Thursdays are my day off. A day to try to get done all the things that most people get done on weekends. Which makes me wonder what I am going to do tomorrow, as Yom Kippur falls on a Thursday. But one thing I like to do on Thursdays is go for a hike, often with my mom. We don't hike every week – sometimes it is too hot, or I have too much work to do, or COVID protocols get in the way – but we often hike. We have trekked through the hills of Tarzana and Malibu and Thousand Oaks and Agoura.

On one Thursday, we were hiking right behind my mom's friends Cathy and David's house. At the end of the hike, my mom asked if we should surprise her friend Cathy, and knock on her door. I said sure, and then my mom remembered that it was Thursday, and Cathy works on Thursdays. So we decided to go to her store instead – surprise her and her coworker who we also love – and then grab lunch. As we are discussing this plan, my phone rings. It's Cathy. The woman we were just talking about surprising. In some shock, thinking that perhaps she sees us from her house, or she saw our car, I answer the phone in disbelief. "What?" She says, "Is that how a rabbi answers the phone?" And I explain to her that we are on our way to surprise her at work, when she tells me that she was calling asking if I could come to her work. They need a rabbi.

Who needs a rabbi? Who, on a Thursday, shy of a God-forbid moment, needs a rabbi, in a store? I explain that I just hiked near her house and am not looking or smelling so rabbinic.

We went anyways.

After our hellos and air hugs, one of Cathy's coworkers, a woman named Christine, asked if I would sit down with her. She told me her story in a similar way to how I tell a story – it was not linear, but jumped around and across centuries. Her son had just died and she was broken. Her husband and teenage daughter were trying to work through the grief of losing a son and a brother, a seemingly healthy son in college whose cancer diagnosis progressed so quickly. I assumed that this is why there was a rabbi emergency on a Thursday – to help this non-Jewish woman through her sorrow.

But then Christine's story went on – she wanted to be Jewish. She loves Judaism and always felt connected to Judaism. Oh, this must be why I was called in, to start counseling her toward conversion, to recommend books and classes, and set up regular appointments for questions and discussions. But, again, no. I jump to conclusions too quickly.

She remembers her grandmother in Mexico lighting candles on Friday nights. Making circles with her hands and mumbling something. She never thought much of it. She was handed a silver cup and told to keep it in the family. On display in her house, a friend came over and asked why Christine had a Kiddush cup. She started doing research,

poking around, and asked her grandmother. In a faint whisper, days before Abuelita died, she told Christine that they were Jewish.

That they could trace their ancestry through twenty-five generations to royalty in Spain. The mayor of the town and the rabbi. Passed down from generation to generation were silver cups and candlesticks, the family secret not shared until the matriarch was about to die, through countries on three continents.

She, it turns out, is Jewish. She, who didn't know she was Jewish until she was in her late 40s. She, whose name does not sound Jewish. Who always felt connected to Judaism, even before she had ever met a Jew herself. She, who fell in love with a Jewish man and raised Jewish kids, and converted her kids, and always felt like she was getting the stink-eye from her synagogue because she did not come across as Jewish, was Jewish all along.

This year, I have heard from so many Jews who do not look like your traditional Ashkenazi Jew. Jews who are Black and Asian and Hispanic. Jews who get the sideways glances when they go to shul or Jewish events. Who have to constantly explain themselves to people who think Jews should look like Gal Gadot or Jerry Seinfeld or a bearded Hassidic rebbe.

On Instagram, there is an entity called Hey Alma, and on Tuesdays, they put out a game that they hope is fun (though I'm sure they get a lot of angry letters). The game is called Jew or Not, and they

put up pictures of celebrities, politicians, athletes and you guess if they are Jewish or not.

And it is surprising every time – people who look Jewish, whose names sound Jewish, who have played Jews in movies turn out to not be Jewish. Conversely, people who do not look like the kids from my Hebrew school class, turns out they are Jewish.

Last year I heard a story from my colleague Rabbi Angela Buchdahl. Rabbi Buchdahl is an Asian Jew. And a great rabbi and an incredible singer. She was counseling a couple before their wedding and the groom was trying to convince his fiancée to convert. The fiancée, tall and blonde and, well, not looking like the typical Jew, was really interested in the theology, loved the holidays and Shabbat, dove into the learning. In one of their last sessions, the rabbi asked the groom what he loved most about being Jewish. And he said, "I love that I can look around the room and sense who else is Jewish, just by looking." The fiancée then asked, "Would you think that I am Jewish?" He realized that – with all the beauty of our peoplehood that his beloved had learned, with all of our holidays and customs and language – of all the things he could say, the idea of *looking* Jewish – and saying it to his Asian rabbi and his statuesque fiancée – was the wrong answer. The couple got married, but the woman did not convert. If, in her husband's eyes, she would never be seen as Jewish, then what was the point?

