

## **EREV RH 5785: STARTING WITH WHY 5785**

**When I introduce myself as a rabbi, people often ask me- - what kind of a job is that for a nice jewish girl?!**

**And so I explain to them...that when I was in elementary school**

**my family moved to Huntsville, Alabama AND....**

**- you'll be SHOCKED to hear to this- there are NOT a ton of Jews there.**

**So at an early age I was faced with a choice:**

**I either had to hide who I was so I wouldn't stand out and be different...**

**OR- I could start telling everyone I meet that I'm Jewish....hmmm...which one do you think I chose?!**

**Friends, from a young age, My personal mission statement became: "Shalom Y'all- being Jewish is**

**AWESOME!”**

**I told everyone who would listen about my beautiful and historic “Jewish church!” in downtown Huntsville**

**And all my local friends wished they too could go to Jewish summer camp after hearing about my exploits every summer.**

**My ability to enthusiastically promote Judaism in Huntsville, Alabama was the perfect preparation for this time we are tragically finding ourselves in right now- a time that does NOT seem friendly to us- where so many are assuming the worst of us as a Jews.**

**Since the massacre in Israel on Oct 7, Jews all over this country have been waking up to the reality that having grown up in the deep south, I’ve long known is true:**

**Anti- semitism IS REAL and much more widespread**

**than we had even realized. We felt this all the more so yesterday as we sat here in Florida, helplessly watching our brothers and sisters in Israel huddle in their bomb shelters during the largest ballistic missile attack on another country in History.**

**How could we possibly be in ANY doubt about the prevalence of global Anti-Semitism.**

**A nationwide survey conducted by the Federations of North America proved that October 7th has resulted in a heightened sense of vulnerability for American Jews and as a result, has become a watershed event for Jewish engagement.**

**Since October 7th, Jewish students all over this country are asking themselves, “Should I put a mezuzah on my dorm room door to proudly proclaim my Jewish pride- or should I live in fear?”**

**Since October 7th, Jews all over this country are**

**asking themselves: If people are going to be biased against me simply because I'm Jewish, maybe this is the time I should really support my community?**

**Since October 7th, Jews all over this country have been asking themselves- maybe for the very first time: could investing myself in what Judaism offers make my life more meaningful?!**

**And if the answer to these questions is YES then... where the heck do we begin?!**

**Personally, as a rabbi, when I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I need guidance... of course I turn to the wisdom of....the self help aisle at Barnes and Nobles (c'mon,I know I've seen you there too too...).**

**One such self-help guru I've turned to in challenging times is Simon Sinek, who has one of the most viewed Ted Talks of all time called "It Starts with Why".**

**As He explains,**

**“Our WHY is our purpose, cause or belief — the driving force behind everything we do.” His mantra “start with why” can empower both businesses AND individuals to truly live their values.**

**During this Ted Talk, Sinek shares how certain companies, like Apple, have become so successful because - Everything they do starts with their WHY-**

**Their driving force. So in the example of Apple- instead of saying - like their less successful competitors do-**

**hey we make good, cheaper computers- want one?**

**Apple says, WE BELIEVE in challenging the status quo and thinking differently. We believe in making beautifully designed, innovative, easy to use products- want one?**

**Apple starts with their Why.**

**I utilized this wisdom when I had the challenge and privilege of leading our young professional team during my five years serving as Campus Rabbi at Florida Atlantic University in Boca.**

**We were spending hours each day shvitzing outside on campus trying to engage stressed and distracted college students who did NOT want to stop & shmooze.**

**I realized early on that we needed a simple yet effective mantra to focus and motivate our work.**

**(SLOW) Sinek's advice in his Ted Talk helped us realize that we could engage more students when, instead of saying to them, "We are offering free trips to Israel and delicious FREE shabbat dinners- want one?"**

**We would instead say:**

**“Judaism’s ancient wisdom offers the pathway to living a deeply authentic, joyful and meaningful life - want one?! “**

**This slight change in our elevator pitch to the students helped me realize that if we DON’T START WITH WHY then our lives become a puzzle that we are trying to put together without looking at the picture first.**

**We might figure it out in the end but it would be a lot more efficient and less stressful if we knew the picture we were trying to put together in the first place.**

**My friends, (PAUSE- then Quietly:)  
It starts with Why.**

**As the author of the Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Ex·u·pé·ry. once wrote,**

**“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather *teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*” PAUSE**

**Judaism isn’t simply a task in your overall day, OR an item on your to do list to check off.**

**It’s the whole megillah.**

**It’s the endless immensity of the sea.**

**I imagine no one is feeling this immensity more than our family members in Israel. I want to take a moment to offer some perspective- our Israeli brothers and sisters do not need to figure out their why- their why is simply to survive and live in peace in the Jewish homeland - yet just today 8 more Israeli families are mourning their young heroic soldiers who died - on erev Rosh Hashanah- as they fought to protect the Jewish people from the existential threat of Hezbollah**



**in Lebanon.**

**What a privilege to be a Jew in America today, struggling to find our own individual whys- we can only can do this because of Israeli resilience and strength as they defend the Jewish home and the Jewish people while we sit here comfortably tonight.**

**So tonight, to honor this strength, I want all of us to get a little out of our comfort zone and think about OUR big picture- our mission statements- our why. What are WE living for?!**

**During the last month of Elul, during which we traditionally begin the reflective and introspective spiritual work of teshuvah- I facilitated a weekly class called Everyday Spiritual Practices for Elul and we had a great time experimenting with some “new age” techniques to help us find our why.**

**(SLOW) It might surprise you to learn that these “new**

**age” ideas such as meditation and visualization - are actually taken directly from our ancient Jewish wisdom. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov popularized a hasidic tradition called “HITBODEDOOT” which is connecting with God through visualization/meditation.**

