

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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Astronaut

Ever since I was a child, I have looked towards the future, seeking knowledge and new horizons. Space was the unknown frontier that I dreamed of exploring, in theory and in fantasy, like my childhood heroes Albert Einstein and Flash Gordon. I feel very lucky that, as an astrophysicist and astronaut, I have been able to realize these dreams.

Having spent more than a month in orbit on four space flights, I have had time to reflect on the influence of spaceflight on my thinking. Floating in the hostile vacuum of space, I felt a deep reverence for our life-nurturing Earth. I know that this sense of awe and wonder is intimately related to the spiritual tradition of Judaism.

Perhaps it is ironic that one whose work is so future oriented finds himself so deeply rooted in a 3500-year-old tradition. I am proud to be the bearer of the Jewish heritage transmitted by my parents and grandparents; I am privileged to hand it down to my children.

Throughout the history of human exploration, people have carried with them memories of home and community, symbols of personal, cultural, and spiritual significance. On each of my space flights, I took Jewish ceremonial objects of great meaning to me, including a *mezuzah* which, following the ancient custom, I later affixed to the doorpost of our home. I also took with me several *atarot* which were to adorn our sons' prayer shawls at their Bar Mitzvahs. The *mezuzah* and the *atarot* rode the fire into the heavens and returned with me to earth. Sharing them with my family has given us a strong sense of *ledor vador*, of transmitting Jewish heritage, values and identity from one generation to the next.

On my most recent flight to repair the Hubble space telescope, I celebrated the festival of Hanukkah in orbit with a *menorah* and a *dreidel*. In this way, I am continuing an age-old tradition of my people; in all their wanderings from the ancestral homeland, they carried with them the building blocks of Jewish family and community.

The human spirit yearns to expand, to reach beyond itself to the unknown. Synagogues on Mars? Maybe not soon, but even when our descendants have established themselves beyond the terrestrial cradle, they will continue to face human issues: good and evil, suffering and redemption, faith and doubt.

The core values of Judaism -- the sanctity of life; the goodness of human beings; the commitment to law and to social justice; a vision of peace between peoples and nations -- these are necessary if humanity is to survive.

We will need modern technology to enable us to reach new frontiers. Yet, the wisdom gained from our religious traditions will teach us how to live in new worlds. Until then, we need this wisdom to help us live on our only home, planet Earth.



The American Jewish Committee

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The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the fourteenth in a series on the meaning of being Jewish today. It is published to coincide with the Jewish High Holy Days which begin this evening with Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year.

For information on a variety of programs which can help you explore your connection to Judaism, write or call us at 1-800-551-3252.

Founded in 1906, the American Jewish Committee is dedicated to strengthening the Jewish community, enriching the quality of Jewish life, and enhancing democratic values for all.

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