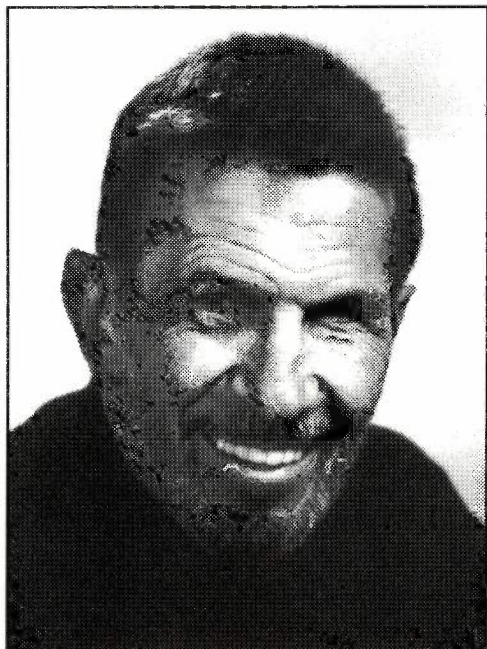


WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



Leonard Nimoy
Actor

I have very warm memories of growing up in Boston in a secure and loving home, of being surrounded by relatives, all of whom had fled from Eastern Europe, of attending a local Orthodox synagogue, and of studying at an after-school cheder (Jewish school). Judaism was very much alive in our home. So, too, Yiddish. All of this gave me a very strong sense of pride, of spirituality, of connection to an extended Jewish family.

I learned early on about street-level anti-Semitism, but I also learned that America is a diverse country in which anti-Semitism is not condoned by the larger society. I felt a sense of security as a Jew; I felt I could aspire to do or be anything I wanted. And I wanted to be an actor.

By the time I was ten, the U.S. had just entered the Second World War and I began to perform for Jewish audiences to promote war bonds. That was the first, but far from the last, melding of my Jewish identity and artistic life. For example, playing the role of Morris Myerson, the husband of Golda Meir, in "A Woman Called Golda" was a special moment in my life as an actor and a Jew. It also gave me a chance to spend a month in Israel, one of three visits I've made which have reinforced my connection to the Jewish state.

Arthur Miller, the playwright, once posed a challenge which I paraphrase: How can we make the outside world a home? How do we find a sense of belonging in that larger world? For me, being part of the larger Jewish family and a member of a congregation in Los Angeles have provided a means.

Being Jewish is a gift, not a burden. I treasure that identity. It has been a source of the most important values of all -- family, charity, wisdom, compassion, social justice, culture -- those values that form the foundation of a civilized society. How can this heritage, this legacy of the Jewish experience, be anything but a treasure for its heirs today?

When I was a boy, there was a particular blessing used in our local shul (synagogue). The four fingers of each hand were split to create the Hebrew letter shin, representing Shad-dai, the name of the Almighty. When we were creating the television program *Star Trek*, we needed a salute. I thought back to that hand symbol and proposed it. The rest, as they say, is history.

Why did I think back to that hand gesture? Actors are always looking for something personal to bring to their professional lives. Maybe, then, it was the convergence of my spiritual and artistic lives. Maybe, in a way, I can call that salute my Vulcan shalom, my greeting of peace, my yearning for the blessing of peace -- the age-old quest of the Jewish people, my people.



The American Jewish Committee

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The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the nineteenth in a series on the meaning of being Jewish today. For information on a variety of programs which can help you explore your connection to the Jewish people, contact us at: Dept. JCAD, 165 East 56 Street, New York, NY 10022 ; Tel: 1-800-551-3252; <http://www.ajc.org>

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