

Rosh Hashanah 5780  
Torah is My Delight  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

As we stand on the brink of the new year 5780, looking back and forward at this sacred hour, a swell of emotions rises to the surface. I see a room full of people I have come to know and love, with whom I have davened, celebrated, studied, grieved, meditated, danced, and dined, people from whom I have learned as I grew into this pulpit. I also see people who have recently joined our kahal and others whom I last saw here about a year ago. I am delighted to see all of you. My heart is filled with gratitude and joy that we are here together.

Yet there is also pain as we come together this year. Some of our members and their family members are no longer with us. Some of us are struggling with illness at this time and the brink of a new year brings a mixture of hope and worry. As a community, we know that the past year was hard for the Jews, with rising anti-semitism and attacks against synagogues and Jewish people in this country.

I once took a graduate course on Jewish organizational leadership. We were asked to describe our biggest work challenge. Every student came back with a story blaming someone or some policy for keeping them back from their fullest productivity. Our professor became irritated. He sighed and asked, “what is *your* part of the problem?” I thought I was going to talk about anti-semitism today, but that will not be my topic. However, I think that if we apply the question--“What is your part of the problem?” to the anti-semitism we’re seeing, we get to the question we really need to be asking ourselves at this time.

It is not that we have done anything to deserve to be hated for being Jews. We have not brought anti-semitism upon ourselves. *Our* part of the problem is how we *respond*. It is the anxiety we feel when we try to articulate why we love being Jewish so much that we wouldn’t trade it for all the tea in China. It is knowing that what motivated our grandparents to identify Jewishly no longer feels compelling in today’s ethos.

Even rabbis sometimes need to stop and ask ourselves how being Jewish structures our lives on a scaffold of meaning and purpose and supports our own thriving in this world.

In her recent book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Bari Weiss writes, “Nothing can remind you of who you are like a gut punch. It is natural and healthy to push back against the

bully. But if the response ends there, with anger, you have missed a tremendous opportunity to examine *why* you wanted to fight back and *what*, exactly, you wanted to fight for” (p. 167). Yes, I was going to talk about anti-semitism today, but that is not where I have something to offer. Because the Jewish People did not cause anti-semitism. We need to know about it, and we need to be safe, but most of all we need to thrive as Jews. This is not a new idea. In the words of the Psalmist (Ps. 119: 92):

לִּלְמִי תוֹרַתְךָ שְׂעֵשְׂעִי אֲזִאֲבֹדְתִי בְּעֵינָי:

Were not Your teaching my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

I have come to realize that the best religious response I can offer to antisemitism, is to love being Jewish. That is where I believe I have something to share.

Many people say that they’re “spiritual” but not religious. I want to tell you that we’re all spiritual. Being spiritual is part of being a human being, like intelligence or emotion. But we get stuck on religion. Today, I would like to share with you what it’s like for me to love being Jewish, why I find it so meaningful and essential in my life.

For me, being Jewish is a particular way of walking in the world. It’s about believing I am here to do some good, to serve with a full heart and to hold many truths. It is about compassion and taking responsibility, about listening deeply and reading carefully. And most importantly, for me, being Jewish is a regular, daily practice.

When I wake up in the morning, I say the *Modah Ani* prayer. No matter how tired I am or what challenges await me as I begin my day, the words remind me that God has faith in me. I have my bit of service to offer to the Universe. I am part of something great and wonderful, and it’s all out there waiting for me to get out of bed. I am not a morning person...

but I pay attention to the way I put on my shoes. That’s because I have learned how a Jew puts on their shoes. It sounds silly, I know, but for me it’s about mindfulness--that, and connection to millions of people like me, from centuries ago up to this moment, who do the same thing because Jews want to be intentional. It is not about obedience. It is about being attentive, and not taking for granted that I have feet, and shoes, and fingers that can tie them. It is about touching the leather and taking note: this came from another living being. Treat this item with respect. It’s only a shoe--but a shoe is a lot when you pay attention.

