



JEW – Kol Nidre – 5776 – Rabbi Zoë Klein

Jew.
Jew. Jew. Jew.
I'm a Jew.
I imagine the majority of us here are Jews.
We're Jews.
And friends of Jews.

What is it about the word “Jew”?

Comedian Louis CK observed: “Jew is a funny word, because Jew is the only word that is the polite thing to call a group of people, and the slur for the same group.”

He said: “Most groups have a good and a bad word, theirs is the same word, just with a little [sneer] on it and it becomes a *terrible* thing to call a person! Because you can say, ‘He’s a Jew’ and it’s fine, but ‘He’s a *Jew...*’ that’s all it takes.”

Are you as comfortable saying “I’m a Jew”
As you are saying “I’m Jewish.”
“I’m of the Jewish persuasion.”

Why are we more comfortable with ourselves if we add an “ish” to the end?
How old are you?
I’m fortyish.
Actually, I’m forty-four.

What religion are you?
I’m Jewish.
Actually, I’m a Jew.

One of the entries for “Jewish” on Urban Dictionary says: *Someone who is kinda like a Jew, but not quite. For example, “Marisa makes matzo ball soup but never goes to temple, she’s so Jewish.”*

Yes I know, there are other *ish* ethnicities. English, Irish, Scottish, Polish, Amish...

I’m toying with language here, just having fun with suffixes – but... perhaps we are more comfortable being Jewish than “a Jew” because when you add *ish* to the end of your age or your weight or your height, you’ve made a little wiggle room, you might be a little older, a little younger than you say, a little slimmer, a little heftier, a little shorter, a little taller. You’re this, but you’re fluid, you have brown hair but you’re blondish, in certain lights. If you’re vegetarianish you can still have a turkey slider now and then. If you’re due to arrive at sixish, you can still be a few minutes late. The *ish* is forgiving. You can’t be defined, nailed down. You defy categories. The *ish* perforates the lines. While Jew is so exacting.

I’m Jewish. I’m not orthodox. I left the shtetl with the Enlightenment and never looked back. I have universal principles. I reject the biblical concept of a chosen people. I’m uncomfortable with elitism. I value and defend the rights of all people.

I’m an American, a citizen, a human being, a humanitarian, a student of humanities, who happens to be Jewish.

And even with an *ish* at the end, sometimes we worry things are *too* Jewish...

No one walks into a pho restaurant and complains that it’s ‘too Vietnamese,’ a patisserie and says, ‘too French.’ A trattoria and says, ‘oh, too Italian.’ But Jews, we walk into a deli and sometimes it feels too Jewish!

Vanessa Hidary, also known as the Hebrew Mamasita tells this story:

I meet a guy in a bar that’s cute. He asks me out to dinner on the following Tuesday. I decline. Next Tuesday is Yom Kippur, I will be fasting. “You’re Jewish. Wow, you don’t look Jewish. You don’t act Jewish.” And he says it in this tone that sounds like he’s complimenting me. And I say, and I say, nothing. I say nothing which combined with a flirty smile translates as “Thank you.” I say nothing because I got a contact high off of someone’s anti-Semitic crack pipe... Bartender! Tell me I don’t look Jewish. Tell me I don’t act Jewish. Because...what does Jewish look like to you? Should I fiddle on a roof for you? Should I humor you with oy veys and refuse to pay because oh, you know how we like to “Jew you down.” Jew you down? I’d like to throw you down, because I walked here long miles on hot sand to

*publicly repent my sins, because I almost forgot six million died without having the option of giggling on barstools...and if you must see me as that blood-sucking Jew, see me as that pesky mosquito who sucks the prejudice right out of you...Someone tells you you don't act like or look like your people? Impossible. Because you are your people. You just tell them they don't look. Period.*¹

Good stuff. But there's a reason "Jew" is uncomfortable at times. A reason we worry about things being too Jewish. A reason we forget that two of the most iconic beauties on the planet, Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor, were Jews by choice. A reason why we feel good when we blend in.

Because despite living in West Los Angeles, sometimes we think "Jew," and we still think beard, sidelocks. Shtreiml. Yellow star. German propaganda. Cartoons. Warsaw. Young boy with his hands up. Piles of shoes. We think soap. Lampshade.

It's safer to be *Jewish* than a Jew.

Jew has been defined by the centuries, chiseled by abusive hands, molested into shape. A blood-stained word. A target. A word people spit.

This past year has seen a rise of anti-Semitism on American campuses² and around the world.

Starting with a firebomb thrown at a synagogue shortly before the start of Rosh Hashanah services last year in Kiev.

A rabbi in Belgium stabbed in the throat walking to synagogue. A Belgium officer ranting online saying, "The word Jew itself is dirty." Jews assaulted in Austria.

