

Sermon delivered by Rabbi James A. Gibson, Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh, PA

Rosh Hashana II - 5765
"Sacred Citizens"
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In the early 1800's, a successful Jewish merchant named Aaron Lazarus bought himself instant respectability in the town of Wilmington, North Carolina. How? He donated substantial funds to bring a pastor to St. James Episcopal Church. A few years later Aaron went even further. He bought pew number #78 to help the church building campaign.

At that time Wilmington, North Carolina was a hotbed of evangelism aimed especially at Jews, to gain their souls for Jesus. But despite his aid to the church, neither Aaron nor his family converted from Judaism.

If the Church tried to convert him, then why was Aaron Lazarus so generous with St. James Episcopal? He thought of every reason but the religious: He wanted to be a good and friendly neighbor, a Jew who supported community endeavors; a Jew who was not alien or different from the other good citizens of Wilmington. The historian Emily Bingham wrote that by financially supporting a church Aaron Lazarus, "in no way meant he rejected Judaism. He said he 'could worship Jehovah (sic) in any temple.'"

Besides, Aaron Lazarus felt far more comfortable sitting in the pew at St. James than he did praying with his own poorer co-religionists. They were neither the kind nor class of people with whom the Lazarus family, as up and coming merchants, wanted to associate. So they practiced Judaism and celebrated Shabbat and holidays in the privacy of their home.

But on Sunday mornings, in public, the Lazarus family went to church where they sang good English hymns, not Hebrew chants. The sermons were tolerable except for the ones aimed at converting him. Attending Christian worship seemed a small price to pay for acceptance.

To succeed in North Carolina, Aaron Lazarus and his family played a delicate balancing act. By remaining Jewish they

demonstrated self-respect, family loyalty and fidelity, all admirable traits in the Christian mind. By supporting St. James, the Lazarus family showed it was neither narrow-minded nor clannish. Social respectability was the key. Don't rock the boat. Don't stand out. Religion was a private matter for family, not public discussion.

Unfortunately for Aaron Lazarus, his son Gershon didn't care much about social respectability. Nineteen years old, he simply wanted to believe. Week after week he sat with his parents in pew #78 at St. James Episcopal, listening with increasing rapture to the sermons of Reverend Adam Empie. Reverend Empie was widely known for his efforts to improve the condition of Jews in America...by making them Christians.

Gershon asked his step mother Rachel why their family didn't believe in Jesus. Rachel had few, if any, answers. She appealed to her father, Jacob Mordecai, to help keep him in the fold. Jacob Mordecai was one of the most learned Jews in North America at the time.

But his grandson Gershon didn't really care. He thought Judaism was old and boring. Gershon felt Jewish only because of his family's private rituals. He recited Hebrew prayers he didn't understand and remained deeply troubled.

After much soul searching, he wrote a letter to his father Aaron, who had moved to Charleston, South Carolina. In it he asked for permission to become a Christian. When Aaron received the letter, he was so stunned and angry he didn't know what to do. So he did nothing. He didn't write back. He thought that maybe Gershon was going through a teen thing and it would simply go away. But it didn't. And Gershon took his father's lack of response as acceptance.

So Gershon prepared to undergo baptism. Finally, the day came when he walked over to St. James Episcopal and told Rev. Empie that he was prepared to accept Jesus.

Rev. Empie was delighted. According to Emily Bingham, "Gershon kneeled. The priest poured water over him, read a prayer and made the sign of the cross on his forehead. In lifting the Communion wine to Gershon's lips, Empie felt his [own hopes rise]; perhaps this was the opening that would...permit all the Lazaruses to see the light [of Jesus]."

Bingham continues: "On returning home, Gershon [to his horror] found his father's written response to his declaration. Aaron's letter forbade the very action Gershon had just taken!...Tragically, Gershon had defied his father's wishes before they were [ever] known to him."

When Aaron realized he had written too late, he sprang into action. He wrote the bishop in Virginia to have the conversion set aside. But Rev. Empie defended the baptism. The cleric stunned Aaron by quoting Jewish law - since Gershon was 19 years old, he was a Jewish adult and able to make his own decision. He went on to declare his hope that Aaron, who "had sat in his church for so many years," would harbor no bitterness at his son's acceptance of Jesus.

