



Yom Kippur 2017

Member Presentation from Matt Rand
“JOURNEY TO JUDAISM”

Part One
Introduction by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Some of the treasured artifacts of my youth were the spiral bound trip-tiks that my fathered ordered from Triple-A. Our route was marked out in highlighter, usually orange or green, and as you flipped the pages to mark your progress, you could tell that you were getting closer and closer to your destination. The map also included locations of gas stations, restaurants and campgrounds, an occasional local museum and, most critically, a note here and there where you could anticipate road maintenance and traffic slow-downs, and maybe even some speed traps.

Of course, now we have GPS and we'll soon have cars that drive themselves. What a strange world we live in. But some journeys still need us to be the drivers. We can't pass off that responsibility on others let alone a self-navigating sensory-overloaded vehicle.

I am especially thinking of journeys of self-discovery and personal enlightenment: when we try out philosophies and try on new identities, when we sample different courses of study, choose majors and career paths only to make further course corrections along the way as we redefine ourselves and re-discover who we are and want to be.

As children, we are starting to figure things out and form personalities. But while the whole world awaits us, we are mostly passive travelers being led places by our parents, older siblings, sitters: to the park, to the museum, a play-date that is set-up for us, a trip to the beach, a visit to relatives. We are introduced to sports and music lessons. And, for better or worse, we are indoctrinated – I mean exposed – to our family's values, beliefs, and practices – which, at least in our circles, include critical thinking, the challenge to think for oneself, and, as we say in our bar and bat mitzvah services, “to have the courage and *chutzpa* to question ancient teachings and not accept them automatically simply because they come from long ago.”

As Jewish kids, we may get taken to Sunday School, to a cousin's bar or bat mitzvah, to a family seder, to High Holidays. We don't question – or maybe we do, and put up some resistance – but mostly our parents don't give us a choice. Or sometimes they do take the path of least resistance and decide not to make Jewish education a battle.

As we get older, some of us keep up the resistance and do, indeed, become Jewish drop-outs, or at least for a while, until we figure out how to reclaim our Jewish identity but on our own terms. In the extreme, this may even mean becoming neo-Hasids, god-forbid.

My own path took several of those detours. There was no triptik available to chart my journey from the outset. I didn't even know what the destination was. I had to figure it out as I went along.

During a rebellious period, my parents let me drop out of Sunday School for a year, but then I rejoined in time to have a meaningful confirmation. Earlier, they had spared me having a bar mitzvah, which, in retrospect, was a tricky way to get me to later seek out Jewish learning on my own, that eventually led to the rabbinate.

I was raised on lobster and shrimp as a child, but in college, I joined the kosher co-op for a year. However, when my mother said she wasn't going to go out of her way and shop especially for me I quickly discovered that I wasn't committed enough – or I was too lazy – to go shop for myself, so I ate what was there, and that was the end of that. Then, in rabbinic school my first year, living in Jerusalem, I, and a few other classmates had our “back-to-Orthodoxy” experiment – wearing kippot, davening three times a day – until I, at least, got it out of my system. For a while, I settled down, but it was just a matter of time before the pendulum swung the other direction, and pulled me right out of the Reform movement and eventually here to Humanistic Judaism.

All of us here, I venture to say, have our own tales to tell, perhaps not as wide-ranging or experimental as mine, but we have all made our own choices along the way that have eventually brought us here today, to this congregation, and this philosophy.

For some, these choices and decisions are years in the making and have sprung solid roots here. I am especially thrilled whenever I meet someone who was raised in one of our communities and is now coming to us as an adult.

For others, the journeys are much more recent and you may still be in an adjustment period as you sort out your historical emotional and intellectual ties with your new discoveries and affirmations.

This could not be truer than for someone who has taken the most daunting journey possible, which is to become a new member of the Jewish people. Who, in their right mind, we often say, would want to give up the safety of their origins for the risky business of being a Jew? What kind of masochism does this require?

And yet we are all about being inclusive, not exclusive, welcoming not off-putting. How can we close the door on someone who genuinely discovers a home with us and, in so doing, strengthens our community with her or his very presence?

In April 2016, I received an email from Matt Rand in which he expressed his interest in learning more about our conversion program. He thought our movement would be a great fit. He told me he lived in Queens and would be happy to come to Manhattan to meet me. And so we met over the course of the year and some of you may have met Matt at an occasional Shabbat.

