Temple Beth-El of Great Neck
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My remarks this evening might appear a bit self-serving, as I am hoping you can help me answer a question with which I have been wrestling for some time now. It's no mean question. The question is this: Am I Jewish?

I get that the question might sound absurd. I'm a rabbi, after all, a teacher of rabbis, and one would think that being a Jew is a prerequisite for such an endeavor. Here is the truth, though: My mother converted to Judaism—yes, before I was born—but, nonetheless, she did so under the auspices of a non-Orthodox rabbi, and therefore plenty of Jews out there would call into question my authenticity as a Jew.

Most important among those naysayers, to me at least, is the chief rabbinate of Israel, making it so that I am considered Jewish enough to qualify for *aliyah* under the Law of Return, but not Jewish enough to partake in life-cycle events in Israel with Jewish status. So, am I Jewish? I think so. I hope you think so. But not everyone would agree. Perhaps, then, I'm kinda-sorta Jewish?

My own quandary is, of course, just one among a welter of contemporary Jewish identities that might be colloquially described as messy. Imagine, for example, if my mother had never converted. I'd still be considered Jewish by the Reform movement, which accepts patrilineal descent so long as it is accompanied by "timely and appropriate acts of identification with the Jewish people," but in that case far more Jews would reject my claim to Jewishness. Heck, my own synagogue, which is a part of the Conservative movement, would not consider me a Jew had my mother not converted!

But don't think that such debates about identity are simply a matter of Reform Jews being lax and the Orthodox more stringent and Conservative somewhere in between. Consider the case of a person with a Jewish mother but not a Jewish father, who was raised without Judaism, without those "timely and appropriate acts of identification." A Reform rabbi might consider that person to be not a Jew while our friends at Chabad would readily accept him as a Jew. He has a Jewish mother, after all.

And it's not simply mixed parentage that creates contemporary Jewish messiness. No less so can beliefs and practices complicate matters. I imagine there are folks here tonight, and many in this congregation, who might be dubbed Jewish adjacent—married or partnered to a Jew, invested in Judaism and routinely participating in Jewish life, but for whatever reason having not chosen to convert. Are such people Jews? I suppose not, but I have been in several contexts where such adjacent Jews have been reckoned Jews in every sense that matters.

What of the opposite phenomenon, of Jews whose beliefs or practices appear to have taken them outside the Jewish community. Chiefly, I'm talking about that third rail in conversations about Jewish identity, the messianic Jew. What of a person who is born Jewish, raised Jewish and remains committed to Jewish life and practice, but who has come to believe that his Jewishness can be properly understood only in the light of his conviction that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. Is such a person a Jew? Folks I ask tend to say no, but frankly I'm not so sure, or at least I'm not sure

why that belief specifically is disqualifying while several other beliefs that stand diametrically opposed to Jewish tradition—say, atheism—are not disqualifying.

Mind you, I am not here to provide answers to these questions. My answers to whether such people are Jewish, in any case, would simply be *my* answers, not *the* answers. Nor am I here simply to tell you that contemporary Jewish identity, especially here in the American diaspora, is incredibly messy.

You know that already, and you did not need to fly an ancient historian across the continent to confirm that it's so. I am here rather to do what historians do—to teach, to familiarize you with a time and place far, far away and, in this case, to invoke for you the old adage from the book of *Ecclesiastes*, "*ayn kol hadash tachat hashemesh*," "there's nothing new under the sun."

For you see, there is perhaps no time and place in all of history when Jewish identity was quite so messy as in the period I study—what is known alternatively as the late Second Temple period or the Hellenistic period, the four centuries spanning the extraordinary conquests of Alexander the Great, which turned the eastern Mediterranean world Greek, and the emergence of the Roman Empire, which unified that realm into one political order.

What one finds in that period, as I said, is a messiness in Jewish identities all too familiar to us Jews today. And, like today, the principal cause of this messiness was the boundary-crossing that invariably occurs in any cosmopolitan world. Simply put, many non-Jews encountered Jews and wanted to become more like them; many Jews encountered non-Jews and wanted to become more like them. The result? A blending of beliefs and practices—and, yes, genetic material—that leads to identities that are "kinda-sorta" Jewish. Just like today.

