

I Am a Jew!

D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

5785



1. I am a Rabbi.
2. I am a spouse to a devoted and caring wife, Silvia.
3. I am a father to Daniela, Ilan, and Abby, three wonderful children.
4. I am a son to loving parents, may their memory be for a blessing.
5. I am a brother and a brother-in-law.
6. I am a nephew, an uncle, and a cousin.
7. I am an American soldier, a Captain in the US Army.
8. I am a Chaplain.
9. I am a cigar aficionado and a bourbon connoisseur.
10. Not sure I am a golfer, yet, but I wish to be one.
11. I am a friend, a loyal friend.
12. I am a caring human being.
13. I am intelligent.
14. I am a fan of Boca Juniors.
15. I am sensitive, compassionate, and kind.
16. I am a forgiving person.
17. (I can work a little on my humility.)
18. I am an American citizen.
19. I am an Argentinean licensed psychologist.
20. I am a member of the Rabbinical Assembly.
21. I am a graduate of the University of Buenos Aires, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano.
22. I am an Argentinean citizen.
23. I am a native of Buenos Aires.

- 24.I am a Spanish speaker.
- 25.I am Latino, and I am Hispanic.
- 26.I am white.
- 27.I am straight.
- 28.I am an ordained clergy.
- 29.I am a member of the New York Board of Rabbis since 2006, and I am an officer of the New York Board of Rabbis since 2022.
- 30.I am a senior fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute.
- 31.I am an Alpha Epsilon Pi (AEPi) brother.
- 32.I am fluent in Hebrew.
- 33.I am a graduate of the Senior Educators Program of the Melton Center for Jewish Education.
- 34.I am a member of the Kellogg Jewish Leaders Circle from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.
- 35.I am a recipient of the Israel and Libby Mowshowitz Award.
- 36.I am a Doctor of Divinity, honoris cause, from the Jewish Theological Seminary.
- 37.I have a good sense of humor.
- 38.I am a member of the first cohort of the UJA Rabbinic Fellowship for Visionary Leaders.
39. I am a member of the third cohort of LEATID, Senior Community Leaders in Argentina.
- 40.I speak, read and write in Yiddish.
- 41.I am a certified volunteer with the Red Cross.
- 42.I am an employee.
- 43.I am a teacher.
- 44.I write poetry.
- 45.I am a former Rabbi of the Dominican Republic.
- 46.I am a former Adjunct Professor at the Universities of Buenos Aires, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and St. John's University.
- 47.I am an enthusiastic Talmud and Mishna learner.
- 48.I am a bridges' builder. Maybe I am a builder of bridges.
- 49.I believe in Hashem.
- 50.I am a Jew.

Dear friends,

In preparation for this d'var Torah, I was able to identify 50 different personal identities. All real, all true, all helping define who I am, all contributing to the person I am today. The exercise took me a little over an hour, and it wasn't too difficult.

We don't have an hour right now for each of us to do this exercise. However, I can invite you to think on the spot, from your own seats, on your own multiple identities.

Begin by saying: *I am...* and then add your family relationships, your professional and work identities, your hobbies, and your skills. Believe me, it won't be too difficult for each of you to come up with at least 25 identities. These identities can be described as the sum of who we are.

Now, imagine each identity being a card. I have a deck of 50 cards, each of them having one of my many identities written on it. I can shuffle them; I can pull them as needed. I can also put them in some logical order.

I will come back to the identity cards in a few minutes, but while you think of your multiple identities, please allow me to move in a different direction and talk to you about Jonah.

In the book of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow afternoon, God calls Jonah to be a prophet to the wicked city Nineveh, but Jonah rebels and flees across the sea in the opposite direction. When God sends a storm to stop Jonah, the prophet is thrown overboard. God sends a fish to rescue Jonah, and in the fish's belly Jonah sings a song of thanks. The fish spits Jonah up on the shore near Nineveh and God calls Jonah a second time. Jonah goes to Nineveh, preaches a short sermon, and the whole city repents. Afterward, Jonah admits to God that the reason he had fled in the first place was that he had known that God would be merciful to the city—and Jonah had wanted the city destroyed. God is not happy that Jonah is so selfish, so God uses a plant to try to teach Jonah that God loves all creatures.¹

¹ <https://enterthebible.org/courses/jonah/lessons/summary-of-jonah>

The book of Jonah teaches us lessons about the consequences of choices, the power of repentance, and the forgiveness of God, all excellent topics for a Yom Kippur sermon. However, I would like to talk to you about the fleeing Jonah, the runaway Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" (Jonah 1:1-8)

In other words, Jonah was asked by the sailors about his many identities: What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" in other words: Jonah, tell us about you.

