

Making the case for Judaism at Congregation Kol Tikvah

Yom Kippur Morning 5785

My friends, imagine the following conversation, Honey, New Year's is approaching and we haven't discussed what religion we want to practice this year.

Oh you mean it's that time of year again when we can choose what religion we want to be? I don't know. Three years ago we were Buddhist, two years ago we were Muslim, last year we were Pagan. You know it's just so hard to choose. I know but it's our annual opportunity to switch, so I thought we'd try Christianity this year.

Oh Honey that is so common. I thought we would try something a little more niche or exotic. Like what? I thought we'd give Judaism a try. But we know so little about it. I propose we do a little research and then

choose. A week later just before New Year's, the couple chose to be Jewish – but why?

The scenario I painted above is actually a real thing. When I was in Iceland this summer, we learned that each year on New Year's day citizens of Iceland can choose what religion if any they wish to practice, identify with and support with their tax dollars. Each year they get to determine which religious affiliation to designate to be the beneficiary of their Icelandic kroners. In fact, I asked our guide how many Jews are there in Iceland? The guide quickly responded there are 60 citizens who identify as Jewish by virtue of the taxes they paid last year. She said this information is readily available after it is recalibrated each new year.

Wow! Can you imagine choosing a new religion each year?! More importantly, if each religious community is competing for tax dollars, can you imagine how each one promotes itself, how in the marketplace

of ideas, beliefs, ideals, and practices each one is portrayed to convince potential followers to join their ranks.

On this Day of Attonement, imagine you had the right to choose Judaism or another religion. Upon what basis would you choose?

Assuming you did a cursory or intensive study of other religions, would you still choose to be Jewish? Upon what basis would you choose

Judaism? In an age of personal autonomy, as the former President of the then UAHC Rabbi Alexander Schindler taught, “some who convert, may choose Judaism and they are indeed Jews by choice; but aren’t we all to some degree Jews by choice?”

This morning, allow me to state the case for Judaism. What indeed is the value proposition which undergirds a decision many of us had made for us when we were born.

What are the big ideas, values, ideals, beliefs and practices which give shape to this thing called Judaism and which helps to shape our Jewish identity?

First let me begin by stating a core belief that I hold dearly. It is actually summed up best on a bumper sticker in my office which I have had for over 30 years. It simply states:

“God is too big to fit inside one religion”

I also believe that there is good in almost any religion as long as it proposes to do 2 things:

1. Does the religion help to make you a better person, more loving, honest, compassionate, just and fair?
2. Does the religion help to create a better world? Filled with more respect, dignity and justice, freedom and peace.

For sure sadly there is a lot of bad in religion, when it purports to triumph over others, when it uses prejudice and hatred to divide people, when it claims to have The Truth or the Only Truth, and when God is held hostage by our fears, our ignorance and our xenophobia.

So what about our religion, the one we call Jewish, and by which the vast majority in this synagogue this morning identify with? What are our core values, ideals, ideas, practices and beliefs? Can you articulate them? Is it enough to just have been born Jewish or if you had to give an “elevator pitch” to convince others why you identify as a Jew you could intelligently and cogently present the case for choosing Judaism as your North Star?

Well about 6 years ago as part of my Talmud 101 class, members of CKT were challenged to draft a manifesto of sorts, a set of guiding principles to help ourselves and others clearly understand who we are and what

we believe as Jews and in particular, members of this K'hillah K'doshah, this sacred fellowship we call CKT.

Allow me to briefly unpacked the 6 key guiding principles, steeped so deeply in our uniquely Jewish worldview, based upon quintessentially Jewishly lived experiences, time tested through 4,000 years of history.

[Power Point Presentation]

Who we are . . . and what we believe

My friends all of these high sounding beliefs, ideas, ideals and ritual practices mean nothing if there is not a model to deliver them, concretize them, enable them and ultimately to embody them and pass them on to the next generation. It's like having a soul without a body.

For over 2,000 years that body, the central address for making Jews Jewish, for perpetuating the Jewish story is the synagogue. Indeed, the

synagogue first conceived by our people while in exile in Babylonia became the archetype for the Christian church and the Moslem mosque. The synagogue which comes from the Greek word meaning “to come together”, in Hebrew is called a Beit K’nesset which means the same thing, “the house of coming together.” There are however 2 other names in Hebrew which describe to the main functions of the synagogue, Beit T’fillah and Beit Midrash, meaning house of prayer and house of study. Altogether the synagogue of today as it has been for over 2,000 years is where Jews gather, pray and study.

