

The High Holy Days are a time to re-examine what it means to be a Jew. We examine our faith to understand our relationship with our God. We recall Abraham, the first Jew, the first to probe the meaning of Jewishness. Abraham was the first to test his faith, to explore his relationship with God. We recall the episode that gave him the distinction of being the first Jew. In the Akeda – today's Torah portion about the binding of Isaac, we are ambivalent and perplexed over Abraham's actions toward his son. When we look, however, to an earlier account in the Torah, Abraham's departure from his birthplace as an act to repudiate idolatry, we all cheer. It is clear that Abraham's understanding of a relationship with God requires him to reject the forms and content of paganism. There are scores of passages about stone and graven images, about bowing down to statues and making sacrificial offerings. It is hard not to recognize all the cultic paraphernalia. In the Bible and Jewish tradition, we find enormous opposition to idolatry. Apparently, the rejection of idolatry is one of the significant pillars of Jewish faith. The Ten Commandments contain the admonition "Thou shall have no other gods before Me."

We might think that biblical idolatry is totally visible because it is easily recognized because it is focused on the physical worship of stone and wooden images. This is more difficult. Conceptual idolatry cannot be seen by our eyes. We must instead probe it with our minds. Particularly today, idolatry must be understood not simplistically as those physical objects to which we bow down.

Anything that obscures our relationship with God, to dynamic reality of a God commanding righteousness – is conceptual idolatry. Idolatry is that which confuses our religious priorities. Idolatry distorts our self-understanding of who we are as Jews. Abraham and Moses had to reject idols to be called a Jew. Today we must reject idols to be called a Jew.

The conventional forms of idolatry – money, power, status – these are cliché idols of our generation. They are much like the wooden and stone statues of our ancestors' age. They are easy to see. But we are blind to other forms of idolatry. Specifically, Jewish idols.

I am talking about Jewish idolatry – such things as the Holocaust and the State of Israel. Do not misunderstand. Certainly, the Holocaust is the most devastating event in recent Jewish history -- perhaps in all of Jewish history. One third of our people were annihilated.

We must not forget the Holocaust. Soon there will not be any more actual Holocaust survivors; no more eyewitnesses; no more first-hand sources to tell

the story, to inform the world. So many are quick to forget; so determined not to remember. Some even seek to rewrite history itself. They claim that the Holocaust never took place. If only, that was true.

Recently, a Phil Donahue show focused on the Holocaust. Callers barraged the switchboard, protesting the subject of the program. They were tired of hearing about it. Other people, they claimed, have also suffered. When the world wants to forget the Holocaust, it is our responsibility to remind them.

Still, we must guard against making the Holocaust an idolatrous conception. Let me explain.

A contemporary Jewish philosopher, Emil Feckenheim, maintains that a religious commandment sticks to us out of the Holocaust: Thou shall not grant Hitler a posthumous victory! In other words, it is his view that we must be Jewish just because Hitler wanted to eradicate Jews. While this may sound logical, I believe that elevating the Holocaust to be the main attraction of Judaism is to do precisely what Feckenheim does not want us to do. To turn the Holocaust into the single most significant reason for confirming Jewishness, does give Hitler a posthumous victory. One of the major failings of our Jewish religious schools is that we are educating a generation of students whose only knowledge of Jews is how they died. The Holocaust has become the most central event of our Jewish self-consciousness. We must ask: what must our children think, living in freedom, and affluence, when they experience our pre-occupation with Hitler's Europe? To learn merely the negative reason for Jewish identity is an incentive for young Jews to be repulsed. They will opt out of a religion based solely on negative historic fact.

Let us face it. No healthy person chooses to be a perpetual victim. No psychologically healthy person lives with an obsession about destruction. The Jewish community is more than preoccupied with Holocaust – it is obsessively focused on it. I agree with Jacob Newsner who said turning the murder of European Jewry into the paramount motive of being a Jew presents all together too simple and too repulsive account of reality. The death of the Jews in Europe was significant, but even more significant and more unique was their life. The Jewish life that they lived.