Posters calling Jews murderers and criminals all over the capital of Brazil. In Denmark, a kosher restaurant smashed, painted with the words "Jewish pig." A gunman opening fire at the Great Synagogue of Copenhagen.

In France, a Jewish woman and her child violently assaulted by others shouting "You're a dirty race." People beaten, punched, kicked walking home from synagogue. Windows smashed at the Jewish library. A Jewish boy tear-gassed. Four Jewish men killed in a Kosher supermarket the same time a dozen people were killed at a newspaper. Je suis Charlie. Je suis Juif.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAeWyGGTdEE> and www.thehebrewmamasita.com

² Drexel, Stanford, George Washington, Purchase, Vanderbilt, University of Missouri, of Chicago, UC Berkeley, UC Davis

Hundreds of graves in a Jewish French cemetery overturned, the words “dirty Jew” graffitied. Jewish cemeteries vandalized in Greece, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Norway. Swastikas and slogans like “six million more.”

A soccer game in Amsterdam where people chanted: “ Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas” and “My father was in the commandos, my mother in the SS, together they burned Jews because Jews burn the best.” Happened this year.

An attack inside a London synagogue. Jewish teens attacked in a South African shopping mall, assailants yelling ‘You Jew.’

Even though there are strides, Pope Francis saying this year: “It’s a contradiction that a Christian is anti-Semitic. His roots are Jewish. Let anti-Semitism be banished from the heart and life of every man and every woman.” It was a rough, rough year.

It is upsetting, scary, but not surprising. It happens whenever the world spirals down. Economic distress. Debt. Recession. Crash. Blame the Jew. The eternal scapegoat reloaded.

In fact, that’s what this day was originally about. Torah describes the ancient Temple ritual on Yom Kippur. The High Priest took two goats, sacrificed one on the altar to God, and the other was sent off into the wilderness³. The original scape-goat.

We invented the scapegoat. And... we are the scapegoat.

Yes, “Jew” is a tough word.

The first time the word “Jew” appears in our Scripture is when our matriarch Leah says of her fourth baby, “This time I shall thank the Lord,”⁴ and she names him *Yehuda*. Judah. Which means “Thankful.” Judaism means thankfulness. Jew means Thankful One.

The first time the word “Jew” appears not as a name but an identity in our Scripture is in the Book of Esther. “Mordechai the Jew.”⁵ And we all know that story. In chapter 3 it says: “Haman said to King Ahasuerus, ‘There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from [those of] every people, and they do not keep the king’s laws; it is [therefore] of no use for

³ Leviticus 16:8-10

⁴ Genesis 29:35

⁵ Esther 10:3

the king to let them be. If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them.”⁶

“A certain people.”

Boo Haman. Cue the groggers. His genocide is thwarted, and at the end Haman hangs. But he’s not dead.

You could hear echoes of Haman when the term “The Jewish Question” was first used in Great Britain in 1750 in debates over the status of the Jew in European society.

“There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples and their laws differ.”

The question was discussed in France after the French Revolution in 1789.

“There is a certain people.”

The Jewish Question then moved to Germany.

“There is a certain people, and their laws differ.”

Reform Judaism was born around the French Revolution, when for the first time, European Jews were recognized as citizens of the countries in which they lived. No longer ghettoized, no longer “separate among the peoples” the Reform movement re-formed Jewish practice to mainstream Judaism, pledging allegiance to this new world of opportunity, no longer German Jews but Jewish Germans.

In its earliest iteration, our movement removed Hebrew from prayer books, renounced circumcision, kosher laws, family purity laws, renounced the hope for a restored Israel, called Germany the new Zion, replaced Bar Mitzvah with confirmation, changed Shabbat to Sundays.⁷

Even so, Haman’s voice persisted.

“There is a certain people scattered and separate...and they do not keep the king’s laws.”

Karl Marx wrote a work called “On The Jewish Question.”

“There is a certain people.”

⁶ Esther 3:8-9

⁷ Jewish Virtual Library

The Dreyfus affair.

“There is a certain people.”

Theodor Herzl’s answer to the Jewish Question was Zionism.

Hitler’s answer was different. A genocide that would not be thwarted. “If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them.” Haman’s revenge.

Oh once there was a wicked wicked man
And Haman was his name sir,
He would have murdered all the Jews
Though they were not to blame sir.
Oh today we’ll merry merry be,
Oh today we’ll merry merry be,
Oh today we’ll merry merry be,
And...