Now Jonah, not unlike us, had many identity cards. He could have replied:

- I am a human being.
- I am a prophet.
- I am the son of Amitai.
- I am a resident of Gat-Heffer.
- I am a runaway.
- I am fluent in Hebrew.
- I hate Assyrians.
- I have money.
- I like to sleep.

- I don't like to talk about myself.

Jonah could have told the sailors many more things we don't know about him because the story doesn't tell us. Perhaps he was a swimming instructor or perhaps he was allergic to fish. We don't know and we will never know.

What we do know, however, are the first words that came out of Jonah's mouth in the most critical moment in his life – the first words when he believed these might be his last words.

And he answered, עברי אנכי (and please allow me to paraphrase): "I am a Jew, and I worship Hashem, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:9)

"I am a Jew" is Jonah's most important identity card, the one that he pulls out when push comes to shove.

Dear friends, let's pay attention to how Jonah orders his identity cards: I am a Jew, and I worship Hashem, and yes, I am running away, and yes, I have many more things to tell you about me, but the most important fact you need to know about me now, at this crucial time, is that I am a Jew.

Yes, I do believe in Hashem, says Jonah, but for me that comes second. First, before anything else, you should know that I am a Jew.

And now, he is ready.

Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (Jonah 1:12)

But the sailors don't wish to throw Jonah into the sea. Somehow, the words: עברי אנכי - "I am a Jew, increased his stature in their eyes. Somehow, in a strange way, the words *I am a Jew*, earned him a new respect. Jonah's proud words: עברי אנכי - "I am a Jew," had a transformative power on everyone around him.

Jonah, instinctively, understood a truth that many Jews are failing to understand: if you are proud of who you are, others will respect you.

Barbara Resnick was telling me that more and more people are buying stars of David and identifying Jewish symbols. Good for them. Now is the time. Being a proud Jew, standing for what you believe, will make other people respect you more. If not, just see what happened with Jonah.

The big question today is not if "I am a Jew" is part of your identity cards' deck (even for Bernie Sanders it is) but is it on the top or not.

Yes, I am a Rabbi, and a spouse, and a father, and an American, and a Chaplain, and a Spanish speaker, and many more things, but today more than ever, I am first and foremost, a proud Jew! And let me add, a proud Jew for whom the Jewish State of Israel is an indivisible part of his identity.

Jonah taught us that you may run away from God, from your family, from your vocation, but you should never run away from your Jewish identity (and I have a secret for you: even if you do run away, they will find you).

So, my message for you is simple: let's imitate Jonah and let's wear our Judaism on the outside, with pride and determination, bringing our Jewish identity card to the top of the deck. May the words: **עברי אנכי** - "I am a Jew," be the first ones to come out of our mouths. Now is the time, more than ever.

Today, more than ever, we need proud Jewish lawyers, and proud Jewish judges, and proud Jewish artists, and proud Jewish journalists, and proud Jewish professors, and proud Jewish elected officials, and proud Jewish influencers, and proud Jewish people who others listen to and respect.

Alan Dershowitz was once asked: don't you think the Jews have too much power? Not enough, was his reply.

We need proud Jews in positions of power, and we need them to use that power. The time is now! Tomorrow might be too late.

We are living in fateful times. We have a unique opportunity to impact the Jewish lives of our children and grandchildren. We have an opportunity to shape the lives of those around us.

Last, but not least, since I have a close friend in high places, let me conclude with a special request:

אָנָּא בְּכַח גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ תַּתִּיר צְרוּרָה – *If You would, may Your mighty right hand undo the knot that ties us up. Mighty, Holy One, in Your abundant goodness, guide Your people, listen to our pleas, hear our cry...*²

For we are Your people, and You are our God; we are Your children, and You are our Father.

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ - Our Father, Our King

As we close one of the most difficult years in modern Jewish history, we come to You, imploring You for a better one.

Give us the courage, strength and resolve to sort our many identity cards and to put the Jewish one on top.

Help us understand that only by being proud Jews, by living proud Jewish lives, will we earn the respect of the others, that only by being loyal to our place in history, will we find our place in the world.

And since You love us, and You have the power, bless all of us, our loved ones, and the entire people Israel, with a good, sweet, joyous, and peaceful year.

Amen

² Ana B'Khoah – Siddur Lev Shalem, Page 22