

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Ezra Ende, Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
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## Walking Jewish

Before I started my rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College I had a dream. In my dream I was applying for the program and one of the required entrance exams had to do with art of embroidery.

Every student had to pick out a Jewish quote or saying that reflected who he was and to embroider it on a piece of fabric. In my dream I chose the prayer which comes just before the Shema and its blessings.

*Avinu ha'av harachaman ham'racheim, racheim aleinu v'tein b'libeinu l'havin ul'haskil, lishmoa l'lmod ul'lameid*

The "Gates of Prayer" translates this prayer as "Be gracious now to us that we may understand and fulfill the teachings of your word." But In the original Hebrew there is a distinction between different Hebrew verbs that represent functions of our behavior.

In this prayer we are asking God to grant us the ability to serve in various ways:

**l'havin - to understand**  
**l'haskil - to grow intellectually**  
**lishmoa - to hear**  
**lilmod - to learn**  
**l'lamed – to teach**  
**lishmor - to keep**  
**la'asot - to do**  
**lekayeim - to fulfill or confirm**

One of the things I like about this prayer is that it contains many skills that represent different ways that one can refer to the Torah. These actions help us develop our sense of identification with Judaism and with God. This prayer calls us to take an active and continuing responsibility for our Jewish lives.

In the prayer we ask God for the ability to **understand** and **grow intellectually**.

What does that mean?

We in the Reform movement have taken these challenges quite seriously. Since the Jewish Enlightenment Movement of the late 1800s, our movement's core purpose was to integrate our Jewish faith with the facts and opportunities of modernity. In order for this to happen, we needed to break the barriers between the Jews and the non-Jews.

How?

By emphasizing the philosophical aspects of our monotheism rather than focusing on Jewish law. (Halacha).

The sentence: "Be a Jew in your home and a person out of your home." represented the attitude at that time.

The Jewish American Reform Movement has one of its stronger roots right here in the holy community of Pittsburgh. Down at our sister congregation, Rodef Shalom, the first platform of the Reform movement was written in 1885.

The Pittsburgh Platform included the founding Ideas of our movement.

As the platform says:

"We extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men."

Indeed, the bridge between our universal values and our Jewish heritage was and is very clear. But, if we choose only to hold on to our universal values, we will find that we are not clear on how we stand as Jews. What is it that makes us unique? What makes this effort of continuity worthwhile?

We cannot encourage our children to become the next generation that commit to Judaism if we don't provide them with Jewish lives. And a life is not created only from principles and ideas. It consists of experiences, relationships, learning and practice

Like the prayer says: "What we **learn**, what we **teach**, what we **feel**."

Judaism has evolved throughout the ages. Who knows more than we that what seemed right yesterday will not necessarily seem right tomorrow?

The Orthodox movement was created because some were convinced that the Torah is the never-changing will of God and that modernity would destroy Jewish life, that Judaism could not survive without the concept of Halacha, narrow restrictions for the sake of survival.

And that connects me to the third part of this prayer which refers to the verbs "**to do and to keep**."

**What is Jewish law, Halacha, to us as Reform Jews? Is it a list of laws or a way of life?**

The Hebrew word Halacha has the same root as the Hebrew word "to walk," *halicha*.

## **What does it mean "to walk Jewish" for us today as American Jews?**

### **How do we walk Jewish?**

To me a Jewish walk will always be done together, never alone.

In our congregation we call ourselves a “family of families.” I believe that each of us should develop a strong connection to lifelong companions and become a part a family that shares a past, lives the present and dreams about the future—a family that celebrates Shabbat together, lights the Shabbat candles together, rejoices over the food and creates a special Shabbat atmosphere of their own. Together we can enjoy the festivity of Shabbat and invite friends to join us to experience our own special flavor of Shabbat.

One Shabbat, when I came back from the army, one of the biggest secrets in my family was revealed. My sister opened her heart at the Shabbat table and told us why she stopped singing Shabbat songs with Abba and the boys when she turned six. She said that whenever the boys got their *yishar koachs* for their singing, somehow she was skipped or forgotten. And the reason she chose to reveal her secret was in order for my brother and me not to do the same with our own kids. Since that Shabbat, no one ever got away from our Shabbat table without a *yishar koach*.

**At the Shabbat table we are nourished both physically and spiritually. That is the way long-lasting family memories and traditions are born. We create a circle of family experiences that gives a meaning to who we are.**

### **So, what dose it mean "to walk Jewish" for us as American Jews today?**

Where do we learn, pray and share life’s storms and happiness if not in our Temple, our spiritual home? But we can only call our Temple home if we feel comfortable in it, if we are able to follow the prayers, the songs and the rituals that give meaning to our worship.

