish. Jews pray three times a day and wear black hats.” “You can’t be Jewish. Jews don’t eat at that restaurant.” “You can’t be Jewish. Jews don’t do that and that and that.” And some of us, throughout history, have believed it. If I can’t do it all, if I can’t live the lifestyle, then perhaps I’m just not Jewish enough. Like the bear, many of us have gone along with what we are told to do. But just like the bear, we also know who we are deep down inside, if only we give ourselves the chance to figure it out. Like the bear, when we feel the cool breezes of fall and see the leaves falling, we too can remember who we are. We can listen to the voices inside of us and declare that yes, what we do, who we are, each of us in our own way is fully and completely Jewish in our lives and practice. Don’t keep kosher? Still Jewish. Drive on Shabbat? Still Jewish. Wear a Halloween costume, eat Christmas cookies, give Valentines, honor the Fourth of July? Yep, still Jewish. Just like the bear, we need to listen to the voices inside us. Just like the bear, we need to believe in ourselves, trust in our instincts, and deny those who would tell us we are wrong.

The bear began to deny who he was, he began to lose himself in what others saw in him. But when he remembered who he was, he fully embraced it. When we have embraced who we are fully, when we have embraced our Jewish identity, in whatever way that we take pride in that piece of ourselves, we can then fully embrace the rest of the world, we can fully participate in it, we can fully be human beings. But only when we

<sup>1</sup> adapted from *The Bear that Wasn't* by Frank Tashlin

know and define who we are, for ourselves.

In Philip Roth's famous collection of stories, *Goodbye Columbus*, there is a short story called "Eli the Fanatic." It is one of the great short stories, one of the defining stories of modern Judaism. It is the story of a group of assimilated Jews in a New York suburb who hire a Jewish lawyer named Eli Peck to drive a yeshiva of Holocaust survivors out of their community. They don't like the way one of the Orthodox survivors dressed when he did business in town. Eli prevails upon the man to dress differently; he gives him one of his Brooks Brothers suits to wear – and the survivor responds by giving Eli one of his black suits. One of Eli's neighbors spots him trying to get into his own home, wearing the black suit the religious Jew gave him. The neighbor calls him on the phone: "Eli, there's a Jew at your door." Eli responds, "It's me."

Each of us has someone inside us, knocking loudly. How do we respond to the Jew that is knocking at our doors? We respond to the desire to find an identity that is meaningful and worthwhile, that doesn't define us but that is defined by who we are. We learn to love the authenticity and meaning of our secular and Jewish lives, as they are fused together. We embrace our strong heritage and history as much as we look to the future for inspiration and an evolution of our religious selves. We must not be afraid to stand proudly and believe in who we are and what we think.

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of our new year, is a time to really examine what defines us and how we want to be defined. It's a time to think critically about what makes us authentic and where we find meaning, not just in day to day life, but in the

spiritual and religious world, as well. This period of time is not just about taking stock of the good or bad we have done in our lives or how we have interacted with others – it's also about learning to love the relationship we have with ourselves.

I bet none of you closed your eyes and pictured yourself as a shofar. But that is what I think you are and what you have the ability to be – narrow at the beginning and wide at the end –starting from a place of self-understanding and exploration before you can bring joyful noise to the outside world. You can be strong and sturdy and beautiful if you awaken your senses and call forward that which needs to be summoned and examined. May each one of us be like the mighty Shofar – unafraid to joyously proclaim the beauty of what is inside of us and what defines who we are. May each one us be like that bear, remembering that no matter what other people tell us, we know deep down inside who we are. May each one of us be like Zusya, recognizing that we are the ones who must account for our actions in this world and the choices that we make that define us. Then, and only then, can we have a most joyous and sweet new year. May each of you realize your fullest potential and love the person that you choose to be, however you choose to define yourself. *Shanah Tovah.*