But Aaron, in fact, harbored great bitterness and would not let the matter rest. He finally won agreement from the Church that Gershon would study both faiths for a set period under the guidance of grandfather Jacob Mordecai and Bishop Richard C. Moore. Years later, Gershon wrote: "...the light of reason burst forth upon [me]." He decided that he made a grave mistake by converting. He wrote Rev. Empie that he now believed only in the truth of Judaism and hereby renounced his baptism. Hard feelings remained on both sides for many years.

It reminds me of that terrifying midrash on the binding of Isaac. The Torah portion we read today tells us that the angel stopped the knife of Avraham in time, but there is this one commentary that won't go away.

In this teaching a rabbi speculates that the angel came too late, he was not able to keep Avraham from bringing down the knife and drawing blood. The commentary goes on to teach that, in the end, God healed the wound and repaired the damage done by Abraham's blade. But Isaac, like Gershon Lazarus, was changed for life.

Why tell the story of Aaron and Gershon Lazarus today, on Rosh Hashana? I believe the Lazarus family fought for many of the same goals we desire: Acceptance, financial and social success, keeping true to faith and family, not to be seen as alien. We too, face the "Lazarus Challenge": To be fully American and fully Jewish; apple pie and matzah ball soup on the same table.

This year is the 350th anniversary of when the first Jews arrived in America. They were bedraggled survivors of a failed Dutch colony

in Brazil. The governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, warned his superiors back in Europe not to let them stay. He wrote that these Jews would be a religious threat and social irritant to the colony's well-being. He called them, "deceitful," "very repugnant" and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ."

Governor Stuyvesant warned that if the Jews were tolerated, the liberty granted them would serve as a precedent for others who did not conform to social and religious norms. And, of course, he was right. Thank God!

We Jews have been a living, breathing challenge to America for the last three and a half centuries. We have challenged America by our refusal to conform to those very social and religious norms Governor Stuyvesant believed in. At the same time, America has challenged us as Jews and still does. Are we Jews who happen to live in America? Are we Americans who happen to belong to an ancient faith? Which sacred document holds our hearts, the Torah or the Constitution?

When I was in youth group we had an exercise to clarify our beliefs about who we were. It was called the "Three Corners" and it went like this:

The group stood in the middle of a big room. Each three corners of the room had a large poster with a label. One corner was marked "American." Another marked "Jew." The third corner had a banner saying "Israeli."

The group was told to go to the corner that best expressed each individual's identity. Out of about 120, maybe 10 went to the Israel corner. Most of them had visited Israel with their families at least once. They declared that they had lost faith in America. It was, after all, the height of the Vietnam war, just a few years after the 6-Day War in Israel. They hoped that Israel might turn out better. They wanted the dream of Israel over the reality of life here under President Richard Nixon.

About 70-80 of them declared themselves American. They said that this country and its culture were the only ones they had ever known. They were no different from any other American kid with hair and clothes that drove their parents crazy. They listened to America's music, rock and roll. They saw themselves as part of a wild American kaleidoscope of tensions about politics, religion, race, war and family.

That left 20-30 kids who went to the Jewish corner. They had the hardest time articulating their thinking. One girl said, "I can't put my finger on it; it's the warm feeling I get when I say the Shema at night under the covers in bed." One of guys said, "When I'm at a Temple youth group weekend I realize that I don't have to explain anything to anyone. Just being Jewish together is so powerful." Another girl said, "Everyone says that going to services is boring. But somehow, I never regret it when I've gone. No one part sticks out, the sermon, the music or anything. It just all comes together and it's strange that it feels so good when it's definitely not so cool."

As the discussion went on, one girl finally stated the obvious: We don't compartmentalize that easily. We can't assign percentages to the many aspects of our identity. We are human beings who care about Israel, live American lives, and relate to faith as Jews. In the end the group cheered when they didn't have to make a choice.

Then our youth group leader, a wonderful man named Paul Kent z"l, brought the session to a standstill when he said, "No, you don't have to choose between identities. But you do, willingly and freely. You make choices every day about where you spend your time, your money, your effort and even your leisure. You don't have to define yourself. Your choices do that for you."

"You don't have to define yourself. Your choices do that for you." That is what this day, Rosh Hashana is about. Reckoning the choices we have made; taking ownership and responsibility for them. We do that very personally at this repentance season. These holidays demand we account for our ethical lapses and putting them to rights if we can.

But this year I am consumed with the larger meaning of our choices, beyond reaffirming we should be nice to each other. This Rosh Hashana I want to explore the choices we make as sacred citizens in this land - proud Americans and Jews who also care deeply for the State of Israel.