To keep a relationship alive we must always continue the dialogue between ourselves and our heritage, just like in marriage we must develop our relationship in order to continue to walk together.

“TODAY I AM THE KING OF THE TORAH!” said the boy in the movie, *Keeping up with the Steins*.

Each time I get to study with one of our B’nai Mitzvah, our queens and kings of the Torah, I have the privilege to meet them on a very personal level. Each child brings his own flavor to our study. This opportunity to walk Jewish through learning enables the B’nai Mitzvah to feel comfortable with the Torah. This is so important in the broad sense.

The minute that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah steps on the Bimah surrounded by their family and our community I see how, through their children, the family forms a strong connection to our roots, This special moment is a product of a continuous learning process which starts at a very young age when our children take their first step to the Bima to get their cookies. Their second steps are climbing up the stairs to religious school where they learn our story, explore our Jewish family lives, talk about our obligations to mankind and our community, question God and learn about our history and our connection to Israel.

Our continuous presence and study in our spiritual home, our Temple, leads us to knowledge which provides us with the tools that help us feel at home.

### **What does it mean "to walk Jewish" for us as American Jews today?**

Each of us strives to be a part of a family. Families form congregations. But what is it that unites all of us Jews all over the world? What is it that connects us to each other, which exemplifies our mutual responsibility as a people?

The State of Israel, our spiritual home, holds responsibility for all the Jewish people in the world, and this bond that we share unites us and gives us strength.

We are no longer wanderers. The State of Israel is a strong and vital country that holds the largest concentration of Jews around the world and represents the Jewish people among the nations. Just as in any kind of family, we don't necessarily agree on everything but we all share the same home.

One of the most meaningful experiences that I had as an Israeli tour guide was a conversation with an American Jewish mother. I asked for her permission to take her children to the Jerusalem mall during the time that Israel was facing terrorist attacks. I'll never forget her answer. She looked at me and asked in return, "Do you take your own children to the Jerusalem mall?" "Yes, I replied." To that she answered, "Every place that you take your own children to is a place that you can take my kids to as well."

I'm sharing this story with you because it's really important for me, as an Israeli, to feel that we share a mutual responsibility for the existence of the Jewish state. When you walk around Israel you can hear almost every kind of opinion about when, how and why Israel should deal with different challenges.

Standing here today I'm not in any way afraid to face criticisms that some of you might have about Israel. Believe me; I've heard similar things from my Israeli neighbors. The only thing that would be hard for me to hear is some one saying, "I don't care." I feel that detaching ourselves from Israel is like turning our backs on our own Jewish existence. The State of Israel is continuously trying to find ways to deal with the challenges we are facing. And our democracy is maintained

in spite of growing threats in an area where democracy is not always the ruling force. We must remember that standing up for the rights of oppressed minorities and trying to achieve high morality is what we are obligated to do as Jews. But that must happen together with maintaining our alliance to home and our people.

### **What does it mean "to walk Jewish" for us as American Jews today?**

The Jewish year cycle shapes our lives and offers us ways to connect to our heritage. We celebrate our Judaism by acting it out. Today on Rosh Hashanah, as the year begins we gather here, at our Temple, and share our hopes and thoughts about the year that has passed and the year that is waiting at our doorstep. This special holy day allows us to close one door and open another. Going through this sensitive process of self reflection demands a lot of concentration. Our gathering here today brings us closer to ourselves and to one another so that we can face ourselves in this process of repentance. We see that we are not alone, and our prayer is so much more powerful when it's sung together.

The holidays are pathways that we walk through every year on our Jewish Journey. By celebrating the different holidays we create a common time that unites and defines us as Jews wherever we are.

I remember my first visit to the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. I saw an exhibit of a family sitting around a table that had Matzah on it and a little child was standing and singing with his book opened. What's amazing is that we all know not only that they were celebrating Passover--and not even just that they were having a Seder--but also what part of the Hagada they were on, the Four Questions.

Our holidays often cause a lot of *mishegas* and sometimes create excitement blended with some tension. For example lots of households here need to decide which holidays to celebrate and how they would like to do that. The civil calendar does not always mesh with the Jewish colander, but if we don't bring the holidays into our lives they won't come banging on our doors. What makes these holy day celebrations holy is the fact that we are doing them together for each other. They make us celebrate our togetherness from the past to the present and on into the future.

