

So, I hope you are wondering why a white elephant is hanging in the sanctuary (thanks to David and Sarah Caine) What is being a white elephant all about? According to Wikipedia, “a **white elephant** is a supposedly valuable possession whose cost (particularly cost of upkeep) exceeds its usefulness, and it is therefore a liability. The term derives from the sacred [white elephants](#) kept by traditional Southeast Asian monarchs.... Because the animals were considered sacred, laws protected them from labor, therefore receiving a “gift” of a white elephant from a monarch was both a blessing and a curse; a blessing because of the animal’s sacred nature and a curse because the animal could be put to no practical use.”

One day, while sitting here in the sanctuary, I suddenly wondered how many Jews view Jewish tradition or even being Jewish, their personal white elephant – something recognized as being sacred in its nature, but of no real use to them. Certainly, those who never, or no longer, belong to a synagogue must view Judaism that way. They don’t belong to synagogues or JCCs because the “cost exceeds the usefulness.” It is always worth remembering that around 50% of American Jews do not belong to any synagogue. If I thought that the unaffiliated were observing Shabbat and kashrut at home; donating to worthwhile Jewish causes and helping strangers, perhaps their lack of affiliation would not matter. But based on information I have seen recently from Jewish community surveys, I am fairly confident that is not the case. The vast majority of the unaffiliated view Judaism and Jewish tradition as a white elephant – a liability which they choose to ignore.

But that is not the case for those of you sitting here. The vast majority of you belong to Brith Sholom and participate in some way. But what if... what if affiliated Jews don’t do much specifically Jewish outside of this room, or don’t seem concerned about Jewish causes or Jewish learning or performing mitzvot or Jewish continuity into the future? What really is the nature and value of your Judaism and Jewish identity **to you**? Is it mostly a white elephant that you prefer to keep locked up, lest it trample on your lifestyle?

Yom Kippur is often a time when we link Franz Rosenzweig, the 19th century Jewish philosopher, to recovering Jewish identity and practice. According to Rüdiger Lux, “Franz Rosenzweig, ... at 20 ... tried to account for his Jewishness: ‘It is the religion of my fathers ... I like to observe some of the customs - without any real reason ... I like to think in the images of the biblical story.’ His cousin, Hans Ehrenberg,

converted to Christianity and was baptized in 1911. Rosenzweig wrote to his own parents: 'We are Christians in all things, we live in a Christian state, go to Christian schools, read Christian books, our whole culture is based on a Christian foundation.' He came very close to the brink of the baptismal font. On the evening of July 7, 1913, while discussing baptism with Eugen Rosenstock and his cousins Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig promised to get baptized. However, he made one condition. He was, he said, not a *goy*, [a gentile,] but a Jew, and wanted to take a closer look at the things from which he would be separated by this conversion. He asked his relatives for a time of contemplation and reviewing, a time of a last (or was it the first?) conscious participation in the 'Ten High Holy Days' from [Rosh HaShanah](#) to [Yom Kippur](#). For him these became the 'ten days of return' to his roots in Judaism. Later he wrote to his cousin Rudolf saying: 'It [conversion to Christianity] seems unnecessary and for me impossible now. I remain a Jew.' According to some accounts of Rosenzweig's life, it was his attendance at a Kol Nidre service in 1913 that caused him to return to Judaism. Either way, the power of this time in the Jewish calendar caused Rosenzweig to adopt a more serious Jewish lifestyle and in some respect, he became the father of modern, adult Jewish education. Somehow, Rosenzweig connected with the Jewish past. He made it his own and helped transform Jewish life for future generations.

But Rosenzweig's transformation of a personal white elephant into a lifestyle occurred in the early twentieth century. What would it take, what does it take, today, for a Jew to examine closely his or her Jewish identity and commitments and adopt a more serious and encompassing Jewish life?

In the weeks before Rosh Hashanah, I read through as much related material as I can, and this year found several statements about Jewish identity and its meaning in the book [Rosh Hashanah Readings](#) and in [Moments of Transcendence](#), both edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins. Not surprisingly, being Jewish seems to have what we could consider positive and negative aspects. Amos Oz is a secular, dovish, contemporary, award winning Israeli writer and novelist.

He wrote:

"A Jew, in my vocabulary, is someone who regards himself as a Jew, or someone who is forced to be a Jew. A Jew is someone who acknowledges his Jewishness. If he acknowledges it publicly, he is a Jew by choice. If he acknowledges it only to his inner self, he is a Jew by the force of his destiny."

I would like every Jew to feel comfortable and proud of being publicly Jewish in a way that respects others and earns the respect of others. But I worry that too many Jews are Jews “by the force of destiny” and really are not eager to do too much Jewish.

Elie Wiesel offers us some important insights on this topic in an essay: “What Being Jewish Means to Me.”

“I still believe that to be Jewish today means what it meant yesterday and a thousand years ago. It means for the Jew in me to seek fulfillment both as a Jew and as a human being. For a Jew, Judaism and humanity must go together. To be Jewish today is to recognize that every person is created in the image of God and that our purpose in living is to be a reminder of God.

Naturally, I claim total kinship with my people and its destiny. Judaism integrates particularist aspirations with universal values, fervor with rigor, legend with law. Being Jewish to me is to reject all fanaticism everywhere.

To be Jewish is, above all, to safeguard memory and open its gates to the celebration of life as well as to the suffering, to the song of ecstasy as well as to the tears of distress that are our legacy as Jews. It is to rejoice in the renaissance of Jewish sovereignty in Israel and the reawakening of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union...”

