



Living Judaism – Kol Nidre 5770

By Rabbi Jesse Gallop

Tonight, I would like to share with you a true story about a family that I know, let's call them Harry and Suzie Silverstein (that is not their real names). After dating in college, Harry and Suzie decided to get married. They both had a lot in common, especially their love for music; and they cared about each other greatly. The difficulty Harry and Suzie faced was that they were from two different faiths. Harry was Jewish by birth and raised in New Jersey with a strong Jewish identity. Suzie however was Christian. She was raised in a Protestant home, but was not strongly connected to the religion. Although, Suzie loved Christmas, because for her the holiday was about remembering how children were gifts in the world. When the couple shared with Harry's parents that they decided to marry, Harry's parents explained that they loved Suzie and Harry, but would not be attending the wedding because they were against their son marrying someone who was not Jewish. Nonetheless, Suzy and Harry got married and were blessed with three children. Through many discussions, Harry and Suzie decided together, that they wanted their children to be raised Jewish. Because they lived in a small town where there were no synagogues, Harry and Suzie Silverstein realized that the Jewish destiny of their children were in their hands.

Harry was aware that he had the greatest responsibility in fulfilling this aspiration because he knew more about Judaism. So, he refreshed his knowledge. Suzie also decided to take some classes to learn more about Judaism; and together. As a family, they made their home a center of Jewish living. In their small town, there was only 1 religious school program 45 minutes away, and it was a community school that was run in partnership by the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues in an hour radius. So the Silversteins drove their children 3 times a week, 45 min in each direction, to religious school on weekday afternoons. Additionally since they lived in such an isolated Jewish setting, Harry and Suzie made holiday celebrations a very special time at the house. They cleaned the house and got rid of all grain products for Passover, went to synagogue for the high holidays, and even made a special treat for Shavuot. On Shavuot Harry would make a special sandwich for each of the three children. Harry's Shavuot sandwich was made by stacking ice cream between two waffles (My apologies for talking about food, but better tonight than tomorrow).

The Silversteins were a regular family. They had struggles like all others. The house was a Jewish home, but they did put Christmas stockings on the chimney, and opened presents on Christmas morning. They also had typical family issues. Life was filled with ups and downs. However as the children grew up, they all continued to have a strong connection with Judaism. Overtime, when the youngest of the three children was in high school, Suzie decided to become Jewish. She had met a cantor along the way that was kind and gentle, helping her to explore Judaism. With her children grown up, Suzie was able explore the meaning of Judaism for herself, and fell in love. She even joined her synagogue's choir and became active in the temple. Today, Harry and Suzie Silverstein have three grown up children: All three have strong Jewish identities. The eldest is married and is building a Jewish home with a Jewish spouse, and the other two children decided to become rabbis. How many parents can say, "Meet my

daughter, Rabbi Silverstein; and meet my son, Rabbi Silverstein.”

Why I chose to share this anecdote with you is because this family could have easily been a member of our congregation. They lived in a non-Judaic centric part of the country, with very few resources, and faced an uphill battle to build a Jewish home. However, Harry and Suzie, like many of you decided to work hard and fight to preserve your traditions and your way of life, bringing Jewish living and learning to the core of their family.

So, tonight I would like to ask you, “Why did you decide to belong to a synagogue, build a Jewish home and live a Jewish life? Life could have been much easier for you by being apathetic and deciding that life is too busy, and belonging to a synagogue was too expensive and too much of a hassle. BUT YOU DIDN’T! You chose to be proactive to shape your life by using Judaism as a cornerstone of your family. I think this is because we are aware that Judaism has deep meaning in our lives, and it helps us to be aware of the world around us and our responsibility to help build and improve it. We want holiness in our lives, and many of us strive to have a relationship with God.

I want to congratulate you, and thank you for taking these steps. However, this is not the end of the journey. Now, each of us needs to continue on this mission and build strong Jewish homes, working together with Judaism at our core to strengthen our synagogue. Making a Jewish home is more than hanging a mezuzah on the door. The mezuzah represents that learning, experiencing, and celebrating Jewish observances, traditions, and ideals are occurring within the home. Jewish life should and must occur both within the synagogue and your home.