### **What does it mean "to walk Jewish" for us as American Jews today?**

Where do we live, and how much does it matter? If we look back, Jewish people always had a tendency to live together. Why? What is the benefit of living within a Jewish community?

In the past we Jews lived with each other and were dependant on the community in order to survive. Now, in the modern world, each family unit has its own little

kingdom (a house, computers, laundry machines, televisions etc...) seemingly we don't need each other, and still we are all here together tonight.

I once had a friend who was an architect and wanted to design the first remote synagogue where people could connect to each other and to God through the web and wouldn't have to get out of their kingdoms to do that. Well – this might be a good idea for some people who are physically limited, but would that serve our needs?

It seems that although we do have the option of staying at home, we come together because we feel that our gathering creates our religious lives. Being with each other gives meaning to our worship.

Our tradition always emphasized the importance of the community. Our Rabbis taught that God is present within an *eidá*, which means at least 10 people

Rabbi Richard Address from The Union of Reform Judaism wrote, “Developing personal relationships with others models the beauty and power of our fundamental relationship with God and thus we create sacred communities... The theology of relationships works to transform the entire culture of the congregation”.

As Martin Buber wrote,

“We feel the presence of God when we reach out to each other. Only within a true ‘Chevruta’ (companionship) the presence of God can be transformed from an inner experience to a way of life.”

There is one last verb in the Hebrew prayer I spoke of before that I want to refer to: which is to **fulfill** or to **confirm**

When we choose a way of life, should we obligate ourselves to it? Is that part of the deal? Well—yes. If we get married, we obligate ourselves to our spouses; we are obligated towards our families. What does it mean, exactly, to be obligated to our Judaism?

As I mentioned, in the past the Reform movement chose to concentrate on universal values. I do believe that in time our motivation in the Jewish world has changed. We have shifted from trying to blend in with those around us to holding on to our own unique culture. In the past we tried our best to act like everyone else so we would be treated like every one else. Now that we feel a lot more secure, our focus has changed and our goals have shifted. We are trying to recognize our uniqueness.

I believe that within the world of Jewish tradition we are entitled to choose the paths that we wish to walk on.

By putting an emphasis on the perpetuation of the values that we teach, we create emotional shaping experiences for ourselves and our children that will have a meaningful affect on their lives, especially if they are done on regular basis.

It is important that we adopt Jewish practices into our family lives. Children learn from what they see and do. We must participate in their learning experiences to have an effect on their Jewish identity.

A study was published not long ago by the Hartman institute in Jerusalem. In this study it was proven that Jewish education can make difference! Alongside the alarming rates of assimilation among American Jewry that ranges between 40%-50%, formal and informal educational experiences such as day schools, Jewish summer camps, Israel trips etc... have been proven to have a significant effect that lowered the degree of assimilation. Supplementary Jewish schools such as our own, have been proven to do the same, although they were found to be significant only among children that attended religious school at least two times a week.

**This also proves that it is not only the content or the methodology of the education that matters but also the degree of exposure and the way Jewish education is integrated in to our daily lives.**

The amount of time that Judaism plays a role in our children's lives is essential in regard to their future as Jewish people! This is a big part of the reason we chose to make the change from being a one-day-a-week religious school to a minimum requirement of two days a week. We care about our children very much and their Jewish future means the world to us.

Just two days a go I had coffee with a wonderful graduate of our religious school. Without naming any names, I believe that she represents how our educational program can have an essential effect on our lives. From Religious School to Youth Group to involvement in NFTY (National Federation of Temple Youth), she went on to participation in a wonderful intensive Israel program and is now serving in the Israeli Defense Force.

Every Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, the Torah is passed to the child by his/her parents which have come to represent what is obvious; there is nothing more significant then the Jewish education that is given at home. Our children learn from what they receive with love from their parents.

So... do you remember that in the beginning of my sermon I mentioned a certain dream that I had about the art of embroidery? Well--after completing my art work I got concerned. Since I did not grow up in the Reform movement, I worried that

the College would turn me down because of my choice of this particular prayer which includes Jewish observance.

And today I understand that this dream represented my own growth in regard to Jewish law. Now I know that our own way of life as Reform Jews can help us to walk together.

I know that it is not always easy to fulfill all our personal goals. Sometimes they have to do with the next generation rather than with ourselves. But in order for the next generation to grow Jewishly, we also need to grow Jewishly.

And that's exactly the reason we are all here - to take Jewish walks together.