What does it mean to be an American Jew this Rosh Hashana? Part of our identity this season is bound up in the political. As someone who spent his youth working on campaigns, I have seen my share of character assassination. Although I am dismayed by this year's mud slinging, I can't say it is new or terribly different.

What I cannot accept as a proud American Jew is a government that refuses to take responsibility for its serious blunders of policy. As an American I insist on my right to challenge the errors and misrepresentations on the war in Iraq that have cost us dearly in lives, money and moral standing.

My American self bristles when I remember the justification for the war in Iraq, which is in fact now a quagmire, complete with daily body counts. Almost two years ago from this pulpit I preached on the Torah portion of Noah and the rising flood that threatened the civilized world. I defended our President and his surge toward war because I believed what his officials repeated endlessly: Saddam Hussein had stockpiled and was prepared to unleash weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Administration claimed that Saddam Hussein was aiming these weapons at us and our vital interests. We were in mortal peril.

That Shabbat I defended the Administration. I defended war on Iraq as necessary for our self-defense. I believed what our President and his advisors claimed.

But now, I apologize publicly to you for that stance. Don't get me wrong. I think it is wonderful that Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. But that is not the reason we as Americans were given for going to war or allocating hundreds of billions of dollars wage it. No. We went to war because our government claimed to have clear and certain intelligence that Saddam Hussein had deployable weapons of mass destruction.

We now know that he did not. Even this week, Colin Powell confirmed we would probably never find such weapons stashed in Iraq. David Kay, the chief weapons inspector, has declared that there was an outright intelligence failure, or even worse, fraud concerning WMD.

More than 1,000 of our soldiers are dead. More than 7,000 are wounded and damaged for life. Perhaps some still believe that their wounds and deaths were necessary to defend our freedom.

But the President was wrong on the facts. Iraq had no functional weapons of mass destruction. Iraq did not organize the 9/11 attack. Iraq was not allied al-Qaida. He has never owned up to it, never apologized for these and other mistakes. He was wrong at the United Nations. He was wrong in leading the incessant beat of war drums based on falsehoods.

The administration has since justified the war on other grounds, but that does not exonerate him. I, who supported the war in its beginning, feel betrayed. And I, an American Jew, am angry about it.

This season I ask that we examine our American values as we prepare to vote. Please do not sit on the sidelines this year. The stakes are too high for us as Americans and Jews. Voting is our sacred, civic mitzvah. It is a right rarely afforded to us in any other country in any other era of our history. To be an American Jew this year is to vote.

We American Jews deeply care for ISRAEL. If you look at my passport since 1993, save for a few brief stops in other countries, every stamp is for travel to and from Israel. In 2000, I moved my entire family to Jerusalem to be there during the blackest days of the Intifada. In 2002, I gave blood in Israel for Israelis wounded by terrorists. In good times, I have taken more than 100 of you to Israel on my trips and while there with you, my soul bursts with joy.

And yet, you and I are not Israelis. We care for, identify with and advocate on behalf of Israel's well being. It is our American right. But we must remember that we do not live in Israel. In the end we cannot carry the burden of protecting her from all harm.

I speak as one who has borne a rifle for Israel and no other country. I served proudly in the civilian guard of Jerusalem. But overzealous concern for Israel can lead to the accusation of dual loyalty. Recently it has opened us to the vicious charge that American Jews will do almost anything, even break the law, to help Israel.

Dina de-malchuta dina. Moses Maimonides wrote these words in the 12th century in his authoritative work of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah. The law of the land we live in is the law, with virtually no exceptions. Support for Israel cannot be blind or without limit. If there are those in the Israel lobby who have broken American law, their acts threaten us as American Jews.

Fifty six years after her birth, Israel is a wondrous miracle, a homeland for 5 million Jews. But some of her well being has come at the expense and pain of innocent Palestinians. There are, in fact, innocent Palestinians. There are those who have been born into refugee camps through no fault of their own. There are Palestinians who have been denied access to work and essential services through no fault of their own. There are many Palestinians who, in fact, would

readily accept a two state solution if their own leadership ever found a way to put it to a vote.

I understand about Palestinian terrorism. I have been 2 blocks away from a café bombing in Jerusalem the night it occurred. We American Jews can and must argue passionately for Israel's right to exist and defend herself within secure borders.

But we must not forget that there are innocents who are hurt by some of Israel's security policies. We must not dismiss as mere pranks the acts of settlers who harass Palestinians farmers who simply want to work their fields and sell their crop. We must not excuse settlers who have wantonly murdered Palestinians for who posed no threat at all.

