There is an old not so funny Jewish joke that goes like this:

After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II of Russia, a government official in Ukraine menacingly addressed the local rabbi, "I suppose you know in full detail who was behind it."
"Ach," the rabbi replied, "I have no idea, but the government's conclusion will be the same as always: they will blame the Jews and the chimneysweeps."
"Why the chimneysweeps?" asked the befuddled official.
"Why the Jews?" responded the rabbi.

Before this past summer this joke felt out dated to me.
In fact, before this past summer anti-semetism felt out dated to me.
This summer, for the first time in my life, I felt nervous to outwardly display that I was a Jew.
Incidents of arson and vandalism, protests where people shouted anti-semetic phrases, boycotts of Jewish businesses, vandalism of synagogues, and targeted violence against Jewish individuals swept across the world including here and throughout Europe.

I thought twice about wearing t-shirts that have Hebrew on them.
I thought twice about the Jewish star
I wear almost everyday around my neck.
In August, I went to the place
Where I don’t think twice about these things: Israel.
Despite rockets being launched at southern and central Israel, I felt safer there to be myself, in a place where “Jewish” is the dominant culture.

This is not a sermon about making aliyah, moving to Israel.
And this is not a sermon about Israel in general.
Although I am always happy to talk about either topic.

What am I going to discuss with you this morning is how to find the balance between two significant identifications: being a citizen of the world, (a somewhat inhospitable world at times) and about being Jew.
This is a sermon about how being a member of a particular tribe has major benefits in both good and bad times.

For those of us who try and straddle these two identities, there are times when it’s much easier to be a citizen of the world. And there are times when it’s much easier to be a member of a specific tribe. My partner Michelle and I tried to decide whether taking a vacation in Israel would be relaxing and rejuvenating amidst a war. We ultimately concluded that we would rather be in Israel where we felt more comfortable in a place with a Jewish majority caring for our safety and well-being than in any other part of the world. For us, this summer it felt hard to be a citizen of the world. Yet, there have been times in my life where Israel does not feel like a comfortable place to be, specifically, when I feel like there is not a place for me as a Reform female Rabbi. When I experience Jewish community, as being intolerant, closed, and unwelcoming, it is much easier to be just a citizen of the world. As Jews, each of us must struggle to balance our Jewish and secular worlds, be it in the workplace, in the synagogue, when traveling or even amongst friends and family. So how do we balance both states?

The scholar and writer Yossi Klein Halevi wrote this week, “Most Jews instinctively know that to be a Jew means to balance paradoxes – security and morality, realism and vision, particularism and universalism, self-defense and self-critique.”

The trick to balancing paradoxes is to hold both in mind. Our main biblical protagonist this morning, Abraham, is a great example.

Abraham is a man intensely concerned with the comfort and well being of others. When he sees strangers approaching his tent, he ignores being ill and the desert heat and shows them hospitality. He pleads with God to spare the cruel sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah because he cannot stand the thought of innocent life being lost.
Abraham’s value and habit of kindness is so inculcated in his life that when his servant Eliezer goes out to find a wife for his son Isaac, the right girl, must be one who demonstrates deep compassion not just for him, but for his camels as well. Abraham values unadulterated kindness.

Abraham’s kindness stems both from his humanism and his covenant with God. Abraham represents a fresh start for humanity. He is the 10th generation from Noah and 10th in descent from Adam. Abraham is considered to be more than Noah ever was and a hope for a reversal of the curses placed on Adam. Abraham’s strong moral compass is an outcome of growth from generations before him. Abraham is humanity the way God intended.

In addition, Abraham is a deep man of faith. He is chosen by God to be a blessing and a great name. His kindness…his choices in life are influenced by the pact that he has made with God. And he does not just passively expect God to make good on his word. Abraham knows he too must be active in bringing about the promised results from God. Therefore, Abraham acts with covenant in mind. He believes his actions are in line with what God demands of him.

Like Abraham we too are called to do what is right in this world, to be good people, to act with kindness towards others because we believe this is what it means to be human or as Victor Frankl puts it, “Being human means being conscious and responsible.” We hope and pray that all human beings hold this universal mission. Yet, we are also like Abraham because we too are involved in a particular covenant: a contract between us and our tradition.

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1 Levenson, p. 20
2 Levenson, p. 38
3 Sacks, p. 3
Our tradition teaches these same values, but asks us to be mindful that when we act we do so with a Jewish consciousness. And when we do this we give honor to both our tradition and to our covenant with God.

When balancing both our universal and particular mindsets, we must ask ourselves, what does it mean to act with a Jewish consciousness? And to complicate the matter further, wondering about Jewish consciousness often leads us to ask, “Why be Jewish?” Some of you who feel firmly rooted in your heritage may find these questions irrelevant. But, even if you don’t ask these questions, I bet you know someone who does because increasing numbers of Jews want to understand the relevancy of Judaism in their lives. Spiritual seekers want to understand what its like to call Judaism, a unique spiritual and cultural home.

Our High Holy Days seek to answer these questions of identity and balance, through prayer, our liturgy, and communal gathering. These Days of Awe affirm our identity both as Jews and as citizens of the world. The message is: we Jews are a particular people who share a universal mission with all people who wish to live in a just and peaceful world. We are a tribe amongst other tribes with the goal of peaceful coexistence.