I think Eli Wiesel has hit on at least three key issues of what it hopefully means to be a Jew today and why it is worthwhile. “Fulfillment as a Jew and human being .. by living as a reminder of God”; a connectedness to our past and a connectedness to contemporary Israel and world Jewry.

Rabbi Bonnie Koppell addressed a significant aspect of fulfillment.

“I am reminded of the *Peanuts* cartoon strip, in which Charlie Brown asks, ‘Sometimes I wonder if I even know what it would take to make me happy.’ Snoopy responds by throwing a ball – ‘Here, get the ball.’ He seems mystified when Charlie Brown is still despondent in the final frame – ‘That usually works with dogs.’

“Sometimes,” Rabbi Koppell continues, “I think we all feel like Charlie Brown, wondering what it would take to make us feel happy. Leo Rosten addressed the issue of what is happiness, writing, ‘Ask an American mother what she wants most for her child. The chances are she will reply: ‘To be happy.’ But there was a time when what we most wanted, for our children or ourselves, was to amount to something. What is this myth, ‘happiness,’ that has bamboozled so many of us? And what is this ... thing, ‘fun,’ which so many chase after? ...

Where was it ever promised to us that life on this earth can ever be easy, free from conflict and uncertainty, devoid of anguish and wonder and pain?... The purpose of life is not to be happy. The purpose of life is to matter, to be productive, to have it make some difference that you lived at all.”

Judaism wants us “to matter, to be productive, to have it make some difference that [we] lived” But it’s not enough just to connect to the Jewish past, you need to find a way to make Judaism, your Jewish identity, your own.

“Once, the great Hasidic leader, the Maggid of Mezeritch, was walking through a town, surrounded by people anxious for the blessing and council of the renowned rabbi. A woman approached him and asked for a blessing to ensure that she would bear a child.

‘Before I was born,’ said the Maggid, ‘my mother prayed to have a child. She heard that a great scholar would be passing through the town, and she spent months before his appearance knitting him a beautiful shawl. When he arrived, she presented him with the shawl and asked for his blessing for a child. A year later, I was born.’ The woman thanked the Maggid and went back home.

The following year, the Maggid was again passing through the town. The same woman approached him, bearing a beautifully knitted shawl. She presented it and asked for a blessing. ‘I will offer a blessing,’ replied the Maggid, ‘but it won’t work. You see, my mother didn’t know the story.’”

Rabbi David Wolpe offers an interesting interpretation of this passage. “The Maggid’s point is that we must not only learn from others, but create something new and beautiful of our own. To slavishly emulate another, even in something good, is not enough; a mitzvah must carry something of the creativity and vitality of our own unique souls.... The story we create [with our lives, needs to be] ... our own story as well as one that enhances the collective story of our people.” I believe that is what the Conservative Movement means by tradition and change. We look to our connection to the past and rely on it for precedent and guidance, but it is also vital that we keep adapting the collective story using our perspective and creativity so that we never lose sight of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s thought that the Torah is “God’s first word, not God’s last.”

Very soon, we will recite the Yizkor prayers. We remember our loved ones from earlier generations. What was their Jewish identity like? Have we retained it? Strengthened it? Enhanced it? Or merely let it slip away like a white elephant? What

Jewish family traditions have we retained and what Jewish family traditions have we created?

And whatever we have done until now, it is never too late to start. Whatever our individual limitations in life, they will not limit our ability to live meaningful, fulfilling Jewish lives. The Torah reading from the first day of Rosh Hashanah reminds us of the possibilities. An unexpected opportunity may come very late in life. Sarah is ninety and Abraham one hundred when Isaac is born. By then, they were both doubtless giving more thought to funeral arrangements than child care. Our daily lives are filled with possibilities “to matter, to be productive and to make a difference.” Whether it is our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel; our Jewish brothers and sisters in the former Soviet Union; our Jewish brothers and sisters suffering from persecution in other countries; or our human brothers and sisters enduring the genocide and dislocation in Darfur; or our human brothers and sisters suffering from AIDS in Africa; or our human brothers and sisters living in repressive societies around the world; or our Jewish and human brothers and sisters who are starving; or our Jewish and human brothers and sisters who are living in poverty, we are able to matter and make a difference at any age, if we make an effort. And if we do so because it is a mitzvah and “to remind people there is a God,” then surely Jewish tradition is no white elephant.

It is an ongoing challenge to connect Jewish rituals to these acts. Tzedakah is obvious. Kashrut, Shabbat, festivals, davening are not as apparent, but nonetheless help determine Jewish identity and clearly connect us to our people, both historically and around the contemporary world. Today, Aaron Juda is in Venezuela where he has been and will be working for a few months. He is observing Yom Kippur there, at a Conservative synagogue in Caracas, as we are here. The only part of the service which may be incomprehensible is the sermon, which I expect is delivered in Spanish. But the prayers and customs will all be familiar because he is connected – through centuries of printed mahzorim and tradition. Don’t cheat yourselves of the opportunity to lead a meaningful life. Don’t cheat our tradition and people of the contributions you are capable of making to our community and society and world. Franz Rosensweig proved a century ago it is never too late. Abraham and Sarah proved it much longer ago. If you have ideas about how to enhance Jewish learning and practice, please let us know. There are so many of us who want to respond to transforming Jewish tradition from a white elephant into a priceless possession. Brith Sholom, Project Yachad, the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley are among those who are concerned about the Jewish

future and the quality and value of Jewish life. We are not here just to take your money; we want to give you value, as well as values. And if we succeed, you will have meaning and connectedness and we will have a stronger Jewish people and a better world.

The direction of the Jewish future is in **your** hands, I pray that you do not take it to a white elephant sale.

AMEN