Why Be Jewish?

Why would anyone in their right might want to become Jewish? That's the question that the Rabbis of the Talmud instruct a Beit Din, or rabbinic court to ask someone who desires to convert to Judaism. Why, with all the tzurious the Jewish people have to endure, with all the obligations of ritual observance, the history of persecution and scape-goating would anyone choose of their own free will to become Jewish?

If the person responds, that they are fully aware of these facts but still desire to convert, then the Talmud, the code of Jewish law that governs conversion, actually instructs the beit din to down play the obligations and expectations the Torah and Judaism place upon the individual. Thinking I guess that we've got a live one here, and so they teach that a convert should be introduced to these things slowly and over a period of time so they are not scared off in an instant, revealing all at once what is expected of a Jew may be too much for one person to bear.

And so tonight on the evening that we welcome a new member into our community and our congregation, into K'lal Yisrael the holy community of Israel, I can assure you that while the proceedings of the beit din that affirmed Anthony's conversion are confidential, he was neither too reluctant about becoming a Jew, nor too excited. He has good reasons for wanting to become a Jew and he is as ready as any of us are for the unpredictable journey into Judaism that lies ahead.

However while Anthony has answered the question, why be Jewish? Have we even asked it of ourselves? It is the curious nature of Judaism in a world and a nation that has become so accepting of Jews and Judaism, that we almost never ask ourselves the question, 'Why be Jewish?' And even if we ask the question, as we make some

choice between to do or not to do something because our faith and community demand it, do we ever wait around for the answer. When deciding to go to Temple verses going to the movies, to eat Matzah instead of sourdough, do we ever really contemplate the reason why, or do we just chalk it up to tradition or guilt, that's what we are supposed to do and endure it?

Rabbis like to say in today's world that we are all Jews by Choice. That to be Jewish in a world and time such as this, and era that makes no particular demands of religious affiliation one-way or the other, being Jewish is an active choice. But I am not so sure anymore. It's pretty easy to be Jewish today, its expensive, that is for sure, but how hard is it really?

My great grandfather stowed away in a steamer truck to come to this country from the pale of Russia. He fled pogroms and cosaks and tyranny so that he could enjoy the freedom of America. Freedom to work and to live, for sure, but also freedom to believe without fear that his beliefs would be turned against him.

So did those courageous Jews who observed mitzvah and ritual amidst the fire of the holocaust. There are stories of Jewish prisoners in the holocaust who were so dedicated to Judaism and the commandment to study Torah and Talmud daily that they recited it by memory as they worked in the fields and factories of the concentration camps. Right under the very eyes and noses of the Nazi guards they recited the weekly Torah portion. Others set aside the rare precious butter or margarine from meager rations so they could sue it as fuel to light Shabbat candles. Thank God we live in a world where Jews no longer have to make such choices, but still when the question why be Jewish was

asked in the midst of a world that said don't be or don't answer, many, many Jews affirmed their identity, some with their last breath.

There is the story of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theologian and scholar, who himself was rescued from Nazi Germany in the midst of the holocaust. Rabbi Heschel, came to the United States and taught at Hebrew Union College and The Jewish Theological Seminary. One would never think to even wonder why he was Jewish, or question his conviction. Yet some did. When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lead a march on Selma, Alabama Rabbi Heschel marched right beside him, arm in arm. Some Heschel's colleagues and members of his congregation were incensed. They berated him, you have no business out there on the front lines of the civil rights movement, and you are a Jew you belong in synagogue praying. To this Heschel responded, "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying." Why be Jewish? For Heschel the answer, at least in this instance was quite simple, because it demanded of him both an awareness of the plight of other in our society and a commitment to bringing about justice and repair of the world.

And so we come to us today. I stand in awe of Anthony and others in our congregation that have converted to Judaism that are Jews by choice, and have enunciated that choice so clearly. But what about the rest of us? With no great threat to our existence, no unsafe land we must flee, not even a specific cause or mandate for social justice and change that awakens in each of us the imperative of Tikkun Olam, Why be Jewish?

For some the answer is the title song from 'Fiddler on the Roof'. Can I get a chorus of 'Tradition'? A word by the way that I am fairly confident has become a

synonym for ‘Jewish guilt’. For others we answer the question through our children. We maintain a Jewish home, belong to a congregation, and observe the holidays, light Shabbat candles because of our kids. This is not a criticism, but I hear all the time from couples who explain that they don’t light Shabbat candles anymore because they kids have grown, or moved out of the house. Being Jewish for your kids is certainly a tenement of Judaism, v’shinantam l’vanecha and you shall teach of it to your children. But its not enough, ultimately the student must master the material and make it his own, and the teacher must at some point become a student again.

No our people will not be sustained by a generation that is Jewish because of others, be it the guilt of the generation lost, or pride in the generation yet to come. We must be Jewish for ourselves, for reasons that are intensely personal, for reasons that objective, for reasons that could with stand the examination of a beit din.

The rabbis of the Talmud teach that one cannot fulfill the commandment of reciting the Shema, the watchword of the Jewish people unless they understand the meaning of the words. No matter how many times it is said, no matter the fervent nature of the recitation, unless the prayer understands what he or she is saying it does not ascend to heaven. If this can be true of one prayer then kal v’homer, so much the more so it is true of our Jewish identity itself. Unless we seek to understand who we are, what we believe and most importantly why we believe, practice, do or not do, then we are lost. There is plenty of room for the undecided in Judaism, our tradition in fact promotes it, we raise far more questions than provide answers, but we I pray that we will all from this Shabbat forward enter into the process of deciding. Let us define Judaism for ourselves; in the context of our own lives, may we all work to become Jews by choice.