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Rosh Hashanah 2014  
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L'Shanah Tovah.

Thank you for the honor to speak to you today about my Jewish identity, where it came from, and how it is expressed in and how it is influenced by my life.

My initial reaction to this invitation was fear that I don't have a Jewish identify anymore.

It was finally time to face-up to the fact that, for years, I've been riding shotgun and going through the motions.

I have a son, Jacob, who is a child with extreme developmental, medical, and behavioral problems that began when he was an infant. Jacob is now twelve years old. In addition to regular work and day to day responsibilities, we fight constantly to get even rudimentary services for Jacob.

Over the last several years there *have* been a few moments of real joy. There have also been times that I've been on the phone literally begging for help while Jacob tore his room apart again, while banging his head against door knobs, but neither Julie nor I had any strength left.

Once when we dared to give our daughter, Dory, a minute of attention Jacob navigated the ever-evolving fence in our back yard to elope with no sense of fear or danger.

I'm embarrassed that there have even been times when, out of desperation and just in case it might work, I was actually reduced to Faustian bargains.

Sometimes I choose to throw out the whole notion of God and spirituality rather than believe that God and spirituality are real but my family doesn't qualify.

Writing this speech has been an exploration and an evolution but ultimately I came to the conclusion that I *do* still have a Jewish identity.

I was reminded of some core Jewish beliefs:

- We not only have permission but we are expected to wrestle with God.
- There will be times that I will not believe and that's OK.
- To act like I believe is better than to believe and not to act.

I also came to appreciate where Judaism and the community have played a role in sustaining my family.

Eighteen years ago, after studying with three rabbis over roughly three years, I surfaced

from the mikvah.

A fellow convert told me to stay under the water as long as possible to fully experience the transformation; when I came out I would be Jewish.

I didn't feel any magic but I did emerge to an impatient rabbi.

He asked me what I was doing in there. "Dunk, dunk, dunk" he said, "Let's get moving!"

Hooray! I was Jewish.

I identify as a convert because I am proud. When I do, while I can't know what you are thinking, I know it's about Jewish identity, similarities or differences maybe. What makes you or me Jewish?

Each Rabbi with whom I studied insisted that I not only study the tradition from which I converted but also the consequences of my choice, not just for myself but for my future family. If history is any lesson, a Jewish identity doesn't come cheap.

One person told me that her whole life she had been trying to escape this family and here I was busting my butt to get in. I love to explain why. Enthusiasm is contagious. To me, Judaism has always been about "we."

We are a tribe, or in the tradition of my birth, a clan. I think it would be cool to make a tallis in the Mackenzie tartan someday.

So, what *is* a Jewish identity? Can I separate my Jewish identity from my identity as a whole?

When I was a child, a friend told me she was half-black, I asked "Which half?"

I come from a chemistry background so this invokes a question of distillation and separation.

If I put my identity in a centrifuge with a "Jewy" end and a "non-Jewy" end, what do I get?

If I'm Mizrahi I get pita where an Ashkenazi might find Challah. What does a convert find?

What makes a convert Jewish?

As a convert the concept of a Jewish identity is both exiting and intimidating.

I have many Jewish cultural examples from which to choose, but which, if any, is the "right" one?

Upon my conversion, I took on a Hebrew name, "Meir," after an important sage of the Talmud. Rabbi Meir consulted with his wife Bruriah as an equal partner.

Bruriah is considered by many the only woman sage of the Talmud.

My Jewish identity insists on egalitarianism.

I also get to choose from many traditions to build a new, hybrid expression, but I also have to constantly reevaluate my motives.

It's OK for Sephardim to eat beans on Pesach. What about me? And why would I ask?

Then there is always the nuclear option. I can be as strict as possible and certain never to choose wrong and offend God.

I think God would be more offended were I to live an ascetic life in a state of constant angst than to worry about legumes on Pesach.

Does God really care whether or not we flog each other with scallions while singing Dayenu?

That's a real source of conflict in our family every year.

Social Justice, on the other hand is foundational to Judaism and to my Jewish identity. However we choose to express it, the goal is the same: respect, dignity, and equality for all people.

Am I really Jewish? Does my conversion count? There will always be those who say, "No." That's fine. It's their right and it is mine (as a Jew) to tell them that they are wrong.

According to tradition, after conversion, I am as Jewish as anyone else regardless of how I express it.

Even so, there is a growing movement in Israel to revoke a convert's status if he has not lived "halachickly" enough.

Only in Israel?

Nope.

I was born into a community that included shomer-shabbos, same-sex couples who used the feminine form for all barchot.

A partner in one such couple challenged me that if I wasn't willing to go "all the way" that

my conversion was obviously not valid and I was not Jewish.

If not born Jewish and if I don't act Jewish, what makes me Jewish?

I think it's the wrong question, but it still nags at me constantly.

What does it mean to "act Jewish?" Some converts identify as "Jews by choice." But if so, aren't we all?

Most of my close friends had been Jewish.

I celebrated the holidays, but always vicariously, through others, watching from the outside-in.

I had even volunteered at two Jewish non-profits. (If you ever want to test your faith, try volunteering for a Jewish non-profit.)

When I came out of the closet and told my parents that I decided to convert, they said, "It's about time."

I have discovered that many people, those who believe in such things, think converts were born with Jewish souls.

What *is* a Jewish soul?

I think a characteristic of a Jewish soul is the same thing might cause someone to ask, "What is a Jewish Soul?"

We are seekers who do not believe that any one person has all the answers and even knowing that some questions have no answer we continue to ask anyway.

A Midrash I love tells that Jewish souls were scattered from Sinai to the four corners of the earth with a single purpose, to come home and inform Judaism with new experience, tradition, and vitality.

Spiritually, I found my own beliefs described in my reading assignments:

- We don't use physical representations of God and we don't need intermediaries.
- It's not enough to pray for forgiveness. We must actively try to fix what we have broken.
- The righteous from all backgrounds are considered equal to our own.

Still, as a father in a family that includes a child with extreme disabilities, I struggle with my commitment.

I don't always set the example that I would have hoped coming out of the mikvah that

day.

Services and events are reminders that Jacob will never have the choice to study Torah, become a bar mitzvah, or experience his own Jewish identity.

But Judaism is at the core of my family structure that has endured, persisted and even thrived over years so taxing they have to be lived to be understood.

I watched my daughter do an amazing job to become a bat mitzvah despite, and even in part because, of these challenges at home.

I see my wife hold us together with unending patience and unyielding strength, well past the point that I would have broken.

And I see us all continue to fight for the dignity and rights of children like my son.

Before my son's problems developed, the high holidays were about learning, t'shuva, forgiveness and renewal. Fixing what I'd broken, recognizing my mistakes, and trying again.

The last eleven high-holidays were about resentment against God over what we had lost and what my son never had.

This year, the high holidays are about mending my Jewish identity, finding my place again in a Jewish community, and about continuing to support the Jewish family that I already have and the fight for my son and others like him.

I want to be involved in the community as I used to be and to contribute as a member of Beth El.

Beth El reached out and drew us in when we were too exhausted and demoralized to do for ourselves.

I want to help drive the Beth El special needs initiative, to find other families like ours that, given a boost and a community, will be free of isolation and can begin to heal; a program that even today will offer the support we need so that Jacob can join us at the Rosh Hashanah gathering this afternoon at Lake Anza where the Special Needs Chavurah will be participating and hopefully so will some of you.

L' Shana Tova.