

Is It Never Again Now?

Who am I?

This is not a trick question and it's not supposed to be a theological question, but one about identity.

Who are you? How do we understand ourselves? Are we American Jews or

Jewish-Americans? Are we primarily Jews who happen to currently live in America?

Or is our American identity primary and our Jewishness secondary?

Or perhaps for some of us, neither of those speaks to the core of who we feel we are. Perhaps we would define ourselves as humanists – people who see themselves connected to all human beings on this planet and only after that, highlight our Jewish or American identities.



Now, this is not a new question – throughout our history, Jews have struggled to define themselves in the various diasporas in which they were charged with the canard of “dual loyalty.”

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It’s fascinating to see this struggle over the history of our people. The Jews in Babylonia in the 7th-10th centuries lived under the yoke of Muslim rule. In general, they enjoyed many freedoms, but they clearly saw their primary identity as Jewish.

In the 9th Century, the Jewish community asserted its particularly Jewish identity in a powerful manner. They took the first blessing before the *Shema* and changed it. Now, it was not a major change – they added a few words about Zion: *Or hadash al tziyon tair v’nizkeh khulanu meheirah l’oro* – they asked God “to cause a new light to shine upon Zion, upon Jerusalem and may all of us speedily merit [enjoying] its radiance.”

At first glance, this does not seem that dissimilar from many other



passages in our *siddur* – in our prayer book – that speak about the restoration of Zion and/or a Messianic era or person.

But, the location of this line was significant: within a blessing about light and nature and creation – a universal *brakhah* that is without any particularistic themes.

The people so longed for Jerusalem that they could not go even one *brakhah* without thinking about her! For them, their Jewish identity was primary.

This change was opposed by the great leader of the community in Babylonia, Sadya Gaon, who said that this insertion distracted people from the universalistic theme of the blessing.



But the people's primary identity as Jews and their love of Zion and desire for its restoration overrode the great rabbi's concern. And so those words have been with us for the last millennium.

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Today, perhaps this phenomenon is more acute as we more deeply appreciate intersectionality – how we are made up of overlapping identities that sometimes place us in multiple minorities that can lead to oppression and discrimination.

It was early this summer when I received an email that reminded me how complicated it is to be a rabbi in this day and age as we juggle different identities and priorities.

A coalition of Jewish organizations were asking me and Temple Emunah to join them in a protest they were calling “Close the Camps.” They invited us to



protest these actions with the words “Never Again is Now,” echoing responses to the Shoah, the Holocaust.

These organizations chose *Tishah B'Av*, the 9th of Av – the saddest day of the Jewish calendar – to protest the immigrant detention centers in the U.S. and the separation of children from their parents at our borders.

According to tradition, *Tishah B'Av* is the day when we remember some of the most terrible events in Jewish history including the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE. It is a day of fasting, reading the book of Lamentations/*Eikhah* by candlelight, a national day of mourning.

These groups wrote that they chose *Tishah B'Av* since “*Tishah B'Av* is a day of mourning for the plight of our refugee ancestors. On this Jewish day of mourning, we cannot ignore the cries of those whose tragedy is right before us, the many immigrants and asylum seekers who are being treated inhumanely by the Trump administration.

We believe it is essential to demonstrate publicly that the Jewish community will not turn its back on refugees arriving in our country and our immigrant neighbors already here.”

I stared back at the email considering what to do. I was not sure and could feel a Tevya moment coming on.

On the one hand, this is a no-brainer. We stand with immigrants – Judaism has a clear perspective on this issue.

But, on the other hand, is it really helpful to use the Holocaust slogans? Is this really the same as the Shoah?

On the one hand, we stand with immigrants – the [Conservative Movement of Judaism and its Rabbinical Assembly has stood with them in policy statements](#), as has the [Massachusetts Board of Rabbis](#). [The CJP has created a fund to support these efforts](#).

This is clear.

While there may be differences of political opinion vis á vis how we should fix our broken immigration system, the Jewish community has been fairly united – even in this divisive time – that we cannot tolerate this tyrannic behavior that traumatises children. This does not accord with the



values of our tradition, which implores us 36 times in the *Tanakh* not to oppress the stranger.

