Joys and Obligations of Being Jewish

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It was in the fall of 1966 that I first fully realized that I was Jewish.

I learned about the Holocaust for the first time in 1958. I was then a Christian teenager attending Mount Hermon School for Boys. The school was founded in 1881 by a Protestant evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. He viewed Christian religious education as an essential objective of his schools. We had mandatory chapel three times a week and a regular class in bible.

A book I read at Mount Hermon changed my life. It was The Wall by John Hersey. The book is fiction based on fact. It recounts the horrendous and murderous cruelty of the Nazis and the resistance of the Jews trapped by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto.

I knew nothing of this, and nothing of the Holocaust. I was sixteen years old. My family was living in Darien, Connecticut. It was a restricted community. The real estate agents, following what was known as a "Gentleman's Agreement," would not sell to Jews. I had learned only a short while earlier, when I met a Jew for the first time, that Jews even continued to exist. I knew of Jews only that they were contemporaries of Jesus; I did not know then that Jesus was Jewish.

Reading about the Holocaust and its horrors destroyed my faith in the God of my childhood.

I grew up in a religious Presbyterian family. I believed that God watched over each person individually, was concerned for us, and could perform literal, supernatural miracles.

As a young, believing Christian, I struggled with the problem of undeserved suffering. The murder of millions in the Holocaust shook me. Did God know? Did God care? Did God know and care but lack the power to prevent? Did God know and care and have the power to prevent but choose not to do so?

I found no satisfactory answers within Christianity. The permitted approach to these questions at that time in my family excluded challenging God's role. The answers included, "We must have faith" or "God has a plan beyond our power to

comprehend, but all is for the good." To me, those answers denied our power to distinguish right from wrong.

When I went to Yale for college I began to have positive encounters with Jews. I took an informal course taught by the Reverend William Sloane Coffin and Rabbi Dick Israel with four Christian boys and four Jewish boys. I was one of the Christian boys, of course.

Also at Yale, Joe Lieberman, later Senator Joseph Lieberman, was a college classmate and good friend. I learned about kashrut as I ate in the college dining room with Joe while he ate his specially delivered kosher dinners. I learned about tzedakah as he made sure to have change in his pockets to give to the homeless when we walked in New Haven.

Later, when I went to Harvard Law School, I found that one-third of the students were Jewish. My law school roommates were both Jewish, as were almost all my friends.

In the fall of 1966 I started studying Judaism. My study led to no easy answers to my questions but, unlike the religion of my youth, Judaism valued questions.

My first formal teacher, Rabbi Beryl Cohon, taught that challenging God's decisions was not only permissible but could be a mitzvah. I learned about Abraham's argument with God to prevent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I learned also that Moses pleaded with God to spare the Jews after the golden calf.

I finally found a place for me to stand in relation to the questions that had bothered me for so long. The more I learned the more I knew that my place in life was as a Jew, not a Christian.

In 1967, I converted to Judaism. For me that was not so much a conversion as a recognition of my religious identity. I was Jewish.

Since 1967 my delight in being Jewish has grown and deepened. As you know, my quest for continuing to pursue the fundamental questions of religion led me after too many years to leave my law practice in 2003 and apply to become one of the founding students in the newly opened Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. In my interview, Rabbi Arthur Green, the founding dean of the school, asked me this question: "I see from your application that you had questions about God as a Christian. Tell me, have you found the answers as a Jew?"

I replied, "No. But I have found that we have better questions, and we value asking questions."

A couple of years later, through an introduction made by Frankie Snyder, I had the great good fortune to meet you. And so I have been serving this warm,

welcoming community now for a decade, first as a student and then after my ordination in 2009.

Being a Jew is one of my greatest joys, while at the same time my identity imposes upon me a set of obligations that I welcome. The best way I know to explain my feelings is to paraphrase an essay by David Harris. It appeared last month in the Huffington Post and in the Times of Israel.

David Harris is the Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee. His essay is entitled "15 Ways Being Jewish Is Meaningful."

David Harris and I share a common vision of the joys and obligations of being Jewish. Here are some ways being a Jew has enriched my life beyond measure.

As a Jew I am a champion of the single most revolutionary concept in the annals of human civilization: monotheism, the doctrine that there is only one God. As we say, modestly, "It is a good doctrine; forsake it not." We repeat this doctrine every time we say the Sh'ma.

I appreciate our view as Jews that we must act as if we are all created in the image of God, B'tzelem Elohim, and as though we all descend from a single couple. The story we tell each other of Adam and Eve lets us understand that all of humanity descends from the "original" couple and we all share the same family tree, whatever our race, religion, or ethnicity. No one can claim superiority from birth over anyone else.

