

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon, 5771

I am, as you all are well aware, not a Priest, but I have heard my share of confessions. The one I hear most frequently is also the one most in need of revision. When I'm out and about, I'll meet a new person and we'll strike up an informal conversation. When we get to the inevitable "And what do you do in Chapel Hill?" I reply that I'm the Rabbi of a wonderful, progressive Jewish community. And then I see in their face a response that seems to be a combination of surprise and recognition, and maybe a desire to flee. That last one is the giveaway. They're about to share that they, too, are Jewish – and then comes the confession: "But, Rabbi, I'm a bad Jew." Before I can respond the explanations pour out: "I'm not religious" or "I haven't been to synagogue since my bar mitzvah," or "It's just a cultural thing for me, I grew up in a completely secular home."

I respond that there are many ways of connecting to Jewish observance, tradition, and culture -- and the conversation continues. But I am starting to think that I've been missing something very important in these encounters. For to identify oneself as a "bad Jew" is to get oneself off the hook. It can be a way to disengage from being Jewish by preemptive self-criticism. You see, if I'm a "bad Jew," then it's just the way things are – and that means there's no reason to do anything differently.

Oy, what a missed opportunity.

When Judaism matters to you, when it makes a difference in what you do in your life and informs who you are, you'll have a hard time convincing me that you are a "bad Jew." Let me offer you an intriguing example.

Back in May, Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, a funk and soul band, played at Cat's Cradle in Carrboro. Now I've loved blues and soul ever since working at Papa Jazz Record Shoppe, a used music store in Columbia, South Carolina, more years ago than I care to count. But I became familiar with the Dap-Kings much more recently, because of the profile of Gabriel Roth that appeared in the New York Times Magazine. Roth is a songwriter, bassist and sound engineer, a musical purist who records using original analogue equipment to recreate the unadulterated true sound of Soul – and he's the co-owner of DapTone records, for whom Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings record.

The first thing that struck me about the Times profile of Mr. Roth appeared in the opening sentence. In speaking about Roth's early love of classic Soul, the writer says that Roth was, at the time, a "Jewish teenager from California." Later in the article, Roth talks about the hardships and setbacks he encountered as he struggled to establish a studio and a record label. He says that this difficult time in his life was "like a 'Jewish history lesson,' or something out of the well-thumbed

pages of one of his Chaim Potok novels.” When he and his partner open their office and studio in Bushwick, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Brooklyn, they place a piano-shaped mezuzah on the doorpost.

In still another part of the article, Mr. Roth compares “soul music to the prose of Isaac Bashevis Singer. ‘There is something visceral and real about it,’ [he says], ‘and at the same time something very high and spiritual.’” Although Gabriel Roth identifies himself as an atheist Jew, he commits his life to musical genres – Soul and Gospel – which tap deeply into spirituality. Now all of these are interesting aspects of Mr. Roth, his history, personality, and work; but here’s the most important one: He conducts business in ways that follow core ethical precepts of Torah.

In the course of pulling together, recording and promoting the Dap-Kings, Roth has helped to make a star of Sharon Jones, once a prison guard on Riker’s Island and previously a back-up singer. Thanks to the Dap-Kings, for the first time in her life, Ms. Jones had enough money to start a savings account and finally move out of the projects. But with success came conflicts over money. In the words of the article:

Jones asked Roth for publishing royalties for songs that, technically speaking, she didn’t write. (Her argument was that in interpreting Roth’s songs, she was doing as much to

create them as he was.) After much deliberation over what would constitute the most ethical course of action, Roth dismissed the advice of his lawyers and agreed to pay her a percentage of all the publishing income those songs had generated over the past 12 years.

When asked about the financial impact of this course of action Roth's reply, with a "dour" look, was "A lot."

In the Torah we read,

You are not to withhold (property from) your neighbor, you are not to commit robbery. You are not to keep overnight the working wages of a hired hand with you until morning. [Lev. 19:13, Fox translation]

And

You are not to withhold from a hired hand, an afflicted and needy one, (whether) from your brothers or from your sojourner that is within your land, within your gates. On his payday you are to give his wage, you are not to let the sun come in upon him, for he is afflicted, for [his wage] he lifts his life breath.... [Deut. 24:14-15].

These verses form the foundation of labor rights laws in the Jewish tradition: Paying fair compensation, on time, is at the heart of Jewish ethics. The Talmud does not mince words when drawing on these

verses. It warns that “He who withholds an employee’s wages is as if he has deprived him of his life.” Mr. Roth may or may not go to synagogue or keep kosher, but he is no “bad Jew.”