As time is limited this evening, I would like to focus on two sterling examples of such ancient Jewish messiness. Both, I hope, will be new to you, and both will help us to think more deeply about what Jewishness means, not only in the past but also today.

The first example is a timely one. The darkness of Kislev is upon us, which means that Hanukkah is only days away. And, the hero of the Hanukkah story is, of course, Judah Maccabee. The Maccabees were indeed a heroic family that stood up to the tyrannical rule of the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes.

What few people know, however, is that once the Maccabees wrestled control of Jerusalem from the Greeks. Their family became, over time, tyrants no less voracious and power hungry, ultimately irritating the Jewish populace more so than did the tyrannical Greeks who preceded them. Indeed, at one point, the Jews went back to the Greeks and begged them to return and conquer the Maccabees. (They don't teach you that in Sunday school.)

In any case, one thing the Maccabean kings did to expand and consolidate their rule was to conquer the non-Jewish communities to the north and to the south of Jerusalem. To the south lay a country called Idumea. You may think you do not know what Idumea was, but you do. Idumea comes from the Hebrew word *adom*. *Adom* means red. Who is the figure in the Torah most famous for being red? Yes, Esau, who's absent from this week's Torah portion, *Vayetze*, but plays a prominent role in last

week's, *Toledot*, and in next week's, *Vayishlach*. Idumea was understood to be the historic realm of Esau.

Around the year 110 BCE, a Maccabean king called John Hyrcanus, a nephew of Judah Maccabee, routed the Idumeans in battle. He subsequently gave the Idumeans a draconian ultimatum: Cease to worship their god, called Koze, and begin to worship the God of the Jews and follow Jewish customs; or, alternatively, get out. Presumably this ultimatum was accompanied by a knife directed not at their throats, but down a bit further, if you catch my drift.

It seems that most of the Idumeans accepted the offer. Idumean men were circumcised. They began to observe the Sabbath, eat kosher meats and send sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem. In so doing, did they become Jews? Not surprisingly, it depends on whom you ask.

One historian at the time, called Josephus, says quite bluntly that yes, the Idumeans became Jews from that point onward. Yet, another Jewish historian said, "No way!" He did not accept that conversion to Judaism was possible, a somewhat common view among Jews in antiquity, and so he said the Idumeans might have come to be called Jews, and they might do Jewish things, but they are nonetheless not actually Jews. Still a third voice, the Greek geographer Strabo, says, "Ah, well, they're kinda Jews and kinda not." In another words, it was messy.
But that's not the end of the story. You see, just two generations later, one Idumean family became so powerful that it began to compete with the Maccabees for the throne in Jerusalem. A scion of that family, who would come to be known as Herod the Great, ultimately defeated the last Maccabee, called Antigonos, following a protracted civil war.

What is fascinating is that Antigonos, in the desperate final hours of the war, tried to rally Jews to his cause by undermining the Jewish identity of Herod. "How can you fail to support me, a full-fledged Jew," he said, "against this hemi-ioudaios!"

Now, you may not know Greek, but you know what hemi-ioudaois means. Ioudaois is Jew. *Hemi*, like hemisphere, is half. In other words, the supporters of Antigonos called Herod a "half-Jew." Mind you, not a half-Jew because one parent was Jewish and the other not, the way we might use half-Jew today. No, "half-Jew" because he was an Idumean, the son of an Idumean, and Idumeans are sort of Jews, and sort of not. Again, messy.

And it should not surprise you that even after he became king, Herod struggled to secure the loyalty of his Jewish subjects, many of whom considered him only partially a Jew. Herod strove mightily to establish his Jewish bona fides. Among these endeavors was his support of a massive renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem, a project that would include the construction of a retaining wall on the western side. As it happens, that is the only standing remnant of that Temple complex. Yes, the *Kotel*, the Wailing Wall, perhaps the most enduring and powerful site of Jewish religiosity in the world, was built by a kinda-sorta Jew, Herod the Great.

That's the first example. I hope you found it illuminating. Let me turn now to the second example of ancient messiness that resembles our own.

I don't know if I saw it, but I'm assuming that somewhere in this synagogue's foyer you have plaques indicating who has donated to the synagogue, in which years and at which levels. Such plaques are as much a staple of the modern synagogue as the ark or the *ner tamid*.

