

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5785

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Congregation Or Ami

Houston, TX

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Erev Tov, Hag Sameach, v'Shana Tovah! It has not been easy to be a Jew this past year. One day in October less than one year ago, more than 1000 Jews were killed in senseless violence; the greatest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust. The resulting trauma and subsequent war are still affecting our lives daily; family, friends and the Jewish community as a whole cannot escape involvement. With these traumas comes renewed acts of increased antisemitism. On college campuses, Jewish students are targeted and told that they are responsible for genocide. Jewish institutions have been swatted and

had bomb threats called in. There have been physical attacks on our people and graffiti expressing disdain and hatred. Insinuations that Jews control the media and the banks. Classic tropes we have seen for centuries are being used to alienate and vilify Jews and Israel. Words matter, and we must call out hatred when we see it. Jews are hurting right now. They are being painted as the aggressors, the perpetrators, the occupiers. I cannot help but think, "What should our response be on this Rosh HaShana?". conclusion:coming back to the same conclusion; it seems the world is telling me to hate myself for being Jewish, but I refuse. I am a good person. I am a good human being. A good neighbor. A good friend. A good brother. A good son. And I am

all those things while also being a Jew. I am proud of who I am, and I think there is value in today, upon the threshold of a new year, for me to share with you why I am proud to be a Jew in hopes that it resonates with you as well.

First, I want to share with you one of my favorite jokes. There are two Jews riding in a train compartment together. One Jew looks to his companion and sees he is reading an antisemitic newspaper. Alarmed, he shouts, “How can you read that trash?” The one reading the paper responds, “When I read the Jewish press, everyone is out to get us, there are pogroms, all kinds of Tzuris (trouble), but when I read this

one, we control all the money, the media, the world, it just makes me feel better.”

This joke embodies one of my main defenses against antisemitism. I lean into the ridiculousness to make me more resilient; what greatness we must have as a people to be given so much credit for power and influence. It is an imperfect solution, but helps me get through a lot; it is a mindset that says you think you can hurt me; well, I am not going to give those who hate me the power to define who I am. As Jews, we creatively use gallows humor and refuse to allow those that want to tear us down to break us mentally and emotionally, to refuse to accept we are evil or self-centered is worthy of pride. We might not be as

powerful or influential as we are blamed to be. But with the power and influence we do have, we use it to advance the world through medicine, education, and helping those in need!

Being a Jew means being part of *Am Yisrael*. Since our first relationship with God many millennia ago, our people have embodied perseverance. How can I not take pride in recognizing that our first enslavers, the Ancient Egyptians are gone; the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Seleucids, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Almohedes, The Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile, the Czar, the Soviets, and the Nazis, all tried and yet here we are. Thanks for trying. We

survive and thrive despite the challenges that we face. We are scrappy,
we are creative, we are survivors!

Longevity alone is not enough to justify pride. One of the most
praiseworthy traits of Judaism is that we are a community based on
values. Baked into the fabric of who we are as a people is the
commandment to care for those who are on the fringes of society. To
ensure that the most vulnerable are provided for. Furthermore, we are
required to act justly, to be fair. Not just to fellow Jews, but all people
regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or education. In Judaism,
justice and compassion are the two sides of the same coin. The
Hebrew word, *Tzedakah* is commonly translated as charity, but it

actually means justice. Building a just and compassionate society is at our core. We visit the sick. We help comfort the mourner. We strive to provide everyone with the message that they are not alone. We ensure all are treated equitably. We are forbidden from causing undue harm to animals. Cruelty is anathema to us. We ask God during this period of judgement to be compassionate on us and we in turn try to emulate what we expect of God and try to practice compassion.

As a rabbi, I love the Torah. The Talmud. The Midrash. The writings and the books that serve to guide us through life. These are holy texts that proclaim our faith and our actions. Yet, spend 5 minutes with me and you know I love a question. A conflict. A needed clarification. Because

as a Jew, we encourage a culture of questioning. Never in this synagogue will anyone be scolded for asking, “Why?” This is something that invigorates me and makes me proud to be a Jew. Going back millennia we have embraced a culture that values constructive debate. Our ancestor, Abraham, is famous for challenging God when hearing of the Divine’s plan to destroy Sodom and Gamorrah. Our people’s name is the name given to Jacob after his wresting match with an angel, Yisrael, the one who struggles with God. We enjoy the intellectual and spiritual turbulence. The Talmud is famous for its *Shachlah V’Tarya*, Aramaic for Give and take. Famously we record not just the winning opinions but the challenges too. We are not scared of challenges or of

different approaches. In fact, we welcome them! We can listen to a reasoned argument and grow and change. The dynamic nature of Judaism is inspiring. We may be long-lived, but we are not a fossil.

Judaism is living and continues to inspire. It is a message that has deep truths that resonate in the here and now.

As Jews, we know the importance of belonging. Jews know well what it means to not be fully integrated. The term ghetto originated in Venice, where the Jews were required to live. Literally, time and again, in our history we were required to live apart. This history has led us to constructing a strong connection with the broader Jewish world. We call this concept *Klal Yisrael*, all of Israel. It is a sense that we look out

for fellow Jews. It does not matter if that Jew is Ultra-Orthodox or a completely secular Jewish atheist. If they are in trouble, we help them.

That's because no matter their level of observance, we see ourselves in them. Judaism is not faith you have to be born into. We welcome those who want to share our faith, the people who choose to convert to Judaism. A Convert is no less a Jew than one who is Jewish from birth. We are all family. Which may mean we are little *meshugna* – crazy, but we are still family. We are responsible for each other and gather strength from each other. And this big tent of Judaism makes me very proud.

There are real, ongoing threats to the Jewish people and I am not ignoring those risks. Instead, I am saying I am proud to be a Jew despite them! I will not cower with fear! I will hold my head high! I am Jew and I will thrive! Am Yisrael Chai!!!! The Jewish People Live!!!

Shana Tovah U'Metukah!

A Good and Sweet New Year!

May you and yours be inscribed in the Book of Life.