

**For the Right to be Different
(Yom Kippur 2022/5783)
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch**

“The willingness to be different is integral to Judaism,” reflects Rabbi Ammi Hirsch on Yom Kippur. “Our different historical experiences led to our unique sensitivity to injustice and cruelty and gave us our deep appreciation of social repair and freedom.”

My wife and I spent two weeks in Europe this summer — our first visit since the start of the pandemic. I learned early in my career that if I really wanted to rest and get away from it all, I had to leave the country. Otherwise, I would end up watching the news and reading newspapers every day, reviewing scholarly articles, making phone calls, and — frankly — bumping into people I knew or who knew me — and it would seem like only half a vacation. Sometimes, I even ended up working.

So for decades, I have followed the wisdom of the ancient Sages, whose many brilliant observations include sage advice on how to rest. When the Rabbis were asked how a Torah scholar should spend Shabbat, they responded: he should go out to the fields and commune with nature. So that is what we do when we have the opportunity to rest. I do not study Torah. I do not read professional journals. I commune with nature. Mind you, it’s not camping out in a tent — God no — or hiking — no, no, no — but we often do plunk ourselves down on some European mountaintop or in the middle of a field — as long as they have a good restaurant — and just watch the roaring rivers and mountain lakes, the whole sky in my face, summer breezes in my hair, a beer in my hand.

Al har gavoha ali lach — go up to a high mountain, Isaiah urges, you who bring good news to the Jews. So that is what we do. And when we have our fill of nature, we go into some close-by town and wander the streets for an overnight interlude.

By the way, when asked how a farmer should spend Shabbat, the Sages responded — he should come in from the fields and study Torah. In other words, if your full-time vocation is not Torah study, the Rabbis urge Jewish learning on days of rest. You should try that sometime; it is good advice for you. If you have little precious time in the year to devote to Jewish study — a dubious proposition to begin with because we always have time for what is important to us, but still, you know what I mean: If, in the course of your daily responsibilities, you just can’t give Jewish learning the priority it deserves, do it on vacation. Read some good Jewish books, or audit an online lecture. Catch up on my podcasts. Step away from reading the company’s profit reports and read the reports of our prophets.

Stepping away from my daily discipline, gives me time to think more deeply. Sometimes I come up with what I think are quite profound observations that I share with you on the High Holy Days. For example, did it ever dawn on you that to the untrained ear, German sounds slightly rude? While dining in a Black Forest *weinstube* this summer — that’s a kind of upscale German drinking tavern — the owner of the establishment bounded up to me and offered me *feinshmekel*. I was taken aback; it sounded like some vulgar Yiddish reference to an anatomy part that I would hear at home when my parents spoke Yiddish with their siblings. It certainly didn’t sound like something a rabbi should want at any time, let alone in public. But I looked it up on my phone — and all the owner meant was to offer “fine dining” — *feinshmekel*. The next day, we drove out of town — taking the *ausfahrt* to the highway — again, not a rude word.

So here is a poignant thought I had this summer that I want to share with you:

We are a traveling people. You have heard the term “wandering Jew,” but it is more than roaming the lands of Europe, Asia and Africa in search of refuge after the Romans destroyed the Israelite kingdom two thousand years ago. We were born in movement.

There are two transformative journeys in the Torah that defined Judaism forevermore. The first words to the first Jew, Abraham, were — *lech lecha* — go from the place you live to the undiscovered country. Abraham didn’t even know where he was going — *lech lecha el ha’aretz asher areka* — “go to a land that I will show you.”

The second transformative travel experience encompasses the final four books of the Torah. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness, where our people eventually spent four decades. Most of the Torah unfolds in the Sinai desert — not at home, but on the way — between leaving and arriving.

These odysseys formed us and sustained us ever since. They made us who we are today.

Let me suggest four characteristics we acquired by virtue of our continuous journeys:

1. We are a non-conforming people

Jews developed the spirit of non-conformity. We were born in rebellion against the status quo. *Lech Lecha* — Abraham — leave this place of idol worshippers, lest you become one of them. *Shlach et ami* — Moses — go to the land of oppression and demand that Pharaoh let My people go. The long night of slavery is ending. No longer will the world consider human bondage a natural and just practice.

Jews challenge the status quo. We are committed to smashing idols of power that justify the exploitation and degradation of fellow human beings. We challenge authority with the authority of moral challenge, and contest power with the power of moral contest. We do not reject power, per se. To the contrary: we believe that, given the world as it is, power is necessary to prevent evil. But it must be exercised justly. When you come to attack a city, the Torah urges, first offer peace.

