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The Cost of Entry (or I Am Still A Jew)

It seems that we need to have our tickets to come back next week.

You'll show your tickets at the door.

It would be nice if we didn't need tickets. Like tonight. You didn't need tickets. You just decided to come to services. To join the community. A community of people who didn't know that there was a fake sermon.

I'm not a rabbi. So this is a fake sermon.

I feel like the rabbinic version of non-alcoholic beer. If you squint, I look like a tall cold one. And, if you smile a lot, you might think you are being refreshed. But I lack the power to intoxicate. I can't get you closer to heaven.

That's the real clergy. And that's next week. And you'll need a ticket.

Anyway, years ago, I was describing the system to a non-Jewish friend. That we can't pass the plate at services, because our services are on days when — by tradition — we aren't conducting daily business, days when we aren't supposed to be ready with our wallets. Even the highest authority in Judaism — Temple Sisterhood — closes the shop.

And I described to my friend that our Temple doesn't run on miracles. We have a clergy and a staff and, just like me, they are all addicted to food. And we have a building and it's got this great Jerusalem stone that has to be — waxed or dusted or something. And there is an everlasting candle that's really a light bulb — but that still matters because every once in a while you have to replace the light bulb.

Sometimes, when all of you are talking to God, I am looking at the Ner Tamid, the everlasting light, and I'm thinking to myself, "Artie, that is the most expensive light bulb in Columbus, Ohio." Except the new Main Street shul probably has a brighter, more expensive bulb. (I hope they do.)

So, I explained to my non-Jewish friend, we issue invoices which we call "membership renewal agreements," and we send big checks which we call "big checks." And everyone pays something, according to his means, because that is the Jewish way. Everyone has a piece of that light bulb. It's not that Frank Kass and Dan Finkelman get the light bulb and you get the paper towels in the bathroom. We all got a piece of that light bulb,

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So, I'm explaining to my friend, everyone pays something and everyone gets a couple tickets in the mail.

"Tickets," my friend says. "You get tickets? Like a movie theatre?"

"Well, yes," I say. "We had that influence on the movies first. It worked in Hollywood. We are big in Hollywood you know?"

My friend nods.

"Well, what works in Hollywood, works in Templewood. Movies cost money, so do services, so buy a ticket and come on in."

"Well," says my friend — and this is the point of everything I've said up to now, thank God — "Well, that doesn't sound very Christian."

Maybe that's the idea. We aren't trying to be very Christian here. If we were trying to be Christian, we'd head over to the Greek Orthodox Cathedral and enjoy the Labor Day baklavah and mosaics of historical figures on the walls. We aren't allowed to have mosaics like that because — even though its highly respectful — it falls into our vaguely defined bucket of idol worship. Except that the stained-glass windows behind you feature historical figures and are clearly in that respectful bucket, but we make an exception for those because they were in the Bryden Road Temple back when we wanted to be more like the other nations. To show our growth, we have placed you with your backs to them. We just ask our clergy to face them.

So what is the point of all this? It is time for the point.

Here's the point.

We buy tickets. But there are two kinds of tickets.

There are the paper tickets and there is the Conceptual Ticket. The paper ticket is bought with cash, each to his ability.

The Conceptual Ticket is earned all year long. It is the Ticket we get when we approach this time of year and say to ourselves: the High Holy Days are coming. I am going to services, right? Of course, I am. I am still a Jew.

Wait.

Am I? Am I still a Jew? How do I know I'm still a Jew?

Relax. If you were a Jew last year, you are still a Jew. The rules didn't change. And if you weren't a Jew last year, you might very well be a Jew by now, depending on what you did with the rabbis, the Torah, the community, and the mikvah.

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So I'm not here to tell you how to know whether you are a Jew.

But I will quickly explain — and then sit down — how I know whether I am a Jew. Here are the various definitions of what it means to be a Jew that I use when I approach the High Holy Days.

The following list sounds a little like "You know you are a Redneck if..." but it isn't even that funny.

- I am a Jew if there is still the physical manifestation of my entry into the covenant of Abraham. Trust me, my manifestation is still there. Or rather it is still not there. On a lighter note...
- You are a Jew if you have seen six Jewish movies during the past year. I don't bother counting, because every movie is Jewish. Plus, I saw three by Woody Allen, so that counts for six.
- You are a Jew if you have read four Jewish books during the past year. I heard a rabbi give this as the requirement for being Jewish. I think he was talking about Talmud or Joseph Telushkin or Isaac Bashevis Singer. So let's see: what have I read this past year. Was Steve Jobs Jewish? No. But he was Buddhist and that's pretty close. Doesn't count. This was not a good year for my Jewish reading. I read books on creativity and business leadership. So I'm going to pull the wildcard: I made dinner four times last year and every cookbook is Jewish.
- You are a Jew if you read the newspaper and constantly assess every article with the question: "Is this good for the Jews?" Really. We do this. Some whackjob does something unthinkable. It's in the paper. The first thought I have is, "Please let his name be Smith or Jones. Not Isaac or Jacobs." I see his name. It's Johnson. I sigh with relief. Or it's Madoff. Oy, veh, why does it have to be Madoff? Show of hands: do you do that? Lastly, here is the big one...
- Am I a light unto the nations? This is a big one. Because, more than being Jewish, we need to tell others we are being Jewish. It's a big deal. I do think I do a lot of this. People ask me what I do for a living and I now say: "I am an unlicensed rabbi serving non Jews." Really. I work in leadership development for chief executives and business owners — but really what I am is trying to be rabbinic. After all, everyone needs a rabbi, not just Jews. So I lead people with Jewish ethics. I know they are Jewish ethics because what I say is not always popular. That's very Jewish. A rabbi told me once that the old Dale Carnegie classic, *How To Win Friends AND Influence People* is incorrectly titled. It should be *How To Win Friends OR Influence People*, because sometimes you don't win friends by influencing people.

I don't know how you score on these measures. These probably aren't the measures. Those of you who are better educated in Judiasim than I am — and, by that, I mean all of you — know much better what it means to be Jewish. To have that Conceptual Ticket for High Holy Days.

That's a main reason why I'll be here during the big services of the next two weeks. To think about what it means to be Jewish. And to return, to return, to return myself to that honored role of being chosen for the job and honor and burden and joy of being Jewish.

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I am an unlicensed rabbi, so here is unorthodox blessing. Maybe it will work.

May these High Holy Days help you in your return. Your return to a personal Jewish practice that fulfils you, that fills your soul with delight, not merely the accomplishment of an obligation. I wish you a year where you are surrounded by people who love you. A year of laughter, of happiness, with many moments of true engagement in life.

I wish all that for you, for my beloved rabbi, for me, for all our families, for all of us.

Shabbat shalom. L'shanah tova.