Our universal mission is clear, as portrayed in our liturgy. The Aleinu, originally written for Rosh Hashanah, depicts a messianic time, a time when all people, not just Jews, will repair the world with divine presence.4 Our ancestors did not see Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world just for the Jews, but for humanity. Therefore, Rosh Hashanah provides us with a prophetic vision of a world that will be inhabited by nations that will not lift up swords against nations, a world, that is filled with truth and light.

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4 All The World, p. 48
The “particular” part is clear too.
The core of our Rosh Hashanah service
is the re-enthronement of God
as sovereign of the universe,
who will announce a world
that is a spiritual and moral whole,
with only one ruler to whom we owe loyalty.
And as Rabbi David A. Teutsch points out,
“the universalism of this vision assumes
that Zion will be the center of God’s reign
and that the Torah,
God’s central teaching,
will become universally accepted.”

So at the core of the universal messages of the High Holy Days
there is a very specific,
very particular, message at the heart of it all:
the notion that ultimately we pray
for Torah and our God to be universally accepted.
Before this can even be realized
or perhaps even debated
we must first try it out ourselves.
Balancing may actually mean,
placing Torah and tradition
at the center of our world
as catalyst and core
for our universal mission.
How do we do this?

*How do we make Torah and tradition at our center?*

**Through storytelling…**

As social animals we often share stories as a way to connect with others. Through storytelling we are able to understand what we have in common with one another, what are values are, and from where we’ve come. We as a people are bound together through the telling of particular stories. The most famous probably being the Exodus from Egypt. We glean our values from these stories that bind us. A value learned from our collective story is far more likely to stick to our souls than a value without any personal context. We learn from the story of Abraham the value of hospitality. We learn from the Exodus that we should never oppress the stranger for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. The value of giving gifts to the poor is embedded in our Purim story. The value of gratitude for the nature around us is highlighted in the story of Sukkot. Our particular stories enrich the values they proscribe, reminding us of the how to act and when to act. Without them, we loose our moral direction manual and we loose our moral reminders.

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5 *All The World*, p. 46-47
How do we make Torah and tradition at our center?
Through looking out for one another…
In addition to our particular narratives, we also have our particular sense of communal responsibility for one another. Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh…all of Israel are responsible for each other. This basic Jewish tenant implies that we have an obligation to ensure that other Jews have their basic needs met and that if one Jew sees another Jew on the verge of sinning, we have an obligation to step in and help. While obligation can feel burdensome, this particularistic responsibility gives us accountability and a network of support that is unique to us as a community.

How do we make Torah and tradition at our center?
Through being proud…
Being a part of a particular group means taking pride in its achievements. Pride is a complicated feeling as it can often lead to arrogance and narcissism, but when felt genuinely it is a swelling up feeling of joy and admiration. In Yiddish, we might call this “kvelling or “sheppiing naches.” When Jewish immigrants flooded into America during the late 19th and early 20th century, they built synagogues, schools, and cemeteries to serve their own communities, but they also created hospitals and charitable organizations that were designed to serve anyone in need regardless of race or religion. Our immigrant ancestors perceived their role here as new citizens as twofold: to become productive citizens of their new society and to ensure that values they held in their own community was extended to those in the larger community. They took pride in their accomplishments and contributions and demonstrated to the larger world all that we have to offer and contribute to humanity.

How do we make Torah and tradition at our center?
Through allowing Judaism to be a framework for our time…
The rituals that mark Jewish time are designed to make us present to the gift of life, family, and community. Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander writes that, “When we observe the particularistic rituals of lighting Shabbat candles, singing the Kiddush, and saying the Motzi we affirm the universal values of freedom and justice for all.” Engaging in these rituals remind us the important lessons of gratitude, rest, and empathy. They renew and center us each week so that we can be productive at our missions in this world. Marking life’s transformative moments through life-cycle ritual reminds us not to take time for granted. So that we know the precious lesson of making our moments count here on earth.

Torah and tradition at the center provides an anchor of support for our universal missions and aspirations.

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6 Shevuot 39a
7 All The World, p. 171
Rabbi Jonathan Sachs writes, “Happiness is the ability to say: I lived for certain values and acted on them. I was part of a family, embracing it and being embraced by it. I was part of a community, honouring its traditions, sharing its griefs and joys, ready to help others, knowing that they were ready to help me.”

When it feels like the world is plagued with hatred and when some of that hatred is aimed at us it is hard to no where to turn…inward or outward? I vote that we do both. We look inward and strengthen our identity and our tribal bonds, and we look outward and take our tradition to the streets. Let’s show the world a Judaism that teaches and preaches values we are proud of.

Cynthia Ozick, an American Jewish novelist and essayist writes that, "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Humannkind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all;"

Ozick’s words remind us that if we stay entrenched in our tribe and our tradition we then have the power and strength to make our universal missions and desires heard. Starting the other way around will leave us voiceless.

May we enter this New Year five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five rooted in our Jewish paradoxes, with a willingness to place our covenant with God, our teachings, and our traditions, at the center of our lives with hope that they provide us with instruction and meaning to work towards a world filled with kindness, compassion, and love.

Shanah Tovah.

8 Sachs, p. 7