It is the willingness to challenge convention that perhaps most characterizes our people. Think of all those ground-breaking Jewish geniuses — way out of proportion to our numbers — who contributed so much to humanity and to modernity as we know it. Sigmund Freud once observed that part of the success of Jewish scientists was their “creative skepticism,” arising from their essential nature as outsiders. “As a Jew, I was prepared to join the Opposition and to do without agreement,” he said. The great Jewish physicist and Nobel laureate, Isidor Rabi, was once asked why he became a scientist. He responded: “My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Instead of asking me ‘what did you learn in school today,’ she always asked me, ‘did you ask a good question today?’” Did you challenge conventional thinking?

Even those who were unlearned in Jewish texts — or turned their backs on Judaism — absorbed this fundamental spirit of nonconformity. They were the product of 2,000 years of Jewish conditioning and could not shed their heritage, even if they tried. As Einstein once said: “A Jew who abandons his faith is like a snail who abandons his shell. He is still a snail.”

2. A demanding and argumentative people

We are a demanding and argumentative people. The Israelites complained bitterly throughout their 40 years of wandering. They rebelled against Moses repeatedly. To this day, Jews find it hard to follow leaders unquestioningly. Every Jew believes that she is better, and he knows more, than the leader. Golda Meir once told Richard Nixon: “You are the president of 150 million Americans and I am the prime minister of 6 million prime ministers.”

Not only do we challenge our leaders, we also challenge God. Other religions are often taken aback by our *chutzpa*. In their eyes, questioning God’s judgement is apostasy. For Judaism, it is natural and very ancient. One of the central passages in all of human literature is Abraham’s resistance to God’s decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Will not the judge of all the earth do justice,” Abraham demanded of God. Moses also challenges God repeatedly, and the Rabbis teach that God was often convinced. “You have taught Me,” they envision God responding. Imagine how shocking it must be for other religions, to read classic Jewish texts how a human being taught God. Even the thought is blasphemous in their eyes. The human task is to obey God, not to convince God that He is wrong.

We still challenge God. The 18th-century Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, famously put God on trial on Yom Kippur for failing to prevent the persecution of the Jews — and he found God guilty as charged.

From the beginning, we have been a contentious, rebellious, cantankerous people. We haven’t changed all that much. Apparently, other people complain as well, not only the Jews. I haven’t seen it, personally, but I have been told that, from time to time, Gentiles also complain. Even if they do, Jews do it the best. At the shores of the Red Sea, caught between the approaching Egyptian army and the deep blue waters, the Israelites complain in a way that only Jews could appreciate. That’s how you know we are the same people all these millennia later. We use the same language. The Israelites shout: Moses, there weren’t enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?” That’s something my grandmother would have said in salty Yiddish.

And even after our ancestors crossed the Sea, never again to be enslaved by the Egyptians, they continued to complain about everything, even the food: “There is no meat to eat,” they whine. “We remember the fish which we ate for free in Egypt; the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic.” Some of you might remember that 1984 presidential campaign when Walter Mondale released an ad accusing Gary Hart of vapidness — and used the slogan — “where’s the beef?” See, that’s how gentiles complain. When they say “where’s the beef,” they mean “explain yourself.” Where is the substance of your argument? Our ancestors literally meant “we are sick of this bland desert food — give us pastrami on rye?”

The journey through the wilderness was difficult. It took much longer than anyone expected. But by the end of it, our people possessed personal and national attributes that could have only been acquired through movement — breaking away and passing through hardship. They became self-reliant and filled with the vigor of a nation of free men and women. The 40-year odyssey refined them — as fire refines metal, the Rabbis say.

D.H. Lawrence wrote:

“Then I must know that still

I am in the hands of the unknown God.
He is breaking me down to his own oblivion
To send me forth on a new morning, a new man.”

The wilderness broke the Israelites down so that they could be sent forth on a new morning, a new people, a nation devoted to freedom, righteousness and justice. That is why we still complain and argue incessantly. We care. If we didn't care, we wouldn't *kvetch*. We would be placid. We would develop a philosophy of acceptance and resignation. But that is not Judaism. We believe that the world can be different. We are prepared to get into the arena and do our part to make things better. We argue so much about even little things, because Judaism always emphasized this world over the world-to-come. “The heavens are for God,” wrote the Psalmist, “the earth was given to us.” We want to make things better in the here and now. We do not consider our earthly lives mere way-stations to the next world. That is why it seems that every little injustice, every little unfairness, bothers us.