Being Jewish also places upon me and upon all Jews the duty to join in the work of repairing our broken world, in Tikkun Olam. I cannot expect that work to be done by a higher authority or by fate. We are partners with the divine in this work. This work is our responsibility.

As Jews we affirm life. We read in our sacred text, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live." This teaching imposes on us a moral obligation to do our part to bring the world closer to the Jewish prophetic vision of a world at peace and in harmony.

I also love the fact that Jews were early dissidents. We were among the very first to challenge the status quo and insist on the right to worship differently than the majority. Today, we call this pluralism. It is a bedrock principle of democratic societies.

I recognize the pioneering Jewish effort to establish a universal moral code of conduct. We have a living, active obligation to pursue justice, to treat my neighbor as I would wish to be treated, to welcome the stranger in our midst, and to seek peace.

We are heirs and custodians of a civilization that is thousands of years old. That civilization includes bountiful riches of theology and faith, philosophy and ethics, music and art, ethnography and history, and so much more. There is enough in Judaism for a lifetime of endless exploration and enrichment.

We enjoy life. It is no accident that so many comedians and songwriters are Jewish. Every week we have a day of rest and our year is measured by a succession of holidays when we wish each other Chag Sameach, happy holiday.

I have been privileged to experience the indescribable joy of belonging. I am part of a community just about anywhere I go in the world.

We also can justly celebrate the extraordinary impact of the Jewish people. We are barely one-fifth of one percent of the world's population, yet we have contributed to advancing the frontiers of world civilization far more than larger groups. Jews have been awarded an estimated 22 percent of all the world's Nobel prizes.

We embrace the centrality of discussion and debate about life's big questions. Those discussions and debates are informed by a multitude of Jewish teachings over the centuries.

I marvel at the almost unimaginable Jewish determination to persevere against all the odds, without ever losing hope for a brighter future. Mark Twain, who admired the Jewish people, once noted in amazement: "All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

By becoming a Jew and living as a committed Jew, I inherited a past to which I am inextricably linked by the generations that preceded me. Those generations of Jews prepared their sons and daughters for their Bar and Bat Mitzvah. They blessed their children at the Shabbat table. They sat as families at the Passover Seder and yearned for "Next year in Jerusalem" and the coming of the prophet Elijah. They fasted on Yom Kippur as they underwent their moral inventory. They celebrated joyously at Purim in the knowledge that our enemies can be defeated by our concerted efforts. And they passed the baton of the Jewish people from generation to generation, thus imposing upon us in this generation the obligation to do the same.

At the same time, I live in perpetual mourning as I reflect with unspeakable sadness on all that was lost in the Holocaust, and in the pogroms, and in the inquisitions, and in the forced conversions, and in the exiles, and in the blood libels, and in all the other deadly manifestations of anti-Semitism. While holding that grief, I live at the same time in everlasting gratitude for the gift of life, the blessing of opportunity, and the sacred task set before us of igniting that special spark within each of us.

I was six years old, and a member of a Christian family, in 1948 when the prayers of millions of Jews over many centuries were finally answered with the return of the Jewish people to the cradle of our existence and the rebirth of the sovereign state of Israel. I did not know about Israel then, but I was Jewish by the time we won the Six Day War in June, 1967. I celebrated then as a Jew while we once again established that our homeland was going to remain just that, a Jewish homeland.

I believe in the power of the inextricable link between Israel and the Jewish people. This land represents not only the physical, or sovereign, symbol of our nationhood, but also – whether we choose to live there or not – the highest metaphysical expression of our faith, our prayer, and our yearning. As the Psalmist wrote, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

By fighting against anti-Semitism and for Israel's right to live in peace and security, I am striving for a better world that holds promise for all people who aspire to coexistence in peace and freedom.

I take pride in the immense Jewish contribution to the defense of human dignity. Our Torah and its teachings – from its tale of the exodus from Egypt to the very concept of the Promised Land –served as a source of inspiration for America's Founding Fathers and for the American civil rights movement. Because of our shared experience, Jews have been disproportionately represented in the forefront of the global struggle for the advancement of human rights.

Jews have never been satisfied with things as they are. If Isaiah and the other prophets returned to earth, as perennial critics of the status quo, they would remind us that, for all that has been achieved, there's much more work to be done before we can declare success here on earth.

Finally, as Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, being Jewish means not necessarily seeking to make the world more Jewish, but rather more human. That is the goal animating our people, through good times and bad, from the very beginning of this extraordinary historical journey to the present day.

I hope, as we enter into this new year of 5776, that every Jew will feel the joy, the connection through time and space, the shared destiny, the collective responsibility, and the daily inspiration that I have had the privilege of experiencing throughout my life as a Jew.