Holocaust memorials are cropping up all over the country. There is a great danger that they will become the normative place for Jews to gather together no matter what the nature of the meeting. We cannot let the Jewish religion become simply a survival kit. This gives a strong negative dimension of Jewish identity. It arouses in too many Jews an irrational easy excuse to hate gentile neighbors. It supports gross stereotyping such as: Scratch a Goy and

you will find an anti-Semite. The Holocaust, if incorrectly understood, makes us vengeful and hateful. It brings out the worst in us. I refuse to join the cynics who believe the entire world wants the Jews dead.

Obsessing over the Nazi era encourages in us excessive militaristic attitudes. We imagine the world to be our enemy, and therefore, to some extent this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The words "never again" become an excuse for doing anything and everything to preserve ourselves. It fosters chauvinism and the worst kind of particularism. When the Holocaust and Israel are linked in discussion, often this is done to forestall political criticism and suppress debate. We talk about the Holocaust on one hand and raise the flag about Israel on the other. That is not healthy. While the two are intertwined, they must not be a Carte-Blanche ticket to approve every single thing Israel does.

In the final analysis the tragedy of the Holocaust does not give us permission to call ourselves good Jews. The Holocaust is not a surrogate for Jewish life and Jewish commitments.

We may believe when, because we possess a memory of the Holocaust, we end our search for self-identity; the memory is not enough!

The State of Israel is another conceptual idolatry we American Jews have erected for ourselves. In a singular fashion Israel possesses a danger for us. We invest too much of our Jewish attention on the state. We tend to believe because we support Israel monetarily that we are good Jews. That is just not enough. It is a trivialization of our grand heritage.

Israel is indeed an integral part of our identity as Jews. Anyone who has visited Israel finds it a marvelous place to recharge our batteries. We are both moved and inextricably bound to our identity when we stand at the Wall, see the Knesset, and know that Tel-Aviv was built from sand dunes, wondering in amazement at the blossoming desert. We are exhilarated when we climb Masada. There is no comparable sensation to looking out of an airplane's window at the approaching coastline, for a landing at Ben Gurion's Airport. There is something unique about breathing the air in Jerusalem, about walking on the same steps that King David trod, to follow the steps of Abraham and Elijah. I am certain that part of the reason that I am a rabbi today is because I spent most of my life in Israel. Without doubt, Israel can turn you on to being a Jew. Israel arouses in us our Jewish identity. Its existence has changed our self-image. Israel testifies to the fact that we are not sniveling, groveling, beggars living by the goodwill and whim of the Gentile world.

But Israel is not a surrogate for Jewish life and Jewish commitments. We American Jews, I am an American Jew: we are here by choice. Jewish life does not depend solely on the existence of the state of Israel. For more than four thousand years there was no Israel. Jewish life flourished, nonetheless. The last three hundred years in America have produced the most powerful, most dynamic, most influential, most important Jewish community in the world; perhaps in all of history. Here in America, it is time to recognize that American Jews are not second class Jews.

My friends, Jewish history did not begin in the 1940's. Our identity as Jews is not defined alone by the Holocaust nor is it eight thousand miles away in Israel. We cannot let our history become our theology. Judaism is a way of life and belief with rites and rituals, values, culture, holidays and celebrations, Bible, midrash. Judaism is a vehicle to transport us to peace and righteousness through ethics and commandments. Judaism is a doctrine of redemption and a vision of human dignity. Judaism, above everything else, is a spiritual enterprise, a covenant with God. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the High Holy Days are all about these issues. We refocus our sights on our place in the world, our place in God's plan for the world. We are God's partners. And the key to the enterprise of Jewishness is understanding Torah. Neither Auschwitz nor Tel-Aviv are the symbols of our faith: Mt. Sinai is!! The revelation at Sinai commanded charity, concern for the helpless, kindness, honoring parents, speaking to stranger, visiting the sick, attending funerals, devotion in prayer, peace between human beings and the study of Torah. In the Talmud, the study of Torah is the greatest of them all, because the study of Torah leads to them all. The danger in concentrating only on the Holocaust or on the State of Israel is that they take us nowhere but themselves. They become the end rather than the means.

We are here on Rosh Hashanah 5749 measuring our lives and our destinies. This world still needs to be made better. We will go on celebrating Rosh Hashanah each year until we get it right. This is God's eternal plan. To be part of God's eternal plan is to be Jewish!