3. Restlessness

Jews are a hasty and impatient people. We are restless. We can't seem to sit still. We are constantly on the move. There is just so much to do. Have you ever observed how Jews even walk the streets — rushing, swinging our arms, walking by people — and if you have ever spent a week in Israel, it is restlessness on steroids. I still find it difficult to wait in line for anything, having been trained as a teenager that lines are for suckers. It always seems like Jews need to get somewhere and we are always late. We have been this way from the beginning.

We read in the Talmud of Rabbi Zera, who went up to the Land of Israel and reached the Jordan River, at the very embankment where the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land millennia before. Rather than wait for a ferry to allow him to cross, the rabbi grasped a rope that stretched across the water like a bridge and crossed the river himself. When he reached the other side, a certain stranger sneered at him: “You Jews, you hasty people, you are always clinging to your hastiness.”

Rabbi Zera responded: “I stand at the place where Moses and Aaron were forbidden to cross; who can assure me that I should be worthy of crossing into the Promised Land? [So I must make haste, lest something happen to me before I complete my journey.]

Nothing is certain in life. We should take nothing for granted. Who can assure us that we will still be able, still be healthy, and still be safe tomorrow? We have learned through hard and bitter experience that Jews may be secure one year, and persecuted the next. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph is hailed as the savior of Egypt. One chapter later, there arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. In the early 20th century, Jews were at the pinnacle of German society. Within a generation, they were exterminated. We never really feel settled. In the back of our minds we have this dull but ever-present voice reminding us to keep a suitcase packed. We may need to embark on a long journey away from home quickly. They can turn on us at any time. Even if it seems an over-reaction, can you blame us? We were often at the forefront of great advances, but never fully accepted. Soon after revolutionizing the world of physics, Einstein declared in Paris: “If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as a German, and France will declare me a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say I am a German, and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.”

The 40-year sojourn in the wilderness taught us that no one ever really reaches their destination. The Torah ends with the Israelites on the other side of the Jordan River. Moses, Aaron, Miriam and the

entire generation of the exodus, save for Joshua and Caleb, died without ever stepping foot in the Promised Land. They die on the way — always journeying, never arriving.

It is characteristic of the life of a person and the life of a nation. We do not actually arrive. There is always more to do. We aspire to a more perfect union, we pursue happiness, but no one leaves this world having even half his desires fulfilled.

John Kennedy, in his seminal book “Profiles in Courage,” described the sentiments of John Quincy Adams, who had served as president, secretary of state, congressional leader, Harvard professor and American Minister to major European powers. He had a long and exceptionally productive and successful career. At age seventy, looking back on his life, Adams wrote this in his diary:

“[My] whole life has been a succession of disappointments. I can scarcely recollect a single instance of success in anything that I ever undertook.”

And since we do not actually arrive at the destination, we have learned that our lives are an end in themselves. The value is in having lived and experienced the journey. The generation of the Exodus that died in the wilderness still had a critical role to play. They didn’t reach the Promised Land, but had it not been for them, their children would have still been slaves. Their destiny was to journey on, setting the stage for the generations to come. And if our journey was interesting, exciting and complete — then we shall look back — even at the hardships of life and will recall them with special delight because of the dangers we have surmounted.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: “It is true that we shall never reach the goal; it is even more probable that there is no such place. And if we lived for centuries and were endowed with the powers of a god, we should find ourselves not much nearer to what we wanted at the end.

O toiling hands of mortals! Feet traveling ye know not wither! Soon, soon it seems to you — you must come forth on some conspicuous hilltop, and but a little way further against the setting sun, descry the spires of El Dorado. Little do ye know your own blessedness.

For to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive — and the true success is to labor.”

4. For the Right to be Different

The last point I want to make is this:

Jews have a right to be different. The willingness to be different is integral to Judaism. Don’t rush to be like everyone else. Convention is conventional, and often boring. That is not our role. It is not why God singled out Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and the Jewish people. Anyone can be a conformist. Be a Jew. *Lech lecha* — stay on the Jewish road, even if you do not know where the road ends, and even if the road ends short of the Promised Land. Be proud of who you are. Don’t stray from the path: “Stand by the road,” Jeremiah preached, “ask the good way and walk on it, and find rest for your souls.”

This generation of American Jews seems lost.

Looking back, I think the most noticeable change to travel in my lifetime has been GPS. The taxis to the airport are essentially the same. The road to JFK is the same — even worse. That construction project

where the Grand Central flows into the Van Wyck, clogging traffic for miles in both directions, seems a permanent feature of New York life. They have been building there for decades. Airplanes are essentially the same. Cars are little changed. The mountains, the valleys, the villages, the towns and the cities — even many of the hotels and restaurants we frequent — are the same they were all those years ago.

