

D'var, Rosh Hashanah 2014

Offered by Lisa Gallatin

I just want to be clear: this is not the time to say goodbye. That's not why I'm in front of you today. I do hope that you'll join me on October 25th for a good-bye PARTY and celebration. Everybody in this room belongs there, because together we have built this community.

Today, however, is my chance to share with you my thoughts about secular Jewish identity. For 15 years you paid me to think about how to define it, how to enhance its credibility as a legitimate option for Jewish affiliation, how to create secular Jewish practice, both in community and in the home, and how to establish a secular Jewish identity and community that can endure from generation to generation.

I took that assignment very seriously. For you, I became a "professional" Jew. Some of you may think I'm some kind of super Jew, or at least a highly literate Jew. Some of you probably think I speak Yiddish.

But I'm here to publicly confess that after 15 years of building Jewish community, after 17 years of directing what became the largest Yiddish chorus in the world..... I still don't fully understand why being Jewish is important to me.

In fact, throughout my 15 years as your Executive Director, every once in a while – and not just when my job was driving me crazy! -- I would think to myself, "And being Jewish matters, why?"

If I were religious I would have an easier time understanding. Believing in god is a powerful, persuasive force in one's life. But I am an un-ambivalent atheist.

Even if my two Jewish parents had been religious it would be easier to understand. But they were not only anti-religion, they were confused about their Jewish pedigree amidst the pressure to assimilate that in many ways defined their generation.

Or if I had grown up in a Zionist household, an ardent believer in Israel and a Jewish homeland. But while I feel a deep sense of responsibility to speak up about Israel's role in perpetuating the cycle of violence in the Mideast, love of Israel is somewhat of a mystery to me.

Even if my parents were Holocaust survivors or I was one of the many of my generation who could name dozens of relatives who perished in eastern Europe I would find it easier to understand my attachment to Jewish peoplehood and my zeal for Jewish culture. I can claim neither.

There is certainly a general sense of obligation to carry on the traditions and culture of our people that is a part of my Jewish baby boomer, post-Holocaust psyche. But that would be a flimsy foundation on which to base a deeply meaningful identity....and 17 years of hard work.

Intellectually, perhaps the most rational way to ask the question is: In what ways does Jewish identity give meaning to my life? But the more gnawing question for me, the more persistent,

the mysterious question is: Why do I care? Why do I feel an involuntary calling to honor my religious heritage?

I don't know. I just do.

It's the tears that give me away, every time. For 15 years as BWC executive director I have been telling my "story." To prospective shule parents, to donors, to the media. The story about how, when I got recruited as the shule music teacher I didn't know a single Yiddish song. About how I sat on the floor, guitar in hand (my infant daughter cooing next to me) flipping through the Yiddish songbooks, alternately singing and crying.

I know this is going to sound corny, but even though I had never heard or sung those songs growing up, I felt like they were in my blood. Those Yiddish songs of struggle and idealism were my window and my path into finding my own Jewish spirit.

In fact – and I'm not exaggerating – after 15 years I never stopped tearing up when I told that story. I was writing this dvar in the car on my way to western MA and, I kid you not, I was in the bathroom stall at the Ludlow Plaza rest stop on the Mass. Pike brainstorming about this dvar and the tears started flowing!!

Then I thought about the many other times I have choked up over the years:

- There was back stage with the chorus at the 50th anniversary of the execution of Ethyl and Julius Rosenberg
- There was the reading of the final letter from Emanuel Rosenblum, who helped bury Jewish diaries in metal milk containers before the Warsaw Ghetto was burned to the ground. This story was part of my shule Holocaust music curriculum – I knew the last thing I should do is start crying in front of a room full of 12-year olds but every year, sure enough, I just couldn't help myself.
- There was that time at the Jewish Theater of New England, right before walking on stage, when we enveloped members of the chorus who had just returned from a pro-Israel rally where they were heckled – by fellow Jewish demonstrators – for holding pro-Israel, pro-peace, anti-occupation signs – not because everyone in the chorus shared the same views about Israel/Palestine, but because we were all about to go on stage united in – and passionate about -- our mission of preserving Jewish culture and yiddishkayt.
- And, of course, there was the chorus 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire – we opened with a dramatic re-enactment of the moment when the fire that killed 146 young women and girls began spreading through the sweatshop, and it was all I could do every time Rosa shouted "where's my sister" not to sob on stage.

I'm sure it's not surprising to you that my examples all have something to do with music. But believe me there are many times, for instance during our High Holiday observances, that my eyes fill with tears.

So what am I saying, "I know being Jewish matters because Jews have really good folk music? Because being Jewish makes me cry?" Because it stirs something deep inside me, more emotional, closer to my existential core, closer to my very urge for survival, than anything else I can think of? I feel like I still haven't really answered the question.

So I'll go back and answer the first question: how does being Jewish offer meaning to my life?

My kinship with the Jewish people offers meaning to my life... Because it fulfills a deeply human yearning for a sense of belonging. How might I otherwise define my people? American? Suburbanite? 60s counterculture? Jews are my people. And I am proud to belong to an amazing legacy of accomplishments and contributions to society, and to carry on that heritage.

My kinship with the Jewish people offers meaning to my life... Because it fulfills a deeply human yearning for continuity. As a college student I went to my first Yom Kippur service, at a temple in Queens. When we spilled out of the synagogue onto the street and I heard the elderly ladies wishing each other Gut Yontef – in a language which at that time I could not name -- I felt connected, tethered.

My kinship with the Jewish people offers meaning to my life... Because, like it or not, Jewish history defines us – and in many ways explains us -- as much as our individual family histories. We are the product and the expression of those who came before us – the hopes, the fears, the baggage, and the beauty.

My kinship with the Jewish people offers meaning to my life... because it fulfills a deeply human yearning for community and because real, lasting community is hard to come by. It seems to me that, for many, the draw of religion is the promise of community. And we have proved at Boston Workmen's Circle that we can have that community without involving god. With the world increasingly at war and insecure – in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine – I am grateful to have all of you and our unspoken promise – because we are here together today -- to take of each other.

My kinship with the Jewish people offers meaning to my life... Because Jewish ritual is smart about human needs....and although we in the Workmen's Circle have created our own unorthodox variations, we nonetheless benefit from 1000s of years of religious wisdom.

All of these insights make sense....intellectually. But I still don't quite get why being Jewish matters so much to me. Why those many moments touch me so, so profoundly. Why as a secular, leftwing, always learning but still relatively illiterate Jew...it matters so much.

Perhaps in this next chapter of my life – as I carry my newly found Jewish personhood back into the largely Christian world of Boston's labor movement where I will be working – I'll gather new insights. I know that I will proudly recall all the Jewish labor leaders I learned about from WC (I ordered a poster of Rose Schneiderman – the fiery immigrant Jewish labor leader and suffragist

-- to hang in my office. I'm still looking for Clara Lemlich!), and I will also proudly recall our Workmen's Circle legacy, at one time known as the Red Cross of Labor.

But I'm still searching. I know that many of you are searching too. And I look forward to continuing to search and question and create – and cry -- with all of you, my Jewish community.

Boston Workmen's Circle has given me the gift of learning to embrace – with arms wide open – my own Jewish self.

Both of my beautiful daughters have a proud and heartfelt embrace of their Jewish identity. And that is one of the greatest gifts this community has given to me and my family.

Now I just need to figure out what it all means.