How should we American Jews show our caring and support? As much as advocacy and donations, we must visit Israel and see her with our own eyes. I want to publicly thank the 19 people who accompanied my family this June on our Israel trip. They saw a country the media does not really portray. They came away with an appreciation for the complexity of Israel's situation that make their advocacy more believable.

As American Jews we must care for Israel. At the same time we must never support any organization that permits breaking of American laws by merely claiming the rightness of Israel's cause. To be an American Jew is to care with our heads as much as our hearts.

And finally, we are American JEWS. What does that mean? According to Professor Jonathan Sarna, the premier scholar of American Jewish History, being an American Jew has usually meant choosing between Judaism and Jewishness. What is the difference?

Judaism is our faith, built on an unshakeable 3-fold foundation of God, Torah, and peoplehood. It requires more than following the Ten Commandments. It demands more than private spirituality, as Rabbi Freedman said last night. It asks us to cherish a value and a presence beyond ourselves. We call that presence God. Judaism calls on us to accept Torah as we understand it. Torah teaches that there are standards of behavior, ritual and ethics beyond our personal preference. Judaism insists that other Jews matter to us. As Jews we share a common history and belief in a higher destiny for the whole human family, a destiny for which we are responsible.

We share a profoundly adult religion that binds past and present together. Our Judaism especially challenges us to take our faith seriously, not literally.

Jewishness is an aspect of Judaism. It means taking care of Jews in need, the elderly, the frail, the poor and the dispossessed, here or in other lands. From Russian to Syria to India, our Jewishness has motivated us to lobby for our brothers and sisters. Jewishness moves us to offer desperately needed social services to Jews throughout our region, whether it is elder housing, a kosher food pantry or opportunities for special needs children and adults.

I agree with Dr. Sarna's premise. We often choose to support one or the other, Judaism as a faith OR Jewishness as a calling. And yet, I would gently suggest that our Judaism is the foundation for our Jewishness. It is the trunk of the tree from which the branch of peoplehood grows. Those who labor in synagogues must never denigrate those who work for our people. But those who labor for human needs must not devalue what we do here in the synagogue. It is our faith that teaches and inspires us to heed the cry of fellow Jews and others.

There are those among us, unfortunately, who support neither. The music of our faith does not touch them. Our people's cries fall on dead ears.

I believe with all my heart that without an enduring, believing attachment to Judaism, one that goes beyond needing a rabbi for a life cycle ceremony, there is no future for either Judaism or Jewishness in America. Ethnic Jews may survive. But felafel and blintzes alone betray our history, our struggle and even our success as American Jews. If we feed the body but starve the soul, we will wither away.

I believe that we Reform Jews, we Western Jews offer the best and greatest hope of our faith and our people to lift this world out from shadow. We push the frontiers of science, art, music and culture to discover the mind of God through our loftiest endeavor. We are involved in the ache and suffering of both Jews and the rest of the world. It is our highest ethical purpose.

We liberal Jews advocate, push, demand the truth and live by it. We are, as my friend Rabbi David Saperstein puts it, "nudniks for God." This is what liberal Judaism demands of you and me. In the end, being an American Jew means to daily choose our faith, its

challenges, rewards and even its demands with love. Choose or lose this faith. Choose or lose, starting today.

The story is told of people who lived on an island and had to take a ferry boat to shore each morning to work. Every morning they would load up the boat, the captain would push off shore with a long pole and he would guide them to the shore of the mainland. At the end of each work day, the same people would get on to the ferry and the captain would pole them back home.

One afternoon a stranger got on the boat. Everyone was tired, no one paid attention to him. He reached into his satchel and took out a hand drill, fitted in a drill bit and proceeded to drill directly under where he was sitting.

People quickly noticed. When they confronted the man he said, "Who's bothering you? I am only drilling under my seat!" The others shouted at him, "But you're going to sink the boat for all of us! We're all going to drown!"

As both Americans and Jews, this year we ride rough seas in a unique vessel of faith and hope. May the call of the shofar this day guide us and bring us to safe harbor protected by both the Torah and the Constitution.

Or, as Fania Kruger, the American Jewish poet wrote:

"The shofar, symbol of the new year, blows
The tone resounds, and hopeful mankind knows
It is the call of peace that's yet to be
A long-drawn out note of all humanity."

Sacred citizens in this land of promise. This, our goal. This, our hope. This, our destiny. V'chen yehi retzono. May this be God's will. Amen.