One can easily say that without the synagogue, Jewish life would have ceased to exist centuries ago. So too here in our little corner of the world in Coral Springs and Parkland.

1. You see, CKT is the place where over 100 of our children fled for safety to gather together and be comforted in the immediate aftermath of the heinous massacre at MSD on Valentine's day 2018.
2. CKT is the place where we gathered with 800 plus members of the interfaith community, all walks of life, coming together to feel our pain, assuage our fears and support us after the massacre of our fellow Jews in Pittsburgh on that Sabbath morning on October 27, 2018.
3. CKT is where we gathered to grapple with the daunting effects of the reversal of Roe vs. Wade when the Dobbs decision was handed down by the Supreme Court, severely restricting reproductive rights in our country.

4. CKT is the place you have brought your children for over 20 years to be educated in their earlier years as part of our Phyllis J. Green ECC.

5. CKT is the place you witnessed and celebrated their first graduation as they marched across this very bimah, transitioning from toddlerhood to kindergartners.

6. CKT is where you brought your children to learn about their heritage, enjoy living and doing Jewish with their peers, and where they were trained for their b-mitzvah.

7. CKT is where you kvelled with your closest family and friends as you celebrated your child's ability to read Torah, lead prayer and deliver a D'var Torah, in that liminal Jewish experience, that Jewish rite of passage known as the B mitzvah.

8. CKT is where hundreds of you have come as adults to study Torah, deepen your knowledge of Judaism, and draw nearer to our sacred texts, week in and week out.

9. CKT is where ancient Jewish rites are annually observed from generation to generation, where the shofar is sounded, Kol Nidre is chanted, Lulav and Etrog are waved, groggers are turned and Israeli flags are saluted.

10. CKT is where you marked the cycle of life including baby namings, brit milah, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. For me personally on this very bimah my daughter Ashira was confirmed, two of my daughters, Ariel and Talia were wed, and both my father and mother were eulogized.

11. CKT is where we build a better world, one mitzvah at a time, one peanut butter and jelly sandwich at a time, one pair of shoes at a time, one vote at a time.

12. CKT is a where you are cared for in good times and bad by friends you have known for years and by fellow congregants who you have just met.

13. CKT is where we gathered just this past Monday to find solace, comfort and strength to hear the atrocities of October 7.

For so many like me, this place is sacred, it is holy, it is where we lived and experienced some of our most impactful moments, memories that last a lifetime. CKT is also the place where many have turned for fellowship, spiritual guidance, nourishment for the soul. CKT is where we sing and dance, cook and bake, celebrate and party.

Can we imagine a world where CKT didn't exist? Who would want to?

How much poorer we would all be.

Allow me to conclude with the following story:

(anecdote about synagogue)

In a small town, there was a synagogue that had been the heart of the Jewish community for over a century. One winter, a severe storm hit, and the town was buried under several feet of snow. Roads were closed, power lines were down, and people were stuck in their homes, isolated and cold.

As soon as it was safe to do so, the synagogue's rabbi and a few volunteers trudged through the snow to the building. They lit the old wood-burning stove, and the warmth began to spread. The rabbi sent out a message to the community: the synagogue was open, and anyone who needed warmth, food, or company was welcome.

Throughout the day, families arrived, bringing what they could. The synagogue transformed into a haven, a place of warmth and fellowship. The elders told stories of past storms and hardships, creating a tapestry of shared history and resilience. Children played, laughed, and learned about the strength of their community.

In that moment, the synagogue wasn't just a place of worship. It was a sanctuary, a lifeline, and a reminder of the power of community. It exemplified the synagogue's role not just as a religious center, but as a place where people come together in times of need, where traditions are passed down, and where the spirit of togetherness and mutual support thrives. This experience deepened everyone's appreciation for their synagogue, underscoring its importance beyond rituals and prayers—it was the heart and soul of their communal life.

Clearly the “heart and soul” of Jewish life in Coral Springs and Parkland is our beloved synagogue, a synagogue that when I retire in June of 2026, I will have proudly and humbly served for 17 years, almost half the life of our then soon to be 36-year-old Bet K’neset. As we begin our campaign to retire our mortgage and to insure the future of CKT for generations yet unborn through legacy giving, I pray that all of us contribute according to our means willingly, enthusiastically, and generously so that the “heart and soul” of Jewish life in our small corner of the world will survive and thrive for many long years.

Am Yisrael Chai and as is emblazoned on this Amud, this Dais, Chazak Chazak V’nitchazake, “Be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another

As we toil together to ensure the legacy of this beloved institution for many long years, mi dor, L'dor from generation to generation and let us say