**EREV Rosh Hashanah 5787**
**Let the Ties that Bind us to the Past help us create a Future Jewish Life we Love**
**Rabbi Mara S. Nathan**

A month or so ago I visited an older member of our congregation at a nearby assisted living facility. Gary is a retired High School Band Director who grew up on the East Coast. We bond over our love of music and the remarkable coincidence that he knew my middle school flute teacher- Mr. Pagano. So when we visit, we talk about music, his wife, children and grandchildren and his regret that, while he feels deeply Jewish, he never had a bar mitzvah. It's something we're working on to make happen for him.

On this particular visit he asked me a question that all these weeks later I am still pondering. He asked me, "what role does Judaism play in your life?"

At first this question felt like it had an obvious answer. I am a rabbi, I lead services, give sermons (like this one), visit people who are sick, comfort people, celebrate with people, teach Torah, the list does go on and on. But I quickly realized his question was more existential, and it's one I want to explore with all of you tonight.

How does the fact that you are Jewish or part of a Jewish family impact your life? Is it primarily through Jewish culture? (The food we eat, the books we read, the movies we watch.) Is it through the company we keep? (Our family and friends.) Or the Jewish calendar? (Holidays, Shabbat, life cycle events)

But do Jewish values actively inform the day-to-day decisions you make?

We are not Haredim- ultra observant Jews. Most of us live secular lives. Nevertheless, I would assume, since you are here right now, celebrating Rosh Hashanah, welcoming the Jewish New Year, that Judaism means something to you, maybe for some of you even a lot!

Being Jewish right now, feels hard. Antisemitism continues to rear its ugly head in all sorts of surprising spaces. Israel, once a unifying symbol of Jewish survival, is now a politically and socially fraught topic of conversation. The question of whether or not to join a congregation or even to affiliate with a particular movement seems up for grabs in ways that a generation or two ago would not have been open for debate.

Still, I would suggest that these trends, these realities, while all concerning, even painful, are simply *our* generation's evolutionary challenge.

Each generation that came before us faced their own challenges and grappled with a future that also felt uncertain. They too wondered how they would meet the moment. How they would incorporate Jewish meaning into their lives.

The fact that we are here today, asking these questions admitting that what made sense to our parents and grandparents may not feel quite right anymore- in no way means that Jewish life is over or even in decline. It's actually proof of the very creativity and resilience that have enabled us as a people to persevere!

Judaism is actually a brilliant framework to help us make sense of the world we are living in. Our ancient texts and teachings were built to withstand challenge and change. Because their ultimate aim has always been to help us create a more thoughtful Jewish sense of self in our lives.

What better time than Rosh Hashanah Eve— to consider where we go from here. It is a time where we embrace what is old- reciting prayers and singing melodies that have been with us for hundreds of years while we renew our commitment to be a better version of ourselves in the year to come.

The urge to transform sacred traditions to meet the moment —The ability to hold onto the old while creating something new is in our DNA. We see this not just during the High Holy Days, but in every aspect of Jewish life. And it’s especially evident in how we read and interpret our Hebrew Bible.

The oldest, nearly complete biblical manuscript ever discovered is housed at the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in a cave in 1947, the Great Isaiah Scroll, dates back to around 125 BCE! It looks NOTHING like the Torahs we read from today. That is because the earliest scrolls contained a continuous, unformatted string of Hebrew consonants. Forget the vowels, punctuation, accent marks and notes *we rely on* to prepare to read from the Torah now. One must assume that the scribes who wrote the early Torahs, and those who read them had such an intimate understanding of the history, stories and laws of the Jewish people, that what we would consider essential formatting, didn't matter at all.

Clearly that intimate understanding waned over the generations because sometime around the 5th or 6th centuries a class of scribe-scholars known as the Masoretes (Masters of tradition) worked to compile a system that would help with pronunciation and understanding. They added vowels, delineated verses and paragraphs and added cantillation (the symbols we use to learn how to chant) all in an attempt to create a standard reading of the Hebrew Bible for the worldwide Jewish community.

For about 500 years, different groups worked on this sacred project. Amazingly those same vowel notation systems for Hebrew as well as the trope symbols are what we still use to chant Torah today.

Haven't you always just assumed that the Torah has been written and read in exactly the same way from the time of Moses? Well, clearly not.

Rabbi Michael Marmur, professor of Jewish theology at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem points out that one of the best ways we can grapple with the ever-changing reality of what it means to be Jewish is to see ourselves as heirs to the masoretes. They inherited a text and even though they didn't write it, they still felt empowered to decide how to read it and live it!

We Reform Jews are part of a movement that was founded on the idea that there is an ever-present need to evolve Jewish practice and tradition, because it is the only way to rediscover It's essential beauty and power for ourselves.

I'd like to think we can be like the Masoretes. They held on to the sacred text of Torah, molding it as a way to encourage deeper understanding and strengthen connection for others. They were most interested in making it more accessible and more meaningful to all. This commitment remains an open invitation for us to carry on this work for ourselves.