What can you do to preserve Judaism and inspire your children to build a Jewish home like yours? Our youth will connect to Jewish life by practicing Judaism in their daily life, by participating in Jewish activities like camping, youth group, and community programming. [pause] and by teaching Jewish values. Light Shabbat Candles, make a Passover Seder, teach about and perform the commandment of tzedakah (charity). If a child only gets his or her Jewish modeling at Beth Chaverim, he or she will most likely never internalize what was taught. Your actions, as parents, are louder than your words. If your actions give a message that Judaism is unimportant, it doesn’t matter how many Sundays a year you drop your children off at religious school. Likewise, if you teach that Judaism only matters when it fits into your life perfectly, what are you really saying?! For example, many people come to the Kol Nidre service because Monday is a work and school day. Therefore, some congregants think that they are fulfilling the Jewish obligation by “bringing the family to services.” But really you are saying it is okay to not celebrate the most important day of the year because missing an AP class is too hard to make up, and my business meetings and financial considerations are more important than truly fulfilling the observance of this holiest day of the year. How much can one focused on repentance when they are in the class or board room? I am not saying this to shame anyone, it is just a reminder that actions are always louder and leave a stronger impression than words will ever.

Another challenging aspect to building Jewish homes is that for many of us, we have spouses or family members who are of another faith. And it is important to make a home welcoming and comfortable for all members of the family. However, when a couple decides to raise a Jewish family and build a Jewish home it means that everyone should be involved in helping to build the identity. This is true for couples that have two religions, as well as for couples who are both Jewish. Apathy is harmful to your children, and it contradicts and disrespects your spouse. Families today need to find a way that represents both parents within celebrations and teachings. I believe strongly in post-modern understandings of Judaism. You

don't need to celebrate Passover how your grandparents did. Rather, find a way to celebrate and observe Jewish rituals in a way that unites your family. Judaism shouldn't divide your home. When used correctly it will give your family sacred time and space, giving you the ability to slow down and reconnect with one another.

Early in my tenure at Beth Chaverim, people would come up to me sharing that it troubles them that they have no where to go for holiday meals. "My family does not live in the area" or "No one invites me to their home." What I have begun to realize is that many of us are too passive in our Jewish living. There are usually only a handful of families who make holiday celebrations at their homes. Therefore, many congregants look for BCRC to fulfill this need. Next time you have no where to go for a holiday, please think about making your home a place of joy and festivities and invite a few fellow congregants to join you.

This is one of many examples of holiday celebrations. Being Jewish is living by a Jewish calendar. Ideally with the end of summer we are reminded that the holiest days of the year are approaching. And as our first fall crops are coming to the market, we should be thinking about Sukkot and those who are in need of food. As autumn turns into winter we remember how our ancestors overcame many obstacles and defeated many foes to keep Judaism alive. We commemorate this with eight nights of Hanukkah and telling the story of the Macabees who fulfilled the miracle of defeating tyrants who were more powerful than they. In the middle of winter we begin to think about what life is like with warmth and blooming trees. So we celebrate Tu b'shevat the new year of trees, and start thinking about how we are going to plant our gardens, and how we can better take care of the earth. Then comes Purim when we dress up in masquerades celebrating in joyous fun how Esther and Mordechai saved our people. How they risked their lives for Judaism. We are reminded to be like Esther, who shared her identity when it would have been easy to hide Judaism, fitting in and being like everyone else. With the budding of spring we are reminded of new beginnings and how our ancestors were set free from Egypt. How God empowered Moses, Miriam, and Aaron to lead the Jewish people into a great nation. And in the beginning of summer we rejoice in God giving us the Torah on Mount Sinai by celebrating Shavuot. It is the holiday where we spend the night studying because we realize how Judaism is a special gift in our lives exciting us to learn about our heritage. This is the Jewish calendar.

And every week we are reminded of what it means to be Jewish as we celebrate Shabbat. For some, Shabbat is a time to bring the family to services, worshipping together. It is a time where everyone gets an hour in their week to slow down, ponder the meaning of life, and reflect on how to act in holy ways. For others it's a time when they turn off the TV, sit down and eat dinner as a family and maybe even play a board game together celebrating that this is a day of rest different from all other days. Shabbat is a gift. It's a moment in our week that is our own, when we are free from school or work, where we don't have to rush, a time where we can break free from our blackberries and other technology that make us feel so restrained. It's a time to have deep conversations with one another talking about our beliefs and values. It's a moment when we can reconnect, considering how much each member of the family is growing and developing.