**Since everyone here wasn’t able to come to this class- again- I’m looking at you- we are going to try a brief visualization right now to help each of us on the journey of finding and focusing on our “why.”**

**So I understand if meditation is out of your comfort zone - it is for me too - but after all- these days of awe demand that we wake up and enter into the work that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls “spiritual audacity” - together!**

**So let’s try it...and remember....God is watching.**

**SO- Get comfortable in your seat. ACT THESE OUT  
Plant your feet on the floor and roll your shoulders**

**away from your ears. Relax your hands.**

**Take a deep breath... or two.**

**Picture the year ahead- 5785. What are you working towards this year? Is it feeling physically strong enough to joyously celebrate a family simcha or traveling to meet a new great grandchild?**

**Is this the beginning of your retirement and you are looking for your new purpose?**

**Is it earning more money? And if so- what's the money really FOR?**

**Is it finding connection and community?**

**What are you living for this year? Travel? Love? Healing? Hope? You might not have the answer right away- and that's okay.**

**Just Close your eyes and Take a moment to try and**

**picture it- what are you living for?**

**(IF THEY AREN'T DOING IT- remember GATES R newly OPEN people!)**

**30 seconds**

**Take another deep breath- in and out and slowly open your eyes. And hold your why in your mind and heart.**

**START. WITH. WHY.**

**“We humans, the Kotzker Rebbe taught, we humans are unlike the animal who walks on all fours. While the beast sees only the earth, man can also look up toward the heavens, toward a greater vision of himself.”**

**Finding and focusing on a greater vision of ourselves...**

**This is it - this is WHAT WE HAVE BEEN WORKING FOR. On Yom Kippur, we will have to express our regret for the times when we let our calendar take the lead, instead of our intention- our why.**

**Before the pandemic, so many of you were enjoying your retirement- with calendars packed full of mahj, duplicate bridge and pickleball, of course, when the pandemic hit...**

**And we ALL realized that the calendars which hold our lives so firmly together and tell us what to do and where to go each minute can easily crumble away like this SNAP.**

**So MY FRIENDS, I ask you- are you here tonight JUST because your calendar says you should be here- or is it - I imagine- for a much deeper meaning? Are you here tonight to support your Jewish community which needs your support now more than ever?**

**Are you here tonight because you are honoring the memory and the legacy of your loved ones?**

**Are you here to inspire your children, grandchildren and great- grandchildren to bring our sacred traditions from your past into their future?**

**Remember: “Our WHY is our purpose, cause or belief — the driving force behind everything we do. MOST OF US live our lives by accident- we live it as it happens. Fulfillment comes when we live our lives ON PURPOSE.”**

**SO- when I saw how much success we found at Hillel when we started from our why- I realized I wanted to try living my whole life that way- with intention. In Hebrew we call directing one’s purpose or intention our “kavanah.” with kavanah.**

**Now, I’m so lucky that I realized my professional kavanah very early on because I became a de facto**

**Jewish educator in elementary school.**

**But in my personal life- especially after becoming a parent- I needed a way to stop “sweating the small stuff” and to begin focusing my intention on becoming a perfectly imperfect role model for my daughters.**

**Thank GOD we have our Jewish tradition to help guide us in living our most purposeful life. In fact, The entire structure of Jewish life is designed to help us live with kavanah- intention- starting with our tradition of daily morning prayer.**

**In order to live my WHY- I’ve started incorporating aspects of daily morning prayer into my family’s morning routine. For example, during the month of Elul, we traditionally blow the shofar during morning services. So to make this tradition our own, during Elul, we use the shofar as the alarm clock which wakes up our three tween daughters. Especially the**

**first day, their reactions are HILARIOUS.**

**Here's another idea- before opening your NY times OR your Wall Street journal- - and before you have that first blessed sip of coffee in the morning, think for a second about this sermon and focus on your why while saying three simple but powerful words- Baruch Atah Adonai. You can also just try saying "Thank You."**

**How do daily rituals like this begin? Simply from each of us making a small decision and trying it out. Try it- after all, we have thousands of years of Jewish wisdom to back up the power of this morning ritual.**

**And If not now- when?! After all, The biggest regrets most people have in this life are NOT for things they've done- **PAUSE**- but for the things they didn't do.**

**Fractured relationships that we never mended, new**



**opportunities we didn't take, people we could have helped and didn't, traditions we wanted to start but we just never quite got around to it.**

**So Decide once- And get started. If not now- when?!  
START WITH WHY.**

**If living your why means exploring something new, try out one of our wonderful classes and learn from our visiting scholars this year to explore our congregational theme of "soulfulness".**

**If living your why means focusing on your social life and combating loneliness, start small and reach out to greet someone and make a connection on your way out tonight.**

**If living your why means giving back, and making our world a better place, our "Team Tikkun Olam" has volunteering opportunities every month and we'd love to have you join us!**

**If living your why means you are looking for a safe space to be in community during these anxious times, join us here.**

**As Rabbi Sholom ben Elazar one taught-**

**There are three types of exile and they are of increasing severity. The first is when Jews are in exile among other nations.**

**The second is when Jews are in exile among other Jews.**

**The third and most severe is when a Jew is in exile from himself.**

**My prayer for all of you this new year is to return from your own inner exile to our truest selves.**

**My prayer for all of you this new year is that your**

**spiritual audacity allows you to truly connect with your neshama, your Jewish soul.**

**My prayer for all of you this new year is that this moment of vulnerability for the Jewish people inspires us to start from our why everyday - and through this practice-**

**May you, your families, and all of our loved ones in Israel- be blessed with shelemoot - wholeness- and shalom- peace- this new year and ALWAYS.**

**....Ken Yehi Ratzon May it be God's Will.**

**SHANAH TOVAH.**