Well, guess what? The concept is hardly modern. Ancient synagogues celebrated contributors similarly. I could tell you about—even show you—scores of examples, but tonight I'd like to introduce you to just one. It's a pillar found near a synagogue in what was once a large city in southwest Turkey, near the Aegean, called Aphrodisias.

The pillar comes from around the year 300 CE. It is more than nine feet tall and features dozens upon dozens of names. No doubt the names represent contributors to a cause, though it is not clear whether this ancient "capital campaign" funded the synagogue itself, the nearby soup kitchen or something else.

What's fascinating about the pillar is the way its names are organized. They come in three groups. No, not gold, silver and bronze, or some other indication of how much was given, but rather according to Jewish identity.

At the top of the pillar is the Greek word *Ioudaoi*, Jews; and what follows are dozens of names typical of Jews in this period: Simon and Levi, for example. Next, one finds the category "*proselutoi*," or proselytes, indicating persons who had converted to Judaism. Today, we would never countenance such a distinction between born Jews and converts, but back then it was standard.

Remember, some Jews thought of converts as "half-Jews." Then there is the third group, listed under the Greek "*theosebeis*," God-worshippers. What in Sam Hill is a God-worshipper?

Well, it just so happens that literature from this period tells us of non-Jews who gravitated toward the synagogue, who become associated with the Jewish community. They were spouses of Jews, or friends, or business associates, religious seekers and other folks who participated in Jewish life—and even gave of their treasure to a capital campaign—without ever crossing the boundary, so to speak, and becoming a Jew. They were what we might call "Jewish adjacent," but our ancient forbears had a name for them, "God-worshippers," or in other cases, *theofoboumenoi*, "God-fearers."

Were these God-worshippers and God-fearers Jews? Well, presumably not. But if proselytes were seen as "half-Jews," maybe God-fearers were seen as "quarter-Jews"? "Third-Jews?" Who knows.

The point of these ancient examples is not to elucidate who was, or is today, a real Jew, and who is not, but rather to confirm that the messiness in Jewish identity with which we are so familiar today represents nothing new under the sun. Jewish identity is, was and always will be, a messy affair.

Is that a problem? Is that a shortcoming in Judaism, that we determine precisely and uniformly who we are? On the contrary, I think the historic messiness of Jewish identity is one of our greatest assets; and, in these final few minutes, I would like to explain why.
Now, you have to appreciate that my own synagogue is located in Pasadena, California, the home of Caltech and of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Something like half the congregation are scientists,

so no rabbi can get away with a sermon that does not include at least one reference to the hard sciences. So, here goes:

To me, the messiness of Jewish identity is akin to the human cell. If I understand biology correctly, the two most important parts of a cell are the nucleus and the membrane. The nucleus sits safely and securely in the center, guarding the vital information that is passed down from generation to generation. The nucleus is tradition. But the nucleus is boring. The dynamic part of the cell is that phospholipid membrane, the messy boundary. It's where the materials of the cell are shared with the world, where knowledge from the world is introduced into the cell; it's how the cell adapts, and changes, and grows. The boundary has to be flexible, fluid and, yes, messy.

And here's what's called in Hebrew the *nimshal*, the upshot of this metaphor: Jewish communities have always needed both the nucleus and the membrane—conservative tradition at the center and dynamic messiness at the boundary. Thank God, we have within the people Israel those who seek to safeguard tradition, to receive what has been handed down from our ancestors and pass it along to the next generation. But thank God, just the same, that we have Jews on the boundary: messy Jews, progressive Jews, Jews who are interacting with the wider world, bringing in new ideas, enabling Judaism to grow, and adapt, and flourish, and change.

Now, admittedly, Jewish life on that boundary can be challenging, and precarious, and unsettling, and there's always the risk that the boundary becomes too permeable and breaks. And, frankly, that's a teaser to my session tomorrow morning, when we'll be learning about an ancient Jewish community—namely the earliest Christians—who seem ultimately to have pushed the boundary of Judaism too far, whose own Jewish messiness became, over time, unrecognizable as Judaism.

But that's for tomorrow. Tonight, suffice it to say: Jewish identity is, has been and always will be a messy affair. And thank God it's so.

Shabbat Shalom.