

We got some really important news this week about the future of our congregation. I want to share some thoughts on our merger with the Woodbury Jewish Center. These thoughts will not be exhaustive; in fact, they will be somewhat abbreviated both because of the addition of Hallel to the service and because this is a subject that I will return to again many times in the future.

The parsha tells us that Joseph is 17 when we encounter him in this week's parsha Vayeshev. This reminds me of when I was seventeen and where I was in my Jewish journey. I was a senior in college who had grown up in a Reform temple. My main connection to Judaism was my participation in the Maccabee games. How did I get from that point to the point I'm at now, where I am the rabbi of a Conservative synagogue?

I've shared pieces of my story with you – my experience at Harvard Hillel, the several years I spent living in Israel. One thing I haven't spoken much about is my dalliance with Orthodox Judaism. Throughout my Jewish journey, I joined with Orthodox congregations. The pervasive levels of knowledge among Orthodox Jews attracted me. But as you know, ultimately, I decided to become part of the Conservative movement.

I share all of this to let you know that I came to Conservative Judaism after experiencing both the Reform and Orthodox worlds, and I chose Conservative Judaism because I believe in it. I believe that it is the truest form of Judaism that exists. I don't know how all of you came to be members of a Conservative synagogue. For some, you grew up Orthodox and wanted more engagement with the modern world without losing your connection to our heritage. For others, you were raised in a Conservative synagogue, and this was what you always knew.

Because I made a conscious choice to be a Conservative Jew, I feel I'm in a position to declare the power and truth of Conservative Judaism. I am a partisan of this movement.

And it is with that said that I'd like to speak about our merger.

The primary theme of Hanukkah is light. We light the candles to remind us of a surprising military victory and the miracle of the pure oil lasting for eight nights. The theme of light is prominent throughout Scripture. One of the most famous phrases, which comes from Isaiah, describes the Jewish people as a light to the nations, an or l'goyim.

American Jewry has had an unparalleled opportunity to be an or l'goyim. Here, unlike elsewhere in the Diaspora or in the history of the Diaspora, we have been integrated into the society. The challenge, of late, has been that our integration has wandered into assimilation.

Conservative Judaism is the backbone of American Jewry. Without Conservative Judaism, our light will dim here and throughout the Diaspora, which looks to us as a leader.

By coming together with the Woodbury Jewish Center, we strengthen the presence of Conservative Judaism on Long Island immeasurably. We will create a synagogue that is greater than the sum of its previous two parts. We will bring with us the friendly, hamisha atmosphere that we all love about our congregation. We also bring with us our dedication to prayer and religiosity. The Woodbury Jewish Center brings us a pool of young families that will carry forward the wisdom and experience that the longstanding members of our congregation possess. Together, we will become a synagogue that promotes Judaism in an open society.

I understand that leaving a place of worship, a sacred space, is no small matter, and we have every right to grieve our departure from this space, and we will over the coming year and a half to two years. Nevertheless, we must also anticipate the great opportunity that is before us and recognize that the best way for us to have an impact on the future of American Jewry and to promote the Jewish message in the world, is through a merger, which will resurrect us and give us new life.

In their day, to preserve Judaism, the Maccabees had to fight a war. Today, our task is heart-wrenching but significantly less dangerous. We know that Jews have wandered throughout our history. We will be moving, but we will make a new home, and that new home will truly make us more adept at being the light among the nations.

I am here to guide our congregation in the next step in our journey.

To return to Joseph, the Joseph narratives are marked by clothing. When Joseph reaches a new height, he receives and dons a new garment. This occurs three times: when his father Jacob gives him an ornamented tunic; when he leaves slavery to become the assistant to Potiphar; and finally, when Joseph comes out of the dungeon to interpret Pharaoh's dream. The Jericho Jewish Center is about to don a new garment. We will continue to possess the same body, just as Joseph did, but we will assume a different outer form. This new garment that we don is, as it was in each case for Joseph, an indication that we are ascending to a higher place.