I get to morning minyan just on time on a good day. I love that when I walk in the door, Solly is in the Mercaz making coffee and setting up bagels. I enter the small sanctuary and see people I care about, who care about me, and who care about all of you enough to be here in case one of you needs to say kaddish. They are here for many other reasons, too. Some come because our tradition says our prayers are stronger when we pray with others. Some come because they know that being “a spiritual person” needs to land somewhere; it needs a structure and a routine, and we have that here. Some come to talk to God and some come to be seen--by God, and/or by the others who have come.

My *tallit* and *t'fillin* help me love being Jewish. When I wrap myself in my *tallit*, I feel God's loving presence, and it makes me want to give love. First, I wrap it almost like a cocoon, covering my head, which makes me more aware of what is dark in my spirit. I feel my yearning for Divine presence and guidance, which is reinforced by the accompanying liturgy for that moment. And then I am out, in the light, ready to step into the roles that are mine to serve in this world. But slowly. First, I must be personally aligned to my own truth.

I have a special *tallit*. It was hand-woven for me in a pattern based on the *Gematria* (numerology) of *Adon Olam*. My parents tied the *tzitzit* with me on the eve of my 50th birthday. The *atarah*--the part at the neck--says “*Eilu V'Eilu Divrei Elokim Hayim*”--these and those are the words of the living God. Those are rabbinic words about the importance of respectful debate, valuing differing opinions, and the pursuit of truth. For me, those words also mean that when I pray, I am holding all of the love, hope, and gratitude that I can feel at that moment together with the fear, sadness, and brokenness that are also part of my life. I hold them together and I invite God's presence in. When I put on my *tallit*, I feel ready to hold all of those realities come together. You may have noticed that I am constantly re-adjusting my *tallit*. It slips off my shoulders. In those moments of re-adjusting, I try to be mindful of the love that re-embraces me like wings of Divine Presence, and of all of the intentions I have just shared. Each re-positioning is a mindful, re-orienting moment. Putting on a *tallit* does all of that for me.

We rise for the morning benedictions, and I offer thanks that the world rotates and is not made of quicksand, that even when I feel stuck, the rooster still crows first thing in the morning, that I am not alone in the world. I give thanks for the point of freedom that lies within, that I can awaken each day, and for knowing that I have within me all that I will ever really need to make it in this world. We make note of those gifts and more within the first 2 minutes of davenning.

Next in the siddur, we have Torah study. I read the words of the rabbis and feel overwhelmed by gratitude and excitement that I have become their colleague, that I can teach their Torah and add my Torah to theirs. It's 7:05 a.m., I'm still waking up, and that's where my head is.

When I say the *Ashrei* and recite the *Shema* on weekday mornings, I touch the boxes of my *t'fillin* that connect to certain words in the text. Every time I touch my *t'fillin* I am struck by how amazing it is that we still have them. Laying *t'fillin* is one of our most ancient practices, full of its own minute bits of meaning.

My husband, Scott, gave me my first set of *t'fillin* for my 35th birthday after I'd been using a friend's. I was the only female who wrapped them at our Conservative shul that still does not count women in a minyan or allow women to lead services. (We can put a sticky on that!) I grew to love my *t'fillin* and they helped me grow into my identity as a teacher of Torah. And guess what--It turns out that the points of contact correspond to energy centers in the body. Who knew? Putting on *t'fillin* is a deeply rooted spiritual practice that may help me in ways I don't even fully understand.

As I share with you what I love about being Jewish, it strikes me that a lot has to do with davenning, or prayer. There is much more than *davenning*, but I'd still like to say a bit more about it. Every bit of *davenning* has its moment for me, but not all on the same day. Some days, the best part is simply standing with intention in God's presence. The best part of the Amidah for me sometimes is the wordless moment before the first steps or before the first bow. I need to orient myself so that the liturgy will help me connect to God. Sometimes, I spend more time just standing in presence than *davenning* the words. Other times, particular words touch me in an important way and help me hear what I need to hear. There is much more that could be said about the *Amidah*, but let's skip to the end. That is when I am ready to be really open, to let my soul breathe its truth into my conscience. Sometimes insights arise. Sometimes concrete thoughts materialize. Sometimes I am simply there, present, spiritually *on*. You may notice that at the end of the *Amidah* I have my siddur or machzor over my face. I am in my own world at that time, with my Creator. When I am *davenning* with you I also feel your presence, your support, your love, and your need, woven into my own experience.