Joseph was Pharaoh’s right hand man, his top vizier, and he rescued all of Egypt from crippling famine. And then, in Exodus we read, “A new king rose over Egypt who knew not Joseph. And he said to his people, “The children of Israel have become too numerous, so we must deal harshly with them.”⁸

How quickly our accomplishments, our mighty contributions, forgotten.

“There is a certain people.”

The echo of those words even heard at UCLA this year, when the student government questioned the ability of a Jewish nominee to maintain an unbiased view.

“There is a certain people. They do not keep the king’s law.”

Economic distress. Debt. Recession. Crash. One goat to the altar. One goat to the wilderness. Bring out the scapegoat.

“There is a certain people.”

This “certain people...” Religion, race, ethnicity, heritage, nationality? A tribe? What makes one a Jew? Birth mother? *Mikveh*? Cultural Jew, Hasidic Jew, Reform Jew. Is Judaism particular, universal? Insider/outsider, settler/wanderer, “the other” or just-like-any-other, self-loathing/self-loving, Diasporic/Zionist, pacifist/activist? Witness.

⁸ Exodus 1:8-10

I want my name back.
I want our name back.

Remember the poem by Edmund Fleg. He wrote it in 1929 in France, but you might know it from the Maxwell House haggadah?

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering
the Jew weeps.
I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard the
Jew hopes.
I am a Jew because the message of Israel is the most ancient and the
most modern.
I am a Jew because Israel's promise is a universal promise.
I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished; men will
complete it.
I am a Jew because for Israel man is not yet fully created; men are
creating him.
I am a Jew because Israel places man and his unity above nations and
above Israel itself.
I am a Jew because above man, image of the divine unity, Israel
places the unity which is divine.

I want my name back.
I want to decide what my name stands for.

My name is "Jew." My name is smoothed by centuries of storms, polished by the rolling river of time. My name is a diamond, born of friction and pressure, thrust to the surface by fiery lava, precious, multi-faceted. My name is "Jew" and my name is the philosopher's stone, turning base metals into gold, turning all that is mundane in this world and infusing it with meaning, turning it into the shining substance of the sacred. My name is "Jew" and my name turns the animal of man, his brutality, his beastliness, into beauty and righteousness, elevating him above his dust and his dross. "Jew" is the stamp on the greatest love-letter ever written, from Creator to created, the love-letter in which we are given the Ten Commandments, the ethical guideposts of civilizations, the love-letter that proclaimed that every person is made in the Image of God, *b'Tzelem Elohim*, that every living vessel, whether broken or whole, is infused with worthiness, casting down cast systems, a love-letter that told the story of all humanity descending from one couple, that we are one family, no one superior to another, a love-letter that illustrated the redemption of a slave people into a nation of priests, a people whose babies had been drowned in the river, a people beaten and in rags, restored to dignity, a thread of royal blue tied to the corner of their garments, a reminder of each individual's inherent nobility.

Dear mankind, *Here is Shabbat, the world's greatest religious gift, a day upon which the flower and the gardener stand as equals to one another, day of peace, of rest, of family, of vision of a future world. Enjoy. Sincerely, Jews.*

Dear mankind, *I have put My rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between [God] and the world.*⁹ Sincerely, Jews.

Dear mankind, *Love your neighbor as yourself.*¹⁰ Sincerely, Jews.

Dear mankind, *Welcome the stranger in your midst.*¹¹ Sincerely, Jews.

Dear mankind, *Let my people go.*¹² Sincerely, Jews.

Dear mankind, *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.*¹³ Sincerely, Jews.

Dear mankind, *Proclaim liberty throughout all the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof.*¹⁴ Love, Jews.

I want my name back.

Jew means “championing what is arguably the single most revolutionary concept in human civilization, monotheism.”¹⁵ One God. A universal moral code of conduct.

Jew means having partnership with the Divine for the repair of our broken world. *Tikkun Olam*. Not outsourcing to a higher authority.¹⁶

Jew means helping the other is *my* responsibility during *my* lifetime. Jew means confessing my shortcomings and striving to better myself.

I want my name back. My name is “Jew.” David Harris writes that the Jew is:

The first to challenge the status quo and insist on the right to worship differently than the majority. Pluralism – the bedrock of democratic society.

⁹ Genesis 9:13

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:18

¹¹ Leviticus 19:33

¹² Exodus 9:1 and African American spiritual

¹³ Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossal*

¹⁴ Leviticus 25:10, and on the Liberty Bell

¹⁵ David Harris

<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=7oJILSPwFfJSG&b=8478237&ct=14756659>

¹⁶ *ibid*

Heir and custodian of a civilization that is thousands of years old.

Living in perpetual mourning for all that was lost, in the Holocaust, the pogroms, the inquisition, the forced conversions, the exiles, the blood libels, while at the same time, living in everlasting gratitude [the Thankful Ones] for the gift of life [and] the sacred task set before us of igniting that special spark within each of us.