A distant cousin called me a few years ago. I believe she is my third cousin once removed, and we started looking into our family tree

that goes back 6 generations. Unlike Christine, I cannot trace my roots much further back than this one family tree.

This cousin tells me that the furthest back ancestor we know of, my great-great-great grandmother, was not born Jewish. She was so ugly, the story goes, that no one in town would marry her. A poor Jewish merchant came to town and her father liked him. The father married his daughter off to this impoverished Yid, supposedly giving them both a better life. My most distant ancestor wasn't Jewish, but Christine's was.

It brings to mind the question of what is being Jewish? Is it merely handed down through birthright, or is it something that we can embrace and become fully? I love the fact that you can adopt Judaism and become Jewish. That no one can question your Judaism after that. I love the fact that Jews look more diverse today than we did a generation ago. And that's beautiful! Probably every family here has been touched by this progress. How incredible!

A rabbi and a priest were talking – this is not a joke, it's a true story. A rabbi, Dan Greyber, was talking to a priest in his community in Durham about obtaining membership in their houses of worship. The priest said, "To be a member of our church, all you have to do is say that you believe in Jesus, and all that entails. You sign on to the same theology as everyone else in the church, and you are one of us. How do you become a member of your synagogue?" The rabbi gulped in embarrassment. "We don't care what you believe. You just have to

write a check and fill out some paperwork." The rabbi told me this story in shame, but I see it as beautiful.

We don't need identical doxologies, we don't need to all think alike, for us to be a united community.

There are many pathways to Judaism. There are many pathways to God. Some have deep belief and some question. Some are atheists, but cultural or gastronomic Jews, and they are still part of our community. Some believed in God yesterday and then yelled at God today and will be comforted by community tomorrow. You don't have to share the same views on God that I do to be part of our community.

The words of Kol Nidre admit this. They remind us that, sometimes, the things we say and the things we think are not constant. We can really mean it today and feel differently about it tomorrow. We take back the promises and oaths and vows – because we are human. We are evolving and growing.

If there is one line of Torah, one line of the Bible, that most Jews know, it is from the first chapters of Deuteronomy. It is not merely a line of Torah, it is a line of prayer. A central prayer in the morning service and the evening service, we say it when we wake and when we go to bed, when we travel and when we're stuck at home.

Shma Yisrael Adon'ai Elo'heinu Ado'nai Echad.

My teacher, Rabbi Schulweis, says, some prayers I read and just simply don't pay attention to. But this prayer I have never heard or read without feeling that it captured the very heart. The very marrow of

Jewish life. What does it say? First of all, the prayer is remarkable because it doesn't talk *to* God.

Every other prayer seems to be directed at God. I'd expect it to say Sh'ma Elohim, Sh'ma Ado'nai. No. It is talking to *us*. Sh'ma Yisrael. Listen Jews, just listen to what? To the very essence of God and the essence of God, the only predicate that the whole Bible uses to emphasize God's essence in our world. Think about the statement, "God is _____." What would you fill in that blank? God is omnipotent or God is omnipresent. No. The only word that the Bible fills in there is in Shma. This last word here, echad. Did you say Hear, Israel the Lord is all knowing? The Lord is all powerful, the Lord is everywhere? The Lord is not even all good. But unity, oneness. Echad.

It was the Jewish tradition that understood that we are, all of us, interconnected.

Look how you are sitting right now. This is how your great-great-great-great grandfather sat. I am an echo of those who came before me. And I am someone's ancestor.

Our prophet Isaiah knew this as well. He preached to the Jews, "Habitu el Tzur chutzavtem - Look back to the rock you were hewn from. To Abraham and Sarah. God blessed them, and you are their progeny. You carry that blessing."

I love that Isaiah says this. I love that we are from the quarry of our ancestors. And the imagery used by the prophet is that we are hewn from the holy rock of those who came before us. One of the names for God that Isaiah uses is Tzur - Rock. Where do we come from? Not just

our parents and the great-great-great grandparents who sit like us, not just from Abraham and Sarah, but also from HaTzur, from God. We are hewn from M'kor Chayim, from the Source of Life. How beautifully un-lonely, to carry that flint, that piece of soul within you!

