

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME

Photo by Richard Strauss, Smithsonian Institution, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States



Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg
Supreme Court of the United States

There is an age-old connection between Judaism and law. For centuries, rabbis and other Jewish scholars have studied, restudied, and ceaselessly interpreted the Talmud. These studies have produced a vast corpus of juridical writing. Jews have been called "the people of the book," reflecting their placement of learning first among cultural values.

The Jewish tradition prized the scholarship of judges and lawyers, and when anti-Semitic occupational restrictions were lifted, Jews were drawn to the learned professions of the countries in which they lived. In the United States, law became a bulwark against the kind of oppression Jews had endured in many lands and for countless generations. Jews in large numbers became lawyers, some eventually became judges, and the best of those jurists used the law to secure justice for others.

Laws as protectors of the oppressed, the poor, the loner, is evident in the work of my Jewish predecessors on the Supreme Court. The Biblical command: justice, justice shalt thou pursue" is a strand that ties them together. I keep those words on the wall of my chambers, as an ever present reminder of what judges must do "that they may thrive".

The late Supreme Court justice (and former American Jewish Committee president) Arthur Goldberg once said: "My concern for justice, for peace, for enlightenment, all stem from my heritage." I am fortunate to be linked to that heritage.

Each time I visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, I am reminded that Hitler's evil kingdom, his "Holocaust kingdom," was a kingdom full of laws. Leading jurists from Germany's highly educated legal community willingly assisted in drafting the laws of the Third Reich. After serving as draftsmen, those jurists shunned the human consequences of the new laws by retreating into a heartless professionalism. They were, by their accounts, simply serving and enforcing law and order.

We must learn from that dreadful past, and strive to ensure against its repetition. In bad times, in oppressive societies, our humanity should cause us to hold fast to our human decency, so that never, in the service of political leaders, will we administer laws that deny the humanity or the human dignity of others.

I am a judge born, raised, and proud of being a Jew. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish tradition. I hope, in my years on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, I will have the strength and courage to remain constant in the service of that demand.

(Adapted from Justice Ginsburg's address to the Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee, May, 1995.)



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