Last March we welcomed him into the Jewish community and Matt became a member of the City Congregation. His girl friend, Heather Thiess, participated in the ceremony as well. I thought that their remarks were so thoughtful and poignant and revealed a special self-awareness that I hoped they would be willing to share with us today. I am very grateful that they took me up on my invitation to speak. They will tell you more about themselves in their talks, but I will just say briefly that Matt and Heather met at Tufts University where he was a long-distance runner and she was a pole-vaulter. I am also pleased to say that they are now also engaged to be married next year. There will be no formal discussion following these remarks. Instead, we hope they will inspire more informal conversation afterwards during our break.

Part Two Conversion Ceremony Speech

**Given by Heather Theiss on the occasion
of the conversion of Matt Rand, February 14, 2017
Adapted for presentation on Yom Kippur 2017**

When Matt and I first started dating at Tufts University over 5 years ago, he was faced with a difficult decision. Maybe a few months into the relationship, and as we were delving into deeper, more meaningful conversations, I explained to him how important Judaism is to me, and how marrying a Jewish man and raising children in a Jewish household were long-held aspirations for my future. A little heavy for only a few months of dating, but there it was. And so here Matt was presented with a decisive situation, one that would have major effect over his life, with only two foreseeable options. Option 1: run for the hills immediately, or option 2: continue to date me, but always know in the back of his head, that things could only progress so far unless he decided to make Judaism a significant part of his life. Well, our presence here today clearly indicates that you chose the latter option. You must have really liked me.

Four years and a number of shabbas meals, Passover seders, and Chanukah celebrations later, you had experienced Judaism and its many traditions through the lens of my family. While you certainly enjoyed many of the Jewish customs, it became evident that in order for you to fully embrace the religion, you needed to view Judaism through your own lens, and from your own perspective. This is the point at which Rabbi Peter Schweitzer entered our lives. When I first learned that you planned to study Humanistic Judaism, to be honest, I wasn't sure what to think. I was raised in a conservadox household, and being Jewish meant something very concrete. I had never heard of Humanistic Judaism, and after doing some research, it was clear this denomination of the religion was very different from what was familiar to me. At this point, I was hesitant, and a bit leery. Little did I know that through your studies, I too would soon evolve in my perception and understanding of my religion.

Fast forward nine months, and I am so joyful that you found Humanistic Judaism. If I were to describe Matt as a person, I would say some of his defining traits include that he is logical, analytical, and intellectually curious. Humanistic Judaism provided the means for Matt to learn about this ancient religion in a way that made sense to him, and was not at odds with his values for history and science. It speaks to him in a modern language that he can comprehend.

While Matt appreciated the aspects of Judaism he previously experienced with my family, only through learning with Rabbi Schweitzer did he truly understand and internalize the religion, and begin to form his own Jewish identity. Over the course of your conversion process, I too began to more fully embrace the humanistic elements you shared with me through your studies. You have illuminated me to the fact that Judaism is an evolving religion, one that encourages you to ask why, and question conventional wisdom. I am now motivated to incorporate new, contemporary ideas into traditional interpretations of Jewish customs, and teach our children a more holistic modern approach to the religion. I owe this newfound understanding to you Matt, as a direct result of sharing in your conversion process.

Matt, I am so proud of you. For finding the branch of Judaism perfect for you and enthusiastically beginning your studies. For diligently reading so many books and watching so many movies on Jewish history and culture. For learning to read Hebrew with me as a supplement to your studies. For sharing and discussing your ideas with me, even if they were not necessarily compatible with my own beliefs. Not many could have completed this process, and even fewer with the conscientiousness and grace that you infinitely seem to possess. You could not have done it alone, however. Thank you sincerely to Rabbi Schweitzer and the City Congregation for all your guidance and support – we truly could not have done this without your help.

Part Three
Self-Reflection Essay

**Given by Matt Rand on the occasion
of his conversion, February 15, 2017
Adapted for presentation on Yom Kippur 2017**

Ten years ago if someone had told me I'd become Jewish, I definitely wouldn't have believed them. Before attending Shabbat at Temple Hillel in Valley Stream with Heather a year ago, I had never been to a religious service of any faith. Not many people in my hometown in Maine were of the God-fearing variety, and of those who were, only a small portion were Jews. Growing up in that environment, I was apathetic towards religion. I had a cursory understanding of its importance to so many people across the country and the world, but it played no role in my life.

