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. It's a question that we as born Jews, or people who share our lives with Jews, particularly during these high holy days may be asking ourselves as well, especially as we are swelter in High Holy Day heat, feel our stomachs cramp with hunger on Yom Kippur, and snake our way through parking lot lines to sit so far back in the synagogue that even a rabbi of my 'considerable bearing' is but a white dot.

Why, with all the *tzurious* the Jewish people have to endure, with all the obligations of observance, ritual and practical, the history of persecution and scape-goating would anyone choose of their own free will to become Jewish? By the way if I have convinced any of you to change you religious identity at this point, that was not my intention, and yes doing so does not get you out of the rest of the sermon.

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, that's what's expected and we simply 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, an 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, certainly to be a Jewish adult. Its expensive, that is for sure. Belonging to a

temple is a significant financial commitment, one we will remind you of at least once over these holidays. But nobody is Jewish so they can belong to a temple, because we are Jewish we do belong to a temple. But why be Jewish at all, if you had a choice, and by the way you do have a choice, why pick this religion over others or over any what about Judaism do you like, what about Judaism do you love, what about Judaism makes you cry when you hear HaTikvah, makes you bussle with pride when one among us, a member of the tribe so to speak, is acknowledge for his contribution to society. What about Judaism keeps you coming back when so many things would tear you away from this place, this tradition, this people.

Some of us were born Jewish which caused us from the outset to connect and while there are many choices before us, this is what we have known and so this is who we are. Some of us chose to convert to Judaism adopting this way of life as our own. Others of us married into a Jewish family and find our way through the doors of this Temple as a way of becoming part of the bigger Jewish family. Some of us came here because our mothers made us and some came to commune with their mothers who are no longer here. Some of us are not quite sure why the heck we are here, but we are. Heneini – we are here!

For whatever reason brought you in the doors tonight, I applaud you and thank you. It is great to see you. During this High Holy Day season, we evaluate our souls, our very beings. But how much of our essence, I wonder aloud tonight, is Jewish? Of our entire make-up, what percentage is Jewish? Is it 2 days out of 365, which comes to about ½ % of our whole? Or is Judaism more than just prayers, words we read during a service (not that that is bad of course), but is that all it is? Being Jewish is one thing it is a label, a badge of honor, or a burden we bear. But living Jewish, doing Jewish

My great grandfather stowed away in a steamer trunk 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. For him everyday in this country living opening and freely as a Jew was a blessing from God. Every Jewish action he took, ever mitzvah he performed was one more Mitzvah in the world than his persecutors would have allowed if they could stop him. But they could not stop him, he was here, he was free and if his Judaism was important enough to others to persecute him on a daily basis for it, than it must be at least as important to him to live it and practice on a daily basis.

Likewise those courageous Jews who observed mitzvot and ritual amidst the fire of the holocaust, they not only were Jews but lived Jewishly. 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 use 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.

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.

One of my classmates recently gave a sermon at our school; he raised the question, ÒWhat the mitzvoth (commandments) mean in liberal Judaism?Ó His remarks on the subject spurred my own thoughts and I wanted to take this opportuinity to share both with you. When I was a little kid in Sunday school the teachers and rabbis always told us that a Mitzvah was a good deed. Come

Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur we were always asked to write down all the good deeds we had done for people throughout the year, they went into the big ÔMitzvah BagÕ, and our rabbi would read them at childrenÕs services on the High Holy Days.

When I became a Bar Mitzvah the rabbi and the cantor explained to me, in the presence of my parents and whole congregation, that the level I was about to attain by being called to the Torah meant that I was now responsible for the commandments. He informed me that a Mitzvah was much more than a good deed but rather things that I was responsible for in Jewish living. He explained that my Bar Mitzvah marked the begining of my responsibility for all of the commandments, responsibile for doing what I chose to do, and responsible for knowing why I did not do others.

As a rabbinical student I have had the privlige and the opportunity to study most if not all of the commandments placed upon the Jewish people. There are in total 613 commandments that are derived from the Torah. This number includes the the ÔTop TenÕ, commandments concerning ritual practice like, kashrut and wearing a Tallit, as well as a number of commandments that were specific to the sacrificial worhship in the Temple, which we cannot maintain today. I have studied not only what they are, but I believe I have gained a pretty good understanding of why they were commanded and toward what end.

Traditional Jews will explain that Jews are obligated to the commandments (mitzvoth ) because they are central to our unique relationship with God. The merit, in their view, is not what we are being asked to do or not do, but that we are being asked at all, and they reason, if it is God who is commanding how could we refuse. I understand this reasoning, it makes the whole system quite simple, but I cannot agree with it. By the same token, perhaps I now have the impediment of having read and studied too much to continue to define a mitzvah as a good deed.

So I come back to the definition given to me on my Bar Mitzvah day, that the mitzvoth form a list of things that I am free to choose to do or not do I meerly need to understand why I make that choice. This sounds pretty good to me, it makes rational sense, and I am comfortable with it. The problem is that I am too comfortable with it, under these criteria I am only obligated to do what I think makes sense, what I agree with, but in this formation, if I am only going to do what makes sense to me, then why do I need the commandments at all, couldnÕt I just come up with my own list? Of course I could, and I do all the time, the rules that govern my life are not always grounded in Torah, they are often grounded in my own moral underpinnings, which through study I often find are based on Jewish teaching, but not always, and not perfectly. So what can the Mitzvoth mean to me, to liberal Jews as a whole? In my very humble opinion, the mitzvoth can be all three things for each of us simultaneiously. Sometime they are good deeds that we are inspired to perform for others, our community our enviorment. And sometimes they are things that we study but choose not to do, or do based on our understanding. And still sometimes they must also be those things that we know we are obligated to do, and thus we do them, even when we canÕt fully understand why, but we realize it is our duty as a Jew.

What the mitzvoth must never be, are comfortable.