

## **Boston Workers Circle Rosh Hashanah Dvar (Final as of 9/8/2023)**

By Jenny Silverman

As I thought about what I want to talk about today, I remembered a phone call I received when I was the BWC Shule Director.

I was sitting at my desk in the old BWC building on Beacon Street. As the Shule Director I spent many hours there preparing lesson plans, writing curriculum, and talking to parents. One day the phone rang and a voice introduced himself as a rabbi from Cleveland. He said he wanted to talk about the our Shule curriculum.

He said, “Tell me, do you have a course on “Why be Jewish?”

“Excuse me,” I said. “What are you asking?”

He repeated, “Do you have a course on ‘Why be Jewish?’”

“Are you asking ME why be Jewish?” I answered. “Are you sure you are a rabbi?”

I explained that we spend a lot of time in Shule talking about HOW to be Jewish, and all the different ways people relate to their Jewish identity, but I’m not sure we talk about Why be Jewish.

This conversation happened years ago, but the question continues to resonate with me.

Here we are at another High Holiday service, the beginning of the ten days of awe that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. These high holiday services bring together the many parts of BWC—Shule families, A Besere Velt singers, Yiddishists, social justice activists and book group readers, elders and young adults, people who believe in a higher power and committed atheists. This is a time that we come together as a Jewish community and celebrate the beginning of a new year and a time of self-reflection. Perhaps some of us ask ourselves “Why be Jewish?”

Which brings me around to how I am grappling with that Rabbi’s question.

I have been on a Jewish journey for my whole life. I grew up in the 1950’s, just outside of New York City. My grandparents were Eastern European immigrants with a strong Jewish identity, one side more traditional, and one side Arbeter Ring socialists. I don’t think the question “Why be Jewish?” would have occurred to them. They just WERE Jewish—like others were Italian or Irish. My mother insisted that we join a reform temple to get a Jewish education, but I always felt a little uneasy since there was a lot of talk about God, and I knew that no one in my family on either side believed in God. Then in 1960 when I was ten, I visited Israel with my family. The movie Exodus had just come out, and that along with our visit drew me in to the allure of this new, exciting, Jewish country. Visiting family members who lived on a kibbutz, the scent of the orange groves, the winding ancient streets in Jerusalem, swimming in the Dead Sea, the Red Sea! I fell in love with everything about Israel. Finally! I had a way of being authentically Jewish!

I spent my teenage years in a Zionist youth group, lived in Israel on kibbutz after high school, learned Hebrew, and was determined to move to Israel. I attended a very small seder with David Ben Gurion and his bodyguards, who lived on our kibbutz. And Ben Gurion asked me when I would be making Aliyah, the

term for moving to Israel (which literally means moving up.) I assured him that that was my plan. If the former prime minister of Israel thought I should move to Israel, how could the 18 year-old me refuse? I came home, spent two years in college, and then returned to Israel for one more year.

What do you do when you start to question everything you believe in? It didn't happen all at once. I wish I could say that I immediately saw the contradictions of Zionism. But I didn't. I lived in Israel for two years, and never truly saw or spoke to Palestinians. Even the word "Palestinian" was never used—the Israelis I was living with just referred to Palestinians as Arabs, erasing their national identity. I never asked myself what Palestinians thought of living in a Jewish state, or whether or not this had really been an "empty land for a people with no land". No—I didn't have a sudden epiphany, or see right away that an entire indigenous population was pushed aside to achieve the aspirations for a Jewish State. That came later.

I returned to the US and slowly became involved in the anti-war movement, feminism, environmental activism. These were not Jewish centered activities, and I began to move away from Zionism being the center of my identity. I was dismayed that many Israelis, supported the war in Vietnam, and during those years the settler movement began in earnest to permanently occupy the West Bank. I had a slow turning away from my previous conviction that the reason for being Jewish was to build and defend the Jewish homeland.

Eventually I became a member of the Boston Workers Circle, joining a community that had a very different perspective on how to be Jewish for secular Jews like me. We recognized the role of Yiddishkeit, and reinvented new ways of celebrating holidays and creating rituals that felt authentic, and centered social justice in our practice. We explored multiculturalism within the Jewish community, and we disputed the notion that uncritical support for Israeli policies was a necessary part of Jewish organizational life.

Yet the real turning point came for me when a group of leaders from BWC arranged a trip to Israel and Palestine to spend time with activists and leaders from across the political spectrum. We met with Palestinians in Israel and on the West Bank, in refugee camps and villages. We had an overnight stay with Palestinian families in Bethlehem and walked around the boarded-up market in Hebron where Israeli settlers had made commerce impossible by throwing garbage and bricks down on Palestinian shoppers. We visited a medical clinic in Nablus. We listened to stories of the pain of living under occupation. We also stood with Jewish Israeli peace activists at checkpoints and with Women in Black at their weekly vigil against the occupation. And I cried when we spoke with a Palestinian man in a wheelchair who had been shot by Israeli soldiers, yet still welcomed us, American Jews, into his home and talked about his vision for peace. How had I not seen all this when I lived there for two years?

After taking a hard look at the realities of Israel, I had to readjust my thinking about my Jewish identity. I can't be Jewish the way I was for many years. Maybe its time to call the rabbi back.

Why be Jewish?—for me, its because Jews do have a record to be proud of, while we still need to acknowledge the times we have been on the wrong side of history. We need to support the Jewish Israelis who are working with Palestinians to bring true democracy to Israel/Palestine. We have to show the world that there are Jews who speak out against oppression, even when the oppressors are our own people, sometimes our own relatives. And we have to be the kind of Jews who don't achieve our own liberation at the expense of someone else's freedom.

It's difficult to be that kind of Jew without a community that backs me up and shares my values. I'm so grateful to have a community, all of you sitting here today, where we welcome the searching for a meaningful answer to the question. Why be Jewish? We ask our Shule graduates to grapple with that question when they speak about their Jewish identity at the Shule Bnai Mitzvah. Its not an easy task for a thirteen-year-old, and all that we ask of them is to say something meaningful and honest. And it certainly isn't an easy question for any of us.

Why be Jewish? Maybe it's just all about the bagels.

Gut Yontef, gut yor!