



Video Story Transcript

Why Am I A Jew?

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J3m0biKKGo>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

So why am I a Jew? Why do I identify myself as a Jewish American instead of a Nothing American? Especially when somebody asks me if I believe in God and I hesitate. God? War, famine, genocide. Why would God create such a world?

And then, and then I hear the blowing of the ram's horn. In the week between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, the period is called The Days of Awe. The story goes that the Gates of Heaven open. And in that week, you're supposed to repay your debts. You're supposed to ask anyone you've harmed for forgiveness. And you're supposed to look inside your own self, at your own failings. And you are supposed to restore yourself with prayer and with fasting. And then at the end of the week, you have Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement. All day long, you fast and you pray. And God, who has taken down the Book of Life, writes your fate in that book and then puts it back up on the shelf. And then at the end of that day, that day, which I used to hate as a little boy because you had to admit to all the petty jealousies and all the resentments that are just normal to everybody.

At the end of that day, the ram's horn is blown. A great bony, curly thing. It's sound is the sound of the ages. It's the sound of Moses coming down the mountain, the sound of the children of Israel leaving Egypt. It's the sound of Abraham, the father of all three of our religions.

I used to thrill to hear that sound. Then, as the sound of the horn vibrated through my body, I would realize that the Gates of Heaven were closing. And quickly, I would mumble, "Forgive me, God." And the new year would begin. And we would go home. And we would break the fast with a wonderful meal that my mother

had prepared. Smoked fish, lox, bagels, white fish, herring. And we would have apples and honey for good luck. My mother would always say, "May we all be here again next year."

Well, there's no stopping time. My mother died six years ago. I had just come back from out-of-town, and the phone rang. My mother had collapsed. She had fallen to the floor saying, "Bye, bye world." My son and I rushed to her bedside. "Mama, Mama, I'm here."

She opened her eyes. And she reached up and touched me on the cheek. And then she fell back against her pillow, and never awoke again. At the end of the day, when I went home, exhausted from the emotions and the duties of death, I threw myself into bed but I couldn't sleep. I tossed and I turned. And then, suddenly, the whole room went cold. I couldn't move. My arms and my legs were heavy. I couldn't breathe. And I realized my mother was in the room. She couldn't leave. "It's ok, Mommy. We'll be all right. It's okay." And I felt all the energy flowing out of the room like a current of water. Was it a dream? Did I imagine it? I lay there, and then I heard the creaking of the door to the attic in the hallway. The wind had blown it open, and I went to close it. And when I got to the hall, the door was there - open. The stairs went up, and at the top of the stairs, a light.

The Jews don't believe in heaven. When we die, our body goes back to dust. But where does the life force go? What happens to the energy? When I was a little boy, I asked my mother, "What happens when someone dies?" And she said, "A little bit of us goes to everyone we love."

When New Year comes, I go to synagogue with my friend, Annie. We go to the Yizkor service, the memorial for the dead. And then we wait until the ram's horn is blown. There's an expression in Yiddish, *di pintele yid*, the spark of a Jew. I'm not an observant Jew. I don't keep all 613 commandments. But the spark that my parents put inside of me, it lives. And as best I can, I try to retain the heart of my tradition.