GPS is different. It allows us never to be lost.

We used to take these large colorful foldable papers with us — I think they used to call them “maps.” Since I was the driver, my wife was the navigator — the map reader. I am not going to detail our marital discussions in public, but suffice it to say that all these years later, I am still traumatized by circling the one-way streets in Verona three times, trying to get into the center of town, each time energetically reminding Alison to look at the map and tell me where to turn. I still remember those pugnacious Italian drivers forcefully communicating what they thought of my driving skills. And we have never returned to Avignon after trying and failing to figure out how to get inside the city walls. We just gave up and left — permanently. We haven’t been back since. To this day, if I come within 50 miles of Avignon, that unique frustration of being turned away at the city gates comes back to me. I associate Avignon with frustration and anxiety.

Nowadays, we just punch in the destination and the computer takes us there. GPS has taken away much of the uncertainty of traveling. There is no reason to ever get lost. In fact, one of those GPS systems is called, “Never Lost.” The computer even calculates alternative routes. We saved hours this summer because the GPS lady figured out that we should take the *ausfahrt* (not a rude word) off the autobahn before reaching a massive traffic jam that would have wasted half of our day. And she was so polite about it. Even when I ignored her, she never lost her temper with me. She stayed doggedly loyal, just calculating and recalculating routes irrespective of my impertinence.

But remember, GPS only takes you where you say you want to go. The computer lady does not decide for you. You decide your destination and the computer makes it easier for you to get to where you said you wanted to go.

Where do you want to go?

Stay on the Jewish road. If you do, you might get frustrated, upset and impatient — and you might even be hated — but you will never be lost. Stay on the Jewish road, and find rest for your souls. Don’t bury Judaism under some bland white-bread impulse of homogenized sameness. What is so exciting about being like everyone else? Being like everyone else is contrary to the Jewish spirit. We are a small, stubborn, stiff-necked, steadfast, staunch, stout, strong-willed people. We are tenacious, persistent and relentless. It is part of our charm.

Our different historical experiences led to our unique sensitivity to injustice and cruelty. Our long hard journey out of idolatry and slavery is what gave us a deep appreciation of social repair and freedom. We are sworn to uphold human dignity, and to be proactive in repairing the world.

But not only that: God chose Abraham from among all the people of the earth. On wings of eagles, God brought the enslaved nation to the holy mountain: “The Lord God chose you to be His treasured possession, from among all the peoples of the earth” — *ki atem ha’me’at mikol ha’amim* — not because you were the most numerous, but because you were the smallest of nations.”

From the burning bush, God sent Moses back to Egypt with these words:

Ve'amarta el Par'oh — say unto Pharaoh — *ko amar Adonai* — thus says the Eternal God — *beni ve'chori Yisrael* — Israel is My child — My first-born.

That is who we are — your people is God's first-born child.

Those 40 years in the wilderness were so contentious and so rebellious that one wonders why God stuck with us. After all, God threatened our destruction in the desert: "Leave me be, Moses, so that My wrath will consume them, and I will make your descendants a great nation." Why didn't God follow through? Why was God persuaded by Moses' pleas to spare the people?

We do not read the answer until much later in the Bible, in the book of Jeremiah.

Va'yehi d'var Adonai elai lemor — and the word of God came to Jeremiah — say to Jerusalem:

Zacharti lach chessed ne'u'ra'ich - I remember the devotion of your youth — your love was as a bride's love —

Lechtech acharai ba'midbar — I remember how you followed Me in the wilderness in a harsh land — a land not sown.

God stuck with us then — and sticks with us now — because of the devotion of our youth: how, when we were young, we loved God as a bride loves the groom. And despite it all, we followed God through the harsh, unforgiving wilderness. With all our grumpiness, our complaining, our dissatisfaction, we had the courage to be pioneers - to journey on — to cross the desert to reach the Promised Land.

The last chapter of the Hebrew Bible also refers to a journey. Chapter 36 of Second Chronicles describes Cyrus, the king of Persia, who conquered the Babylonians. It was the Babylonians who destroyed the First Temple and exiled its leadership. Cyrus pursued a different policy. He wanted to restore the exiled Jews to the Land of Israel so that they could rebuild the Temple, and Cyrus urged the Jews to journey back.

The last verse of the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible is this:

Mi vachem mi'kol amo — *Adonai elohav imo*.

Those of you of God's people — the Lord God is with you.

And the final word of our Bible is:

Va'ya'al — ascend.

Those of you of God's people, the Lord God is with you.
Ascend.