Our identity is shaped by Judaism. Our expressions, vocabulary and life experiences have been shaped by our religious history. Judaism believes that we must always study both secularly and Jewishly. This has helped us in a world that values knowledge, thoughts, and educational degrees. Being Jewish means we also need to think about others, the world, and why we were put on this earth. Helping us to be aware that we must give back to the

community and help those who are vulnerable or in need. And also being aware of the link we share with all Jews here in the DC metro area and throughout the world. So often it can feel foreign to have a connection with people we have never met. However, there are times in our lives when we need to feel supported. At these moments, we are reminded that being Jewish sometimes makes us different than our neighbors, and we have a yearning to be linked with the greater Jewish world. We are a people without borders.

So it sounds like we have so much to accomplish. How do we begin such a holy task?...[look up] Together. We begin by working together. It is not about my self interest or your self interest, rather it is about how to make this a world that is good, just, and compassionate. It is about making a synagogue that is safe and welcoming. A congregation that both teaches and lives Jewish values. Building a sacred community that is aware of how members treat themselves and each other. This is what a synagogue is. The holiness you live is self-evident at Beth Chaverim, this holiness of the heart is what attracted me years ago. To be honest, Beth Chaverim is a community that is different from how I was raised, you and your families all have faced challenges that seemed so foreign to me. Being in Loudoun County makes living a Jewish life difficult. But no matter the struggles, we have come together to build a strong epicenter of Jewish living. We may dress different, belong to different political parties, and have different understandings related to our Jewish journeys. However it is the holiness and sacred journey this congregation has embarked upon that unites us through our shared commitment to Torah, God, and community.

No where else, have I found a synagogue that is so welcoming to all different types of Jewish families. I love that Beth Chaverim is not judgmental. We do not sell seats at high holidays, nor are rooms named after families who make donations. People are warm and welcoming. Friendships are not based upon social class, but rather based on how people met through volunteering together and working to strengthen the congregation. I am well aware of the challenges this synagogue faces. However, they are likely the same challenges most Jewish congregations will face in the future. I also am impressed by the high level of volunteerism: working as religious school teachers, helping set up and clean up at events, and by serving on the board.

Many of the leaders in this community put in tremendous amounts of time and energy to keep us afloat. It is volunteers who answer the phone, go through the mail, set up the library, take care of the financials, organize programming, as well as other traditional leadership duties. The beauty of this congregation is that we are really members of a cooperative where we invest money and time to build community. If someone is looking for a consumeristic synagogue they will be greatly disappointed here. We do not have the financial or staff power or resources to “take care of you.” What we know is that our synagogue is only as strong as its members. Therefore how each of us, each person here tonight, lives our lives and how we choose to support this organization, this is what Beth Chaverim is. We each have the power to make this synagogue as great as we want it to be. I hear all the time about people who feel strongly that we need to develop in specific ways: either offering more services, resources, or improving the aesthetics. And when I hear this I ask myself, but is that really what the core of a synagogue is? If this sanctuary was prettier, would it make our lives more holy? It could, but there is a lot more work to be done than just beautifying the room.

Beth Chaverim, our sacred congregation, creates a safe environment where our young people feel safe and appreciated. A community that nurtures adult Jewish development and builds a sense of community. I believe belonging to a synagogue is like being a member at a

health club, it becomes a better investment the more you participate. The more times you enter the building and attend, the farther your investment takes you. This understanding is also true for how you bring Judaism into your home and how it is a part of your every day life. Your membership and involvement in the synagogue will feel more important because your personal identity will be more connected with Judaism and living a life that is focused on connecting with God and synagogue. Tomorrow morning, our Torah portion sums up this quest for Jewish living and our covenant with God by stating,

“For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven that you should say: ‘Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it down to us, that we may do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say: ‘Who will cross the sea for us and bring it over to us, that we may do it?’ No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it” (Deut 30:11-14).

Don't take the Jewish way of life for granted. For if we do, it will slip like sand between our fingers. May we each be like Harry and Suzie Silverstein, and live Judaism from our hearts and our mouths. Where we find a way to be a strong beacon of Judaism, where our flame burns strong and our light is bright. And tonight we look into the depth of our soul asking if we have failed our selves, our children, and our heritage. But in our struggle and despair we are reminded that tomorrow is a new day, and starting at this moment we can continue to reshape and strengthen our lives. May this Day of Atonement help us to face ourselves and God, and may we share this journey together.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, may this be God's will. Amen

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