For some of us this may be freeing but for others- overwhelming. Maybe it's easier to say, it doesn't quite work for me and then walk away. But then what? Where do we turn when it feels like the world is turning against us? What tools will we have at our disposal to access the core of our faith and make sense of the world as we know it?

Where can we start? Let's go back to Gary's question: What role does Judaism play in your life?

For many of us, its life cycle moments, shared experiences like summer camp or youth group, and sending our children to religious school. The language we share, the experiences we have in common bind us together. They are part of a Jewish culture that spans generations, geographic differences and economic realities. They are natural expressions of Jewishness that reflect our past and are easily accessible to us, when we invest in our Jewish future.

But for any of it to have staying power, being Jewish needs to be more than shared cultural experiences and feel-good simchas. That's where the spiritual and intellectual work kicks in. How you show up for others, how you speak to others or about others, how you involve yourselves in causes greater than yourself. These are core ethical values that come from our Jewish texts. And the better we understand that the more valuable our tradition becomes.

The ancient sage, Rav Hillel, famous for his ability to interpret Jewish law in a way that got to the essence of what it means to be human, offers a teaching in Pirkei Avot[1] that encapsulates so much of how Jewish tradition can guide us in our lives.

The first part of his teaching is probably the most well-known. *Al Tifrosh min Ha Tzibur*- do not separate yourself from the community.

From this we understand that it is our responsibility to show up. We shouldn't wait to be invited, only *we* can make our Jewish community a priority. We're meant to be there for the celebrations, gather at moments of concern, and worry about the welfare of others, to see that "The Temple" is every single one of us together. It is not a discrete entity but a collaborative community that only exists because you are part of it.

But then Hillel goes on:
Do not believe in yourself until the day of your death.

Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place.

Do not say something that [you think] cannot be heard,
for in the end it will be heard.

Do not say, "When I will be available I will study [Torah],"
lest you never become available.[2]

He could have just said- "be a mensch." But Hillel understood the human ego: our propensity to be judgmental, our love of gossip- our ability to be cruel to each other- often without even noticing it. And the excuses we make to ourselves that keep us from engaging in the intellectual, emotional and spiritual work we need to do if we want to continue evolving into more patient, kind and compassionate human beings.

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[1] Pirkei Avot 2:4
[2] Pirkei Avot 2:4

Maybe that's why he starts with *Al Tifrosh min HaTzibur.* Because when we integrate our lives into the community our sense of obligation, our feelings of connectedness to each other and something bigger than ourselves can only grow.

Of course ***you*** could just commit to being more of a mensch. But I don't believe that is quite enough either. Community involvement is essential to creating Jewish joy. But it is learning about and thinking about what our tradition requires of us that enables us to become more thoughtful people. That's why we study Torah every Shabbat and hold classes and invite scholars. There are so many opportunities to discover what brings added meaning and context to our lives. Both community and practice are aspects of our Jewishness that place us on a continuum with those who came before us and those who are not yet here.

The particulars of how we come together as a community may change based on where we live and who we are. But the need remains the same. The ways we engage with Jewish texts and perform our rituals have evolved too, but they still offer us powerful guidance for how we might best meet the challenges we are facing right now.

Why does Gary want a bar mitzvah? Certainly not for the party or gifts. I think it's because, even at this moment in his life, he knows there is more and he wants it. More understanding and a deeper connection to tradition. He wants to be a link in the chain- thousands of years old of people who have read Torah from our Holy Scroll. It's amazing to me that as he looks back on his life- he is still thinking about his Jewish future. Maybe this is what resilience is all about.

The name Masorete comes from the Hebrew word masoret which is generally translated as tradition. But masoret is actually a hapax legomenon- meaning it is a word that appears only once in the entire Hebrew Bible- in the Book of Ezekiel 20:37 to be exact in the phrase "*veheveiti etkhem bemasoret haberit*" ("and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant").

Because it appears only once no one can be absolutely certain how it's translated. And that means that masoret/tradition is a fluid thing. Yes, it is a binding tie; something that holds us together but we get to decide how we fashion that binding tie for ourselves.

And it's up to you to figure out what ties bind you.

Maybe it's the way Judaism links you to the generations of your family- past present and future through history, traditions and memory. Maybe it's the way that Torah and Jewish teachings provide you with a moral compass, inspiring you to speak up for justice in the world and reach for a better version of yourself.

Maybe it's the power of ritual that gives you a framework to know what to do and what to say, not just in the joyful moments but during the hard times too….or it's the community you know will be there to support you when you feel most alone.

Or maybe it's the fluid nature, the resilience of the tradition itself that gives you permission to grapple with it all.

At this Rosh Hashanah moment it is natural that we are feeling anxious about antisemitism in universities, government, and the world around us. And questions about the future of organized religion and its role in our lives cannot be ignored. But Judaism- as a faith, as a culture and as a community isn't going anywhere.

We know that Jewish life today is different than it was when we were growing up. And we can be assured that Jewish life in the future will be different too. The infinite variations of Jewish life that have existed for centuries and around the globe are proof of this reality.

This is the way it has always been- strengthened by its connection to ancient texts, deepened by its commitment to community. Our masoret- our tradition is an ever-evolving thing….May it always be so.
AMEN