For example from Exodus: “Do not oppress the stranger because you know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt – *Atem yidatem et nefesh hager ki geirim hayeetem b’erzet Mitzrayim.*”
(Exodus 23:9)

Of course, while we are not actually in Egypt, this notion has become the calling card of the Jewish people – we approach others with the sensitivity we would have developed, if we had been strangers in Egypt. Each year at the *Seder*, we are asked to imagine what it would be like if WE were freed from Egypt.

It is in our people’s DNA to understand the plight of the stranger.

But, on the other hand, this language of *closing the camps* with its overt Holocaust



references is really not helpful. While the current situation is terrible, it is different from the Shoah. As awful as these camps are, they are not Nazi concentration camps, which were often linked to death and extermination camps.

And the language of “never again” is complicated. Never Again has been about the Jewish people – never again will we allow anti-Semitism to produce a Shoah, never again will we let six million of our sisters and brothers be murdered....

But, on the other hand, is not the point of all these values, not just to help ourselves, but to use them to help others? Jews have been at the forefront of the movements to help those fleeing genocides from [Darfur](#) to Bosnia.

What’s the point of “never again” if it does not help others?

But, on the other hand, we must care first for ourselves. This is a time of growing anti-Semitism. This year there was a mass-casualty gun violence assault on a *shul* in Pittsburgh, another attack in Poway, CA. Jews killed on Shabbat morning in *shul* for nothing other than being Jewish.

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יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבה...

These are the first words of the Jewish mourners' prayer, 'Magnified and sanctified be Your name,' to be recited tonight on the first Sabbath since the tragedy at Tree of Life



The front page of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on Friday November 2, 2018
(Screenshot via JTA via Times of Israel)

This is a time when we need to stand and protect ourselves. Here at Emunah, we have hired guards and our amazing security committee's volunteers are working to protect us and we are grateful.

[Even the UN has acknowledged the rise in anti-Semitism](#), as Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, says he is "alarmed by the growing use of antisemitic tropes by white supremacists including neo-Nazis and members of radical Islamist groups in slogans,

images, stereotypes and conspiracy theories meant to incite and justify hostility, discrimination, and violence against Jews.”

Shaheed criticized the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, writing that “expression which draws upon antisemitic tropes or stereotypes, rejects the right of Israel to exist, or advocates discrimination against Jewish individuals because of their religion, should be condemned.” He noted “numerous reports of an increase in many countries of what is sometimes called ‘left-wing’ antisemitism, in which individuals claiming to hold anti-racist and anti-imperialist views employ antisemitic narratives or tropes in the course of expressing anger at policies or practices of the Government of Israel.”

He further stressed “that antisemitism if left unchecked by governments, poses risks not only to Jews but also to members of other minority communities. Antisemitism is toxic to democracy and mutual respect of citizens and threatens all societies in which it goes unchallenged.”

And we feel it right here – [attacks on the Chabad house next door in Arlington](#), vandalism and anti-Semitic attacks throughout public schools in our area.

Tevye's words kept echoing in my head, "On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try and bend that far, I'll break. On the other hand..."

Staring at the computer screen for too long, I started to get a headache.

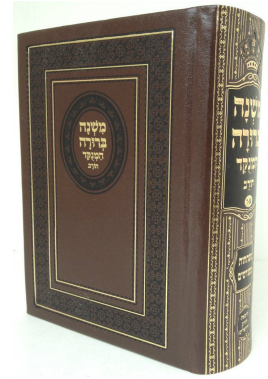
I turned it off. I decided we should discuss it on the following Shabbat at *minhah*. We called it "Is it Never Again Now?"

A large group came to discuss this and sure enough, argued passionately and articulately....for both sides of this argument. I felt affirmed, but still unsure of how to proceed.

* * *

When we need counsel, we turn to our sources. Our sages taught that we should always end every prayer with a call for peace. Without

peace, we have nothing; there are no blessings without peace. This is the conclusion, the final teaching of the entire *Mishnah*.



And then over time, our tradition did just that. They wove peace into our blessings, our salutations and yes, into the end of our prayers. That is why we end the service with the *Kaddish* whose final line is the quintessential prayer for peace – *Oseh Shalom*.

The central prayer of every service; the *Amidah* always ends with the blessing for peace. But there were different foci of this peace: a more universal peace and a more particular peace. The blessing for peace is normally more centered on the Jewish people and it ends with the *hatimah* – the salutation/ending – referring to God, as the One who blesses the Jewish people with peace – *hamevareikh et amo Yisrael Ba'Shalom*.



