

Shana tovah!

As a community, our perspectives often evolve with our choice of words.

I reflected on this a few weeks ago, following our first Board meeting of the new shul year. We had each taken a few minutes to introduce ourselves by sharing a brief story from our Jewish journeys. The stories were moving, delightful, eye-opening, and gratifying. They also revealed a factoid that was surprising particularly because it was no longer surprising. Without highlight or even remark, we learned that evening that almost a quarter of our directors had not been born Jewish.

In a different day, people who had taken that path were referred to as “converts” in English, (and of course some worse things in Yiddish). The word “convert” was loaded—loaded with skepticism, begrudgement, and distance. Conversion was too often thought of as simply the price that a non-Jew had paid for the right to marry one of our spectacular young men or women.

Our comfort and acceptance with the idea of conversion and the people who had undertaken it made huge leaps when we made an adjustment in our language. When we began to speak of “Jews by Choice”, we gave power and respect to those who had made the tremendous investment and commitment of stepping through the doorway into our Jewish world. As it happened, the expression “Jew by Choice” also felt like a pat on the back to the born Jews whose world was desirable and being chosen—so this new expression was a win-win all around.

It was with the powerful perspective lent by this wonderful term that I found myself “shepping naches”, feeling pride, over our new Board that was so well represented with Jews by Choice. I feel great that we are a rigorous Jewish community whose leadership includes a substantial participation by those who considered our faith from the outside, studied it intently, and chose to raise their hands and say, “This is who I am now, and this is what I want in my life!”

But language doesn't lie dormant, and new usage creates new perspectives. I've recently started hearing a new expression that to me, turned that whole happy paradigm on its head. That new expression describes the members of our Tribe who didn't choose their Judaism, but were rather born with it. People like me. That expression is, “Jews by Chance”—and it's a bit shocking, isn't it? We like to think of ourselves as “The Chosen People”, but for those of us born Jewish, that expression begs us to consider whether that distinction isn't just a point of serendipity. And just like the expression “Jew by Choice” is empowering, when I first found out that I was a “Jew by Chance”, it felt a little disempowering, taking this thing that I am so proud of and reminding me that in some ways it was just a genetic accident.

I had a few rough weeks after I first encountered this comeuppance. I envisioned a big question mark on my back, like the “Chance” cards in a Monopoly game. The self-satisfaction of my birth was gone, replaced by uncertainty and diminishment. And all the while, there went those proud Jews by Choice, acting as if they owned my Jewish world simply because they had spent years making the intense effort to recognize, study, and embrace our faith and traditions.

Eventually, I came around to realize that this new expression “Jew by Chance”, this question mark on my back, was not a disempowerment, but rather a challenge. Yes, the fact of my Jewish birth was just a lucky accident, an accident that if nothing else, allowed me to endure my bris before I was old enough to realize what was going on. But I came to realize that being chosen, as it were, was not enough. For my Judaism to be meaningful, I had to also choose it. I had to make it something more than a chance, a question mark on my back.

There are so many ways we can choose our Judaism. We can choose it by Jewish study, or Jewish prayer. We can choose it by intentional Jewish association, or by proudly owning it among non-Jews. We can choose it by how we educate our children, or by the simchas that we observe to mark the milestones of our lives. We can choose it by providing leadership to our organized Jewish communities, with our time, or our financial support, or best yet, with both. We can choose it by providing a Jewish moral compass to everything we do, and by reflecting that Jewish moral compass when we share our perspectives in the dialogue of politics and government. We certainly choose our Judaism when we come to Kol Shofar during these Days of Awe, and we also choose it when we come back to this building for an Arts Salon program, or attend a Chai Lights event, or when we come here to say Kaddish in remembrance of a loved one. Some would say that we choose it when we eat kosher corned beef and watch Woody Allen movies—but come on, people....

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, this day when we all return to shul like the swallows to Capistrano, I bow in awe to my colleagues and co-congregants who were born among the nations but made the choice to be Jewish. And I am inspired by them to challenge the rest of us to consciously choose our Judaism. We have a rich and empowering tradition, a set of values that set us apart, and both a literal and a figurative Torah that remind us that we are the People of the Book. However you envision Torah in your life, raise that scroll over your head and show it to those around you, and then dress it beautifully and parade it around the aisles of your life. Let’s make Kol Shofar a community of 100% Jews by Choice!

Chag Sameach.