

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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I was born in Argentina and, since my youth, I have been immersed in the struggle to achieve pluralism. My parents came to Argentina from Europe, bringing with them thirty-five centuries of Jewish memory which they joined to the four centuries of Argentine memory.

I have lived through a multitude of cultural and political changes, coups d'etat and democratic stirrings. I have felt anti-Semitism, both latent and overt. But I never experienced an anti-Semitic assault of the magnitude and cruelty which, on July 18, fractured Argentine society - the bomb that destroyed the headquarters of the Argentine Jewish community organizations, killed Jews and non-Jews alike, devastated Buenos Aires, and shocked the world.

But why have fanatical anti-Semites always been unsuccessful in their attempts to destroy the Jewish spirit, the Jewish will to live?

Is it because being Jewish means being suffused with the spirit of solidarity? From antiquity, we have prayed in a *minyan* and studied sacred texts together. When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and turned thousands of the vanquished into slaves, contributions to buy their freedom poured in from Jews across the Mediterranean basin. The redemption of captives cut across all forms of oppression and entered Jewish consciousness. To Jews, solidarity is an expression of love. Fanatics prefer to nurture hate.

Is it because being Jewish means believing that we can shape our destiny, evidenced by the epic rebirth of the State of Israel?

Is it because being Jewish means belonging to the first human community that extolled its own critics? Biblical prophets lashed out at corrupt kings and priests. As a consequence, we gained the courage to recognize and take responsibility for our shortcomings. Fanatics cannot tolerate criticism.

Is it because being Jewish means being open to questions? At the Passover meal, a child asks the Four Questions before the story can be told. Questions stimulate thought and knowledge. Fanatics do not question -- they obey. Fanatics have only one truth -- their own.

Is it because being Jewish means facing pain and humiliation with a sense of humor? Humor helped us rise above tyranny, humanize our enemies and recognize our shortcomings. Despots distrust humor so they fear the Jew and try to silence him.

To me, being Jewish means loving culture and its primary symbols: the spoken and written word. The Jews transformed holy words -- the Torah -- into a portable homeland, thus insuring the historic unity of our people. Whether agnostics or mystics, conservatives or liberals, scientists or artists, we carry in our innermost selves a love for words.

When a Jew toasts, he says *l'chaim*, to life, and when he greets another, he says *shalom*, peace.

So, at this High Holy Day season, as we mark the New Year and remember the victims of the July 18 tragedy, we wish for these most precious blessings -- life and peace.

The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the ninth in a series, on the meaning of being Jewish today, as a service to the Jewish community.

This season of Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur is a good time for thinking about what being Jewish means to you. It is a time for every Jew to explore his or her ties to the Jewish people and to the Jewish heritage.

The Jewish community offers an abundant diversity of intellectual, spiritual and cultural opportunities that can enrich and deepen one's life.



The American Jewish Committee

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The American Jewish Committee is dedicated to strengthening the Jewish community, enriching the quality of Jewish life, and enhancing the creative vitality of the Jewish people.

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