That changed over the last few years as my relationship with Heather progressed. In celebrating the holidays with her family, I came to understand that the importance of these events goes far beyond the candles, the latkes, the challah, the shofar, or fasting. It's about reinforcing ties to family, community, and those who came before us. However, you could say those things about almost any holiday of any faith, and that's what made it difficult for me to fully embrace Judaism. Having grown up irreligious, I know from experience that one doesn't need organized religion to feel a strong bond with family or have an appreciation for the past. For me to feel truly connected and inspired by Judaism, there had to be deeper meaning, a greater purpose, a more fruitful endeavor to undertake.

I'm glad I found Humanistic Judaism and Rabbi Schweitzer. During the nine months that I studied with him I discovered how Jewish identity can encompass so much more. For me, this period of discovery has been largely intellectual in nature, as I read several books on Jewish history, life cycle events, culture, the development and evolution of Jewish holidays, and humanistic interpretations and expressions of Judaism. I've discovered that opening my mind to some of the key themes in Jewish history has mirrored the intellectual growth I've experienced since leaving the bubble of Tufts University and joining the real world. In fact, to fully grasp the depth and breadth of this journey, I had to think back to experiences in my hometown.

Cape Elizabeth, Maine is an idyllic seaside community consisting of about 96 percent White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, wealthy, happy families. The public school system is among the best in New England, and opportunities for academic, athletic, and social endeavors are almost limitless. Life was certainly good, and I was totally clueless about how easy I had it. I thought that's how the vast majority of children in this country grow up. Unsurprisingly, notions of inequality, white privilege, and social justice were relatively foreign to me. Maybe I heard them mentioned by a few outspoken peers in history classes now and then, but I never engaged with their meaning.

During my time at Tufts, I couldn't make it through a day without hearing those terms. They annoyed me, to say the least. In fact, I'd often wish the loudmouth bleeding-hearts who uttered them would just be quiet. That sounds awful, and it was a deplorable mindset to have, but that was my initial reaction to the leftist onslaught. By the end of my Tufts career, I was desensitized to that sort of language. It didn't bother me anymore, but I still hadn't fully engaged with the ideas, let alone begun to embrace them.

Looking back on it, I think I needed to see it for myself. I couldn't just take the word of a bunch of haughty white kids. Leaving the Tufts bubble allowed me to do that. My first job was in DC, and like many first jobs, the pay wasn't great. I couldn't afford to live in a region of the metro area where I'd be surrounded by other college-educated whites. In fact, in the apartment complex in which I ended up living for almost two years, I never saw someone like me. Not a single WASP.

Below me was a Hispanic family of five living in a one-bedroom apartment. Next door, a Pakistani family of four in a space the same size as mine. Each morning, I'd ride the city bus with predominantly African-Americans, many of them women juggling multiple small children. They always got off in the most squalid section of town. I couldn't be sure what they're final destination was, but it certainly didn't seem like day care or a play date. It made me think about how different my life would have been if I were those little kids. How would I have turned out if my two siblings and I grew up in a one-bedroom apartment, had no place to play, and attended underfunded urban schools? Not so great is my only conclusion.

On a single weekend long run, I'd also witness the de facto segregation that characterizes many American cities. In Old Town Alexandria, I'd see only white people as I ran past beautiful riverfront townhomes. A half mile later, rows of tiny multi-family brick residential units in disrepair housed only blacks. Then I'd pass a couple high-rise apartment buildings swarming with Orthodox Jews. You'd have to be blind to not notice the inequality and segregation. The

same themes are present here in New York too. Most mornings I look out our bedroom window and see kids, mostly Hispanic, walking alone through the urban jungle to school. Again, it makes me wonder how different things would have been for me if I had attended P.S. 65 in Ozone Park rather than Cape Elizabeth High School.

At the same time, I realize that those kids and the ones in my DC apartment complex have it much better than so many others. Over the last few years, just by watching and reading more news and opening my eyes and mind to certain issues, particularly the ones that have no direct impact on me, I've become more in tune with societal challenges. In a sense, the last four years of my life have been a crash course in the true character of this country and the world. Equality of opportunity is a myth, there is liberty and justice for some, but not all, and the American Dream remains merely a dream for so many. I now better understand my place in society. I know how easy my life has been compared to most, and how I've had every advantage based on social and economic constructs. It certainly makes me feel a bit guilty, and it has also made me realize the only way I can meaningfully contribute to the world is to help the disadvantaged, whether it be through community action, charity, or at the very least, lending an ear, and showing sympathy and compassion for the struggles they face.