I could go on and on and walk you through what I love about being Jewish hour by hour, but that would get old. So let's talk about some themes I find really cool about being Jewish out of the many that I could choose.

Family. Moving through the life cycle, from birth to death, in a Jewish family is a profound exercise in meaning making. Visiting Israel as a family is grounding and enriching unlike other kind of vacation. Blessing our children each *Erev Shabbat*, walking to *shul* with them as children every *Shabbat* morning, and then seeing them thrive as thoughtful Jews, each in their own unique way, fills me with gratitude and a depth of connection that comes from the structures and practices of a Jewish family life. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Here's another theme I love about being Jewish: Water. Before my rabbinical school interview at JTS, some of the students tipped me off to a certain test that is part of the lore there. They told me, "They will give you a cup of water. They will watch to see if you recite a *brachah* (blessing) before you drink the water, and they may ask you about it." I did not touch the water.

But on a serious note, did you know that the *brachah* we say before drinking water, acknowledging that all is created according to God's word--*shehakol n'hiyeh bidvaro*-- is the same bracha for ice cream and beer and cheese? When I say a *brachah* before drinking water, the water tastes better because I've made myself aware of how good it is for me, how much water is part of life and my own body. For a quick second I think about where water comes from and I'm connected to how things work in nature and how I'm connected to nature.

When I rinse my hands before eating a meal, I hold them up and look at them, wet and clean, for a moment. That is the moment of blessing. The words of the prayer are not about washing hands--the words are about *lifting up* hands. So I lift up my hands, and for a moment, I feel the uplift I want to bring to others, to our world, to myself, to what is sacred: all of that, just from taking an extra 10 seconds for a 2,000 year old ritual. And I know the work of the rabbis who institutionalized the ritual. I know about who they were and how they lived and how earnestly they wanted to pass on a tradition that infused their lives with meaning. My life looks very different from theirs but when I enact this ritual, and many others, I feel an irreplaceable sense of continuity, ethnicity, and wonder.

And then, still speaking of water, there is the mikvah. Now, I will admit that my own relationship with mikvah use has had its high's and low's, but I know this: Yesterday, when I walked down those 7 steps, symbolizing the primordial waters, birthing waters, to embody the new beginning I want to live into starting right now, I felt something. Mikvah can be a powerful spiritual experience and I have seen others use our mikvah to mark all sorts of transformations in their lives.

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Torah study is something I adore about being Jewish. There are many thinkers in this room. I am a thinker. I have learned a great deal and there is so much more to learn. For me, Torah study is like being in a candy store. I don't like all of the candy, but what I love, I love. I can't eat too much at once. It needs to be savored and it needs time to be absorbed. And, it's delicious, delightful, and full of surprises. Unlike candy, Torah study sharpens my mind. Talmud is my version of Sudoku. It's my math. And it's my inspiration. It's where I find our tradition trying to figure out how we are to carry ourselves in this world.

Midrash is another literature I enjoy, a delightful distraction that allows me to explore a tension in Scripture and peek into the rabbinic imagination.

Each week I study the weekly *parashah* as if I've never seen it before, and it speaks to me in a new way. I don't have to like all of the narratives or laws to find something that speaks to the moment in which I am living. And I assume that something different will jump off the page for me the next time it rolls around.

All of the social justice work we do flows from Torah, and I love that we study Torah in a variety of ways here, whether it's Talmud in the original, or midrashic musings with pain or clay or Chassidic teachings during a meditation retreat here in this sanctuary.