Barely one-fifth of one percent of the world's population, How we've advanced the frontiers of world civilization, 22 percent of all the world's Nobel prizes... marveling at the almost unimaginable determination to persevere against all the odds, without ever losing hope for a brighter future.¹⁷

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote:

I am a Jew because our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose, that reality is not a ceaseless war of the elements, to be worshiped as gods, nor history a battle in which might is right and power is to be appeased. The Judaic tradition shaped the moral civilization of the West, teaching for the first time that human life is sacred, that the individual may never be sacrificed for the mass, and that rich and poor, great and small, are all equal before God.

I am a Jew because...though at times [we] suffered the deepest poverty, [we] never gave up on [our] commitment to helping the poor, or rescuing Jews from other lands, or fighting for justice for the oppressed.

I am proud to belong to the people Israel, whose name means 'one who wrestles with God and with man and prevails.' For though we have loved humanity, we have never stopped wrestling with it, challenging the idols of every age. And though we have loved God with an everlasting love, we have never stopped wrestling with God nor God with us.

I am proud to be part of a people who, though scarred and traumatized, never lost their humor or their faith, their ability to laugh at present troubles and still believe in ultimate redemption.¹⁸

Who packed timbrels when they left Egypt because they believed they'd one day sing on a new shore.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, in the book *I am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*

I want our name back, the name of a people whose father Abraham was not afraid to raise his voice to God and ask: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do justly?”¹⁹

The name of a people whose Prophet Isaiah said: “Is this not the fast I choose? To undo the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked?”²⁰

Elie Wiesel said that being a Jew means not seeking to make the world more Jewish, but more human.

I want our name back, with all of its Jewtacular, Jewdacious, Jewbunctious, Jewtabulous Jewliciousness.

All of its sweet *charoset* and biting horseradish, its chutzpah and its menschlekeit.

To be a Jew is to be a poet, to derive meaning from the stone and the brook, to be an artist, the community your canvas, to dance with the cycles of the moon, to be in tune with the seasons.

To be a Jew is to know how to sow in tears and reap in joy, to make a song out of sighing, to make light out of shadows.

To be a Jew is to be called, to stand up for justice, to collect the shards of a broken world and build and rebuild.

To be a Jew is to be hope. *HaTikvah*. A miracle. To defy fate.

To be a Jew is to be a soldier for ethics, strident and courageous, manly and virile, womanly and strong.

To be a Jew is to be aware of beauty, to understand stillness, to love and pursue wisdom, to cherish virtue.

To be a Jew is to be passionate, to have a vision and a voice and a bone to pick with God.

To be a Jew is to be in relationship. I and Thou. Here and now.

To be a Jew is to be invited into a beckoning and mystical tradition, not a birthright but a blessing, not a burden but a privilege.

¹⁹ Genesis 18:25

²⁰ Isaiah 58:6-7

To be the Thankful Ones, despite it all.

To be a Jew is to know how precious it all is. How much there is to be thankful for, how much more needs to be done, to be partners with God and to take our work seriously, how far we have to climb, how tedious but how glorious the journey.

To be a Jew is to take our most precious treasure, our Torah, and place it into the hands of our thirteen year olds and say, you with your fresh eyes and your pure heart, we trust you to lead us.

I want to take our name, Jew, and rinse it in a desert well, wring out its tears, mend its tears, hang it on an olive branch in the Godshine, spread it out like a chuppah, under which we renew our covenantal vows, spread it out like a solar panel, its renewable energy charging through our veins, spread it out like wings as we soar skyward for a bird's eye view, spread it out like a parachute, as we come in for the landing, wrap it like a comforter when in need of embrace, wear it like many-colored coat...

Jew is the rainbow. The sign of the covenant between God and the world. Jew is the rainbow, the ark and the dove. Jew is the bread, the wine, the lantern, the light.

I pluck our name out of the carnivorous claws of a self-destructive world, and restore it to its intended Jewpendous, Jewmendous, Jewstonishing, Jewnomenal, Jewperb, Jewrrific, Jewtastic, Jewminous, Jewcandescence, and bathe in its light, for a moment, before the blast of the shofar interrupts our basking, and we are called back out into that calamitous world, meager tools in our pockets, delegates of the Divine, charged with the task, against all odds, to help make things a little better for somebody else.

Baruch Atah Adonai, she-asani Yisrael.

Blessed are You Adonai, who has made me a Jew.

Thank You. Thank You. *She-asani Yisrael.*

Baruch Atah Adonai, she-asani Yisrael.

Blessed are You Adonai, who has made me a Jew.