The experience of the Jewish people, is the perfect illustration of how important it is to embody these qualities, and what can happen if society looks the other way in the face of injustice. From slavery to exile to economic marginalization to relentless persecution to genocide, the last few thousand years haven't been kind to the Jewish people. It's no surprise that tzedakah, tzedek, and tikkun olam – charity, justice, and repairing the world - are salient elements of Judaism's fabric. For Jews, tzedakah is not an act of benevolence or generosity, it's a moral obligation, an act of justice and righteousness. It goes hand in hand with the notion of repairing the world, or tikkun olam, which has been embedded in the Jewish canon since the rabbinic period in the third century C.E. Of course, for Humanistic Jews, validation from a higher authority isn't a prerequisite for such actions and ideals. We impose them on ourselves.

To me, embracing those essential values goes hand in hand with being a Jew. They demonstrate that you know where you came from, what your ancestors endured, and the hardships that so many Jews still face. In embodying these humanitarian elements of Judaism, you're also acknowledging that history does sometimes repeat itself - society doesn't always learn from mistakes. Injustice and discrimination toward minorities are not a thing of the past. They're alive and well, and perceptive Jews know that standing up for the disadvantaged and downtrodden, regardless of faith, race, sexual orientation or anything else we use to divide ourselves, is imperative to the overall health of our society. In that light, tzedakah, tzedek, and tikkun olam are Jewish traditions I'm honored to uphold.

Thinking about traditions brings me back to the holidays. The traditions we maintain on annual religious celebrations are of a very different nature than tzedakah and tikkun olam. In general, they're things we do once per year because we've always done them, and our parents did them, and our grandparents did them. There's nothing wrong with that, and as I've mentioned earlier, these traditions reinforce our bonds with family, community, and our ancestors. A tradition like tikkun olam, on the other hand, looks more toward the future than the past. It's also a perpetual responsibility, rather than a once-per-year custom.

In learning about humanistic interpretations of Jewish holidays, I've discovered that these days of celebration can also serve as reminders to uphold the important responsibility of tikkun olam. Yom Kippur will be a day of self-reflection; a time to think about what I can do better for my family, the community, and society. How can I make a difference in the lives of not only people close to me, but also those who don't have the means to help themselves.

Sukkot will make me think about my relationship to the environment, and on a larger scale, our planet. I look forward to building and spending time in a sukkah during the fall festival, and using the experience as a springboard to reflecting on how humanity impacts our climate and the natural world. There's certainly no shortage of challenges for society in this realm, and Sukkot can serve as a reminder of the immense responsibility shouldered by my generation and the next.

Passover celebrates the rediscovery of human dignity; the escape from slavery in Egypt, or fleeing the shtetls and pogroms of Europe in search of a better life. For us, it's a time to be thankful for the intrepid endeavors undertaken by those before us; the people who left behind everything they'd ever known in hopes of improving their lot and that of future generations. People like Heather's great grandfather, Joseph Schwartz, a successful German businessman who spent a year in a concentration camp near Berlin before his wife, Selma, secured the extensive documentation required for the family of five to emigrate to the U.S. in 1939. Joseph and Selma, along with so many other Jewish families, had the odds stacked against them, but steadfast determination and a willingness to take matters into their own hands facilitated their reversal of fortune. It's a timeless lesson for us and the generations to come.

The notion that one has the ability to create positive change, to ascend from calamity to prosperity, from darkness to light, is undoubtedly a meaningful message. While sharing Joseph and Selma's story at the Seder table is living proof of it, the celebration of Hanukkah could be viewed as a symbolic reminder. Lighting candles when the days are shortest reminds us there's light at the end of the tunnel. Much like fire brings us heat and light when it's cold and dark, people have the power to create hope from despair, triumph from failure. The world certainly needs that sort of attitude from us right now.

So in essence, the Jewish holidays can remind us of our inherent inner strength and the positive impact we can have on our loved ones, our communities, those less fortunate than us, the local environment, and our planet. That's inspiring, rewarding, and meaningful; exactly what I was missing before my experience with Rabbi Peter Schweitzer and the City Congregation.

I didn't realize that the intellectual development I've undergone in my formative years outside the ignorant bliss of Cape Elizabeth or the leftist echo chamber at Tufts could fit so seamlessly with my embracing Judaism and Jewish identity. However, the merging of these two experiences has revealed that there's a relevant and fulfilling place for me among the Jewish people, and so today, I'm very proud to call myself a Jew.