But, there were different versions of this prayer. Thanks to the incredible historic discovery of the Cairo Genizah, brought to light at the end of the 19th

century by the distinguished rabbi and scholar: Solomon Schechter, we have many versions of these texts.

Some of these date to the great rabbis like Amram Gaon who lived in the 9th century in Babylonia. His versions have a more particularistic ending for the prayer for peace, while the manuscripts from the land of Israel around the same time make the prayer much more universal, praising God as the one who makes peace for all, not limiting it to the Jewish people.

My assumption is that those in the land of Israel felt they could pray for others, while those living in exile, experiencing more anti-Semitism, felt they could not.

Today, we are aware that we need both!

And that is how our prayers evolved – we recite the universal versions during these 10 days of repentance in our prayers and we incorporated those elements into the beginning of the blessing for peace based on the prayerbook of Rav Amram which is why we say *Sim Shalom Ba'Olam* – place peace throughout the whole world and *shalom rav al*

yisrael v'al kol yoshvei teivel – place a great peace upon Israel and all the inhabitants of the world.

This is a reminder that we can and must do both!

And this applies not just to the 9th century, but to this very moment.

We must assert our identity as both Jews and Americans, part of two peoples, each with their own unique narratives.

We can assert our Jewish identity and, at the same time, be members of this country – people who stand with others experiencing oppression.



We can and must do both!

We have been a people that have stood for the rule of law. This is a time when we are called as never before to stand for justice. When it

appears that those entrusted with the highest offices in our land seem unable or unwilling to follow the law, it is a most challenging time.

This is a time when we must be able to walk – proudly and strongly – and assert our identity as Jews. When we must speak out and even shout against anti-Semitism, fiercely voicing how we will stand up for ourselves. We will never again allow ourselves to be the victims of hate.

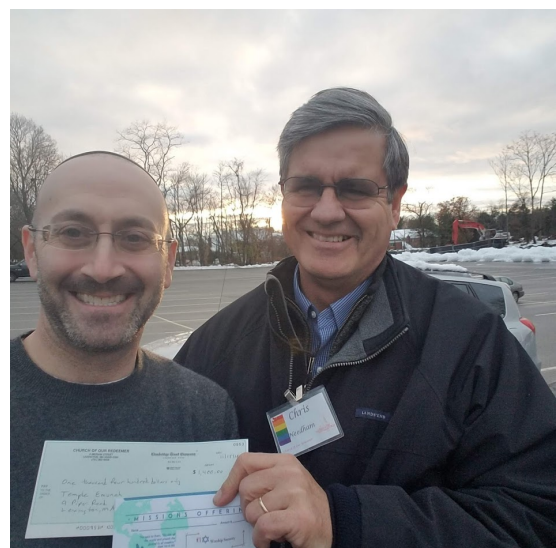
But, let us take the values of our tradition, and help not only ourselves, but others. We do this for two reasons.

First, because it is the right thing to do and second, because it is in our own best interests.

When we build bridges with other groups, other minorities, other religious groups, with those who are threatened, they become our allies.

And, God forbid, if or when we are attacked, then they will stand by us – as they have during this past year.

We have already felt that as several churches and non-Jewish friends



have supported us by sending us thousands of unsolicited dollars to help us with our security needs. And we have received notes of support from our Christian and Muslim friends.



Friends, this is a moment where we must bequeath to the next generation our proud narrative – the story of Jewish survival, the story of a distinct people.

But it does not end there. It is a story that contains the values that call us to act on behalf of others beyond ourselves.

* * *

After many conversations and a good amount of input about decided what to do about the *Tishah B'Av* rally, I tried to find a Solomonic compromise – we would promote this event and many Emunah-ites attended and Rabbi Kling Perkins and I spoke at the rally, but we changed the PR.

We did not use the language of “close the camp,” nor did we use their graphic, which would have been far easier. Thanks to Jodie Parmer, we created our own PR.

We stood up for our identity as Jews, while we spoke out against injustice.

It's not an easy road to walk, it's nuanced in a time of soundbites, it's passionate centrism in a time of extremist voices, but it's where we need to be.

I hope we can join together on this path.

Gmar hatimah tovah – may we be sealed for a year of proud Judaism
that cares for the whole world.

