

As a Jew

Who gets to say these three words:

“As a Jew...?”

You know the sentence.

“As a Jew, I think Israel...”

“As a Jew, I’m offended by...”

“As a Jew, I believe...”

Those words are meant to add something.

Weight.

Authority.

A credential.

To say: I’m not only offering an opinion. I’m speaking from inside this story, this identity, this people.

So who gets to say them?

I ask because I have a friend named Elliott.

Elliott is eighty years old.

He is Jewish.

But in all the years I have known him, he has had virtually no relationship with Judaism.

He has never belonged to a synagogue.

He has never really celebrated Shabbat or the Jewish holidays.

Jewish learning, Jewish ritual, Jewish community — none of it has played much of a role in his life.

As far as I can tell, Judaism has made almost no demands upon his time, his choices, his money, his relationships, or the way he lives.

Except every so often, something happens in the world.

Israel.

American politics.

Antisemitism.

And Elliott posts something online beginning:

“As a Jew...”

As a Jew, I reject the notion of Israel as a fill-in-the-blank.

As a Jew.

And every time I see those words, something inside goes crazy.

Because part of me wants to say:

Elliott.

For eighty years, you’ve had almost no relationship with Judaism.

In my anger, part of me wants to scream

Are you really even Jewish?

But then I hear Elliott answering me.

And the annoying thing is —

he has a pretty good answer.

“Mark, I am Jewish.

“My parents were Jewish.

“My grandparents were Jewish.

“I was born a Jew.

“You’re a rabbi. But you don’t get to decide whether I’m Jewish.

“I am.”

And Elliott would be right.

He is Jewish.

Jewish tradition is remarkably stubborn about that.

You can walk away from Judaism.

But Judaism does not easily walk away from you.

And there is something beautiful about that.

So perhaps the question isn't:

Who gets to say, "As a Jew"?

Maybe the harder question is:

What does being a Jew require of us?

Pause.

Because surely being Jewish has to mean more than ancestry.

More than a box we check.

More than three words we put in front of an opinion.

Pause.

Because at some point, doesn't being Jewish have to affect the way I actually live?

Can I ask my Jewishness to have impact when I've never allowed it to impact me?

The Torah teaches that belonging comes with obligations.

We were called to *do* something.

Pause.

And right about now, I know what some of you are thinking.

Well, Rabbi, fortunately this sermon is about Elliott.

Because we're here.

We came to synagogue on the High Holy Days.

We support the Jewish community.

We raise Jewish children.

We give tzedakah.

We show up at funerals and shivas.

We're not Elliott.

Except...

I'm not entirely sure if that's true.

Because perhaps Elliott is simply an unusually clear example of something all of us do sometimes.

Myself included.

We love Judaism when Judaism agrees with us.

We love quoting the teaching that confirms the decision we already want to make.

We love following the mitzvot that are convenient enough for our lives.

It's easy to believe in tzedakah when we barely notice the loss.

It's easy to admire Judaism's teachings about repentance and forgiveness until it's on me to make the phone call I've spent three years avoiding.

If Judaism never challenges us...

If it never unsettles us...

If it never forces us to reconsider something we were certain about...

Then I have to wonder whether we are actually listening to Judaism.

Or whether we have simply recruited Judaism to agree with ourselves.

If every Jewish teaching somehow confirms all of my existing politics, instincts, preferences and grudges —

that would be quite a coincidence.

At some point Torah ought to tell me something I don't want to hear.

And that brings me back to Elliott.

I'm still not entirely comfortable when he begins a sentence:

"As a Jew..."

But perhaps these High Holy Days are asking me to spend a little less time worrying about Elliott's sentence —

and a little more time worrying about my own.

Because I say those words too.

“As a Jew...”

So this year, as a Jew, how will Judaism shape my life more than it did last year?

Will I make Shabbat different from every other day of the week?

Will I make Jewish learning a priority — even when it’s not entirely convenient for my schedule, not only for my children, but for myself?

Will I choose one mitzvah I do not currently practice and take it seriously this year?

Will I repair one relationship I have allowed to remain broken?

Will I celebrate one Jewish holiday this year that I might otherwise have let pass by?

And perhaps most importantly:

Will I allow Judaism to challenge one opinion I hold — to make me reconsider something I have been certain about?

Will I make one decision differently this year because Judaism asks something of me?

Because being Jewish may be something we inherited or chose.

But living Jewishly demands action.

We have our membership cards.

The question I leave you with is: what are you going to do with it?