Think, for a moment, about Gabriel Roth’s piano-shaped mezuzah. Like all mezuzot, it contains a scroll. On that scroll are words that many of us are familiar with: the part of our liturgy called *V’Ahavta*. It’s the continuation of the *Shema*, and mandates a variety of actions to remember *mitzvot*:

“Love Adonai, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your power. Fix these words, that I command you today, in your mind and in your heart. Teach them to your children in all times and places, speaking of them when you are at home, and when you are away, when you lie down, and when you rise up. Tie them on your hand as a reminder, and also between your eyes. Write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates.”(translation, Siddur Eit Ratzon)

Another reminder occurs a little further on, telling us to “make fringes on the corners of [our] garments.... You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of Adonai and do them....”

The reference to the doorposts becomes one of the source texts for affixing the mezuzah. The binding on the hand and the between your eyes is the source text for the wearing of tefillin during weekday, morning prayers. And the fringes are, of course, the *tzitzit* on the corners of our *tallitot*.

Why all these rituals? Why all the reminders? Remember that piano-shaped mezuzah again. Every time Gabriel Roth enters his office, he sees it. Remember who you are. Remember in what context you make your music and do your work.

I suggest that, like the mezuzah, the imagery and intention of tefillin – even if wearing them is not part of one’s spiritual practice – has much to tell us about leading a meaningful Jewish life.

Tefillin: two small black leather boxes with leather straps attached. Like the mezuzah, the boxes contain scrolls with readings from Torah. One box is placed on the head, centered above the eyes.

I’ve come to understand that we place these verses between the eyes because the eyes – for the sighted – are the primary means by which we encounter the world. The scroll includes the *Shema*, which commands us to hear. The strap around the head not only holds the box in place; it encompasses the brain. The first box reminds us to perceive

the world through a Jewish lens, to make a commitment at the start of each day to engage the world with Jewish intention.

The second box of the tefillin is placed on the arm, next to the heart, with its strap winding down the arm to the hand and fingers. The message of this box: Our perceptions should open the heart, and that openness of heart must radiate down to our hands – to our actions in the world. The tefillin, then, are not merely a literal interpretation of *V'Ahavta's* mandate to put commandments in front of eyes and on hands; rather, they are physical reminders to live Jewishly, with mind, heart, strength and action – with our entire being.

What is a Jewish mind? What does it mean to see the world through a Jewish lens? Here's one aspect of it: As we recite every Passover, we are formed as a people by the movement from slavery to freedom. As Jews, we are to know the feelings of the stranger because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. In more recent history many of us – including me, the granddaughter of a seamstress and a pattern cutter – can trace our own ancestors to being strangers in this land, many laboring as near-slaves in sweatshops on the Lower East Side. When we read about immigration laws in Arizona, or hear of the tribulations of our immigrant neighbors right here in North Carolina, we must read and hear and resonate as Jews, committed to remembering

what it is to be among society's most vulnerable, to be at the mercy of the powerful.

It's not enough, though, just to perceive the world as Jews. When we engage the world, when we act, we must do so as Jews as well. Central to our story is the idea that the world isn't complete. God doesn't quite finish it, in order that we may become partners in the work of creation. So when we learn about the plight of another, we must also act -- to struggle for justice, to reach out in compassion, to add our efforts to the continuing challenge of creating the world.

This Rosh Hashanah I challenge you and me – all of us – to find or to create Jewish markers that will remind us of who we are and what we need to do. Perhaps it will be hanging a mezuzah, and stopping to notice it before passing through its doorway. Maybe the reminder will be committing to Jewish study here at the synagogue. Maybe it will be signing up for a weekly Torah lesson from MyJewishLearning.com. It could be committing to lighting candles on Friday nights or saying the Shema upon waking or right before sleep.

Where will your heightened Jewish consciousness lead? Maybe to picking up something for the IFC's food pantry each time you do your own food shopping. Perhaps to joining a Kehillah delegation in attending an immigrants' rights rally, or a town council meeting about improving the living wage policy in our area. You could sign up to

bring a meal to a congregant in need, or being present for mourners by attending a shiva minyan. Whatever reminders you choose, and whatever actions they lead you to, what is of critical importance is that you live a Judaism that matters to you and matters to the world.

On this Rosh HaShana, may we be blessed with the wisdom to create signposts for ourselves that will shape our perceptions and spur us to action. May it be a New Year full of goodness and blessing. A New Year rich with newfound meaning. (And with fewer causes for confessions). L'shanah tovah,