Oh, and *food!* So much to be said, so little time. For today, I offer this: Everything I eat enters my body with a blessing. My choice to eat only kosher food reminds me of who I am in the world. It's a discipline and it's not easy. That's okay. The best things in life are not necessarily easy. For me there is a powerful ethnic connection to eating. I love to eat and I get a kick out of eating food that makes me conscious of every step in its production as well as my responsibilities as a consumer of food in a world where millions of people are starving.

I saved the best for last: *Shabbat*. *Shabbat* has been its own sermon topic from my pulpit in the past and I'm sure it will be so in the future. So let me just say this: Last *Shabbat* afternoon I curled up on my couch with a good book--okay, yes, a Jewish book--yes, a small pile of Jewish books--anyway, my point is that the day was waning and I felt it. I felt the day wane as the light outside my window faded, and I was aware of how precious it had been to have a day to experience time and people and Torah

differently from any other day. It had been a home game day, and it felt almost surreal to enter this building from the sounds and aromas on my walk to shul. As usual, I was blown away by the carefully prepared readings of Scripture and spirited davenning led by congregants.

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You may think, “oh, well it’s easy for her to say all of this. After all, she’s a rabbi, so she understands all this stuff.” I want you to know that I have worked hard to learn what I know, and it took time. It did not happen all at once, but each new learning has been meaningful enough to inspire me until the next bit.

And, there are times when I feel like I don’t need anything complicated to get to a higher spiritual place. Sometimes the walk to shul on Shabbat feels like enough by itself. There are so many points of connection that when one doesn’t work, something else will. For example, during Shabbat davenning, if I’m not into it for some reason, I use the words as a muse, or as a mantra. Or I focus on just a few phrases, or I go into my own reverie. Or I get out of my seat and greet people I don’t know or haven’t seen in awhile. A lot can happen here. Sometimes even the ancient words in the siddur still take me by surprise.

My entire psyche is oriented around the Jewish calendar and from there it breaks down week by week and day by day. Liberation and release on Pesach, commitment and study on Shavuot, joyful abundance on Sukkot. On Chanukkah, questions of identity and where I draw the line as a Jew living in Wisconsin. On Purim, more questions of identity, being different and being “othered,” and the complete chaos that life sometimes is, and what we do when God hides God’s face. Today is about contemplating how we are living out the awesome privilege of being alive in this world and rejoicing in the gift of being together at this moment. And on Shabbat, I come home to my deepest and truest self and to those I love. I rest my soul in the flow of all that is and all the love and peace for which I hope and in which I trust. From Kabbalat Shabbat singing so rousing that I can’t help but dance a little to all that follows for the next 25 hours of living as I wish the world could always be. Shabbat is my anchor.

The whole is more than the sum of the parts. What does it for me--what makes me love being Jewish--are the million small moments of mindfulness that are richer and more textured because of Jewish words, Jewish history, Jewish thought, and Jewish creativity. It works because it’s a constant practice.

If that is not spirituality, I don't know what is.

The Jewish year, the Jewish week, and most importantly, each Jewish day, are filled with intentional practices that help me thrive and flourish in my life as the Jew I am so blessed and so proud to be. Each breath, each moment of potential awakening that I am able to infuse with sacred intention through a uniquely Jewish lens brings me closer to who I am.

There's something that I started doing in my teens. I'd like to tell you about it. Each year on Rosh HaShanah, I commit to adding or deepening one, specific Jewish practice. I want to invite you to do that. Whether your increment is to wear a *kippah* not only when you are in this building or to learn the Friday evening *Kiddush*, to attend a Jewish meditation retreat or to read a Jewish book, to come to daily minyan or recite the *Shema* at bedtime, to join the *Chevra Kadisha*, turn off your smartphone on Shabbat, or take a class here, there is room for all of us to keep growing in our love of being Jewish.

I am afraid that there will probably be more anti-semitic occurrences this year. Our answer will be our love of who we are and our pride in an attuned way of life founded on justice and compassion. May we treasure the gift of being part of a People that is spiritually alive and rich in possibility. May we all stand more proudly as Jews than ever before, not because the world has changed, but because we find new joy and meaning in being part of the Jewish People.

May this new year bring sweetness and blessing to us all.