Being Echad, being one, is not easy. It means that we can't put others down. We can't denigrate. We have to take care of others as much as we take care of ourselves. Maybe you have seen that Jewish quote splayed across benches around the valley - written in Hebrew Torah font - v'ahavta l're'eicha kamocha - love your fellow human being the same way that you love yourself. From Leviticus - we will read it tomorrow afternoon.

Some rabbis of antiquity debated this line. Who is *re'eikha* your fellow human being? Is it only your neighbor? The one you agree with? The one who goes to the same shul, the same school, the same politics? Does it include competitors or someone I once had a spat with?

The context is maximalist. It is universal. Take care of everyone else. Not just yourself, not just those who are like you, not just those you know. Everyone. And if we think about the power of breath, if we think about the atomic level, about the laws of inertia, about the molecules that make us up, we know that we are interconnected throughout time, in addition to space.

What I do today affects the next generation. And the next. And the next. The stone they will be cut from includes us and our story and our choices. We are echad, even if I will never meet them, generations hence.

What ties us together, we call God. God is the echad. If we are bound by God, then how do we act towards one another? As if we are one. Loving. Compassionate.

Jonathan Safran Foer writes something in his book *We are the Weather* that I find fascinating: *"Every inhalation includes molecules from Julius Caesar's final exhalation. The magical compression of time and space. The implications were almost unbelievable. If I just inhaled Caesar's last breath, then I also must have inhaled Beethoven's, and Darwin's. And that of Roosevelt and Rosa Parks and Elvis and the Pilgrims and Native Americans at the first Thanksgiving, and even the grandfather I had never met.*

And every breath of everyone. And not only of humans, but all other animals, too. And with each inhale, I absorbed the story of life and death on Earth.

Caesar's ending was also a beginning: his was the first recorded autopsy, which is how we know that he was stabbed twenty-three times. The iron daggers are gone. The blood-soaked toga is gone. The Curia of Pompey, in which he was killed, is gone, and the metropolis in which it stood only exists as ruins.

It's hard to think of a more ephemeral artifact of a civilization than a breath. But it's impossible to think of a more enduring one."

Jonathan Safran Foer's vision of our interconnectedness puts a burden on us, in a year when we are very aware of everyone's intertwined breaths. Our holy breath is godly. We have no way of escaping our unity.

The Torah says, “Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kul’khem Lifnei Adonai” – today you are all standing in front of God – leaders and elders and children and converts who have chosen to be part of your community – all entering this covenant together. As one. Not one better than the other. It continues, “I make this covenant not with you alone – both with those standing with you this day and with those who are not standing with us here today” (Deut 29:14). It is binding for all future generations.

Let us see and count every Jew equally as part of the Jewish people. Just as God does.

When I was in college, I saw an art installation that was a video of the exodus from Egypt. I don't know if it was from the movie *The Ten Commandments* or if they got actors to do this recently, or if this was real footage from 3300 years ago. But you stand there watching hundreds of people walking through the parted sea. It's incredible to look at these people who are supposed to be my ancestors - our ancestors - experiencing a great miracle, tasting freedom, smiles on their faces, escaping Pharaoh and slavery. I was trying to take it all in, each face, when I noticed, among the representation of my ancestors, I noticed myself. That's me! Was I there? Did I forget that I was part of this thing with hundreds of extras? Does it just look like me? But as I furrowed my brow to look closer, so did the projected image. Then I moved, and so did the image of me. There was a hidden camera and projector, so that I was in this historical moment.

I was projected there among my people. And so would you be. And so would Christine. We would all see ourselves in this foundational story.

This is your story. Your story that you share with all of us, with all those who came before you and all those who will come after you. The other day at breakfast, my four-and-a-half-year-old son – pardon me. Four- and three-quarter-year old son asked me what is a Jew? He then took a bite of his homemade chocolate chip waffle with peanut butter on top while my brain reeled. Do I go into ethical monotheism, the idea that we believe in one God, a kind and vulnerable and true God? Do I explain mitzvot, the good deeds we do to stay connected to religion, to our tradition, our community and our Torah?

In the brief seconds that I was trying to come up with an answer, he said, "Is a Jew someone who is Jewish?" And, with a smile on my face, I said, "Yes." I laughed to myself at this answer, but it works perfectly. I can't define Judaism. It is a little different for everyone. So maybe the only way to define it is to break the rule and use the word in its own definition. We are Jews – in all forms, with many understandings of the world, with diverse backgrounds.

May we remember how connected we are. And may we look out for each other, so that we are all sealed for a year of goodness.