

Good evening, and Shabbat Shalom.

As with most good stories about Reform Judaism, this one begins in Cincinnati.

However, unlike most stories about Reform Judaism, this one begins in a gentile home. On February 16th, 1981, a son was born to the Reverend and Misses Richard and Sheila Wesley. The hard-working Nazarene preacher and his equally hard-working wife would go on to instill in the boy the values of humility, compassion, self-respect, and determination, as well as a fierce sense of individualism. Two and a half years later they would have another son, my brother John. They raised us to be God-fearing, moral, and just. They taught us the meaning of self-sacrifice, the value of family, and the sacredness of prayer. Indeed, I could stand here all night recounting the teachings they gave us, as Rabbi Mackler put it, the gifts they gave us. However, I will focus on two of these gifts in particular that seem most relevant as I stand before you today.

From my father I received a love of the Book. Of all books in general, but of one book in particular: the Bible. While he did not call it the Tanakh or Pentateuch, my father nevertheless raised me with the words of Torah. To be holy to my God, to be humble, and to act with kindness, all of these things and more he found in its words, and he taught these to me. This gift from my father – the love of Torah – has led me to this place today.

From my mother I received the gift of compassion. I remember my mother being an avid student of the Shoah – the Holocaust – throughout my youth. Despite

the fact that the Nazarene church frowned upon attending movies in the theater, my mother made a point to take my brother and me to see *Schindler's List* when it came out. She would always tell us, "If we don't remember our past, we are doomed to repeat it." I think my mother could find no event in such dire need of not being repeated, and so, felt it needed remembering the most. This gift from my mother – of compassion and remembering – has led me to this place today.

However, despite the great start my parents gave me, much of my life has been a search: a search for meaning, a search for answers. No matter where I looked, I never seemed to find what I was searching for. Yet while my understanding and perception of God underwent many changes, my belief in God never ceased. Sometimes I was angry with God and sometimes I questioned God, but I always knew there was something bigger, a source from which all we know emanates. I studied many world religions, and found much good in each. I borrowed those ideas that best mirrored my own convictions, adding them to the values my parents implanted within me. Thus I built for myself my own way of life, if you will, my own religion. However, this religion was always void of one vital thing: a community. This is the problem with inventing your own religion: you are the only follower. So, imagine my surprise when, after years of search and study, I found, in this place, a way of life that contained all of those vital convictions.

I say I was surprised because I did not come to the Temple to find God. In truth, I had given up on organized religion years ago. I attended the Taste of Judaism class offered last year with my girlfriend Jessica, who is both my biggest

inspiration and my greatest source of support. As a student majoring in psychology, I understand the role culture and religion play in our psychological makeup as human beings, and this seemed like a great way to expand my knowledge. I essentially saw my visit to the Temple as an extension of my schoolwork. I did not enter this sanctuary to hear the voice of God. However, God chose this very sanctuary as the place that I would hear The Call. Those three evenings spent listening to Rabbi Shappiro ignited within me a passion and a longing I have not known before. That initial spark has become a fire that burns deeply within me.

Today, I am a Jew. A proud member of an ancient tradition: a Jew by choice. So what does it mean to be a Jew by choice? It means, for me, three things. In its most obvious sense, it means that I have freely and willingly chosen to cast my lot with the Jewish people. In this sense, Judaism is a choice I have made, and continue to make every day. But this choice is not mine alone to make.

We are taught that this life is not the effort of an individual, but rather a group effort, a partnership. One cannot accomplish the work of two, and two cannot accomplish the work of ten. The Jewish community today has made a choice to accept me as a member, to be counted among the ranks. Therefore, I am a Jew by choice also because the community has chosen to accept me.

As I said a moment ago, this life is a partnership. This is true with our relationship to God, also. Just as we depend on God, so too does God depend on us. As we look to God to sanctify and heal our spirit, so does God look to us to sanctify and heal our world. God gave us the Torah not solely as a book of history,

recounting where we have been, but also as a book of possibility, showing us where we may go. I have found in the Torah, and in the Jewish community, my part in God's plan. However, God revealed this plan to me not in a flash of insight, but rather through a process of learning, and of yearning.

I have chosen to be Jewish, but God also has chosen this path for me. God chose to speak to me in a distinctly Jewish fashion. In this light, I understand that Judaism is not just a choice I am making, but also a choice God has made for me.

Yes, for me, Judaism is a choice: my choice, your choice, and God's choice.

I am humbled today, having been called by Adonai my God to live a holy life. I am honored today, having been accepted into the community. And I am proud, as both an American and as a Jew, to assert my choice: to take my place as a member of the Jewish fold.

As numerous converts before have done I invoke the words of Ruth as I bind myself to k'lal Yisrael, to all of Israel: "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."