

# Rejecting 1<sup>st</sup> C Beliefs in the 21<sup>st</sup> C! – A Four Part Essay

## Challenging the Theology of the Prayerbook.

*My son is studying for his bar mitzvah, but he doesn't believe in God. He told me that one day, when we were taking a walk. "Why not?" I asked. "If God was real, he wouldn't let all those people die." He was talking about the pandemic, but he could have been talking about the war in Ukraine, or so many other catastrophes. "Why do you say that?" "God is supposed to care about us," This is the "problem of evil." It's an old philosophical question. God is supposed to be all-powerful and endlessly empathetic, [so] the existence of evil poses a serious puzzle: Why does God let us suffer?*

*When my son was 4, he asked, "Is God real?" "What do you think?" I asked. "I think that for real God is pretend and for pretend God is real." I was stunned. That's a big thought for a 4-year-old. It's a big thought for a 40-year-old. I asked him to explain what he meant. "God isn't real," he said. "But when we pretend, he is."*

*Now philosophers have a name for this sort of view. They call it "fictionalism." Suppose I say, "Dumbledore teaches at Hogwarts." If that was a claim about this world, it would be false. Hogwarts doesn't exist here, and neither does Dumbledore, so he can hardly teach there. But they do exist in the fictional world of Harry Potter. The sentence "Dumbledore teaches at Hogwarts" is in its own way-- true. For real, God is pretend, and for pretend, God is real. So I'm a fictionalist about God.*

[May 2022 blog entry]

Though I find this thinking process interesting, the author's response only dodges the real theological challenge of affirming God. This is a too easy evasion of the very serious problem of rationally affirming a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God. And that problem especially confronts us (or should confront us!) yearly during the High Holidays.

In the article the author's son says "God is supposed to care about us," by which I think his son meant "God is supposed to take care of us". And isn't that what our tradition, and our Scripture, and our prayerbook have all taught us? In Torah, and in the promises and poetry of the Prophets, and especially in so many of the Psalms, we repeatedly hear something like this assurance: (Psalm 34:19) The righteous person may have many troubles, but God delivers him from them all. Or (Psalm 37:25) I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. On Yom Kippur morning our Torah teaching is: See, I have set before you this day life and good, or death and evil. For I command you this day to love God, to keep the commandments, laws and teachings of your God that you may live and increase, and that your God may bless you. But if your heart turns away and you do not listen, I warn you now that you will perish. (Deuteronomy 30: 15-18)

God will bless and protect those who live rightly, and God will curse and destroy those who do not. It's a black-and-white promise that the omnipotent and omniscient God will bless those who are good and curse those who are not. And there was a time when Jews stood before the ark, trembling with fear on Yom Kippur—hoping, praying that God would accept their sincere prayers and not punish them in the new year.

For Jews not so very long ago, the phrase "may you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a good year" was more than an expression, it was their sure and certain belief that God would indeed decide their fate for the next year before Yom Kippur was over. The Day of Atonement was not some poetic or spiritual metaphor-- but actual and very real. If my promises of repentance were well received up there "on high", I would be blessed and taken care of down here below. The Great Book of Life, closed and sealed with the setting sun, would be indelibly inscribed with my new year's fate, one way or the other. My tomorrows were dependent on my fearful, self-abasing, and sworn promises before God. It really was a day of awe and dread, of fear and trembling when the call of Kol Nidre brought us to our knees in submission before the righteous judgement of God.

We read those words every year-- but really, really, do we believe them? After all that we've experienced, do we really believe that the innocent, the righteous, the deserving are now and will be protected by God?! Do we believe today that our penitent and sincerely offered prayers of repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur will protect us and certainly secure for us a year of health and happiness, life and blessing!?

Truth be told—how many of us come to Kol Nidre night believing that by the next sunset God will have decided and determined our life-or-death fate? And though many of us have questions about God, or are of uncertain faith—how many of us believe that God will protect us merely because we are *shomer shabbat* or *shomer kashrut*? Do any of us really believe that God surely rewards the good and the righteous with blessings and bounty, and that just as surely God punishes “evil doers”? We know all too well that bad things do happen to good people, and not often enough do bad folks properly suffer. We live in a world that clearly and demonstrably is not directed by God's promise of reward to believers and punishment to deniers. And yet, that is exactly what is promised in Torah, and in our Shabbat *siddur*, and in our Holiday *machzor*. Are these just empty phrases, repeated and unthinkingly recited because that's what we're supposed to say? Shouldn't our worship be as intellectually truthful as it is spiritually fulfilling? If yes—then what are we to do?!

Arthur Cohen, in his 1984 theological response to the Holocaust wrote, “The question... is not how can God abide evil in the world, but how can God be affirmed meaningfully in a world where evil enjoys such dominion (*The Tremendum* p. 34).” Cohen concludes that for him, God cannot be the God of traditional theology, which means that God can no longer be the God of the traditional prayerbook.

Many of us, and I include rabbis, agree with Arthur Cohen-- we cannot affirm a God who beneficently intervenes in our lives, who heals us because we're good, who protects us from sickness and misfortune because we merit blessing. If God doesn't, or can't or won't-- then what are we to do with all these prayers in our siddur and machzor (our holiday prayerbook) that petition God to do just that: intervene and intercede in our lives? What are we to do with the prayers that express our gratitude to God for God's active and redemptive salvation? What shall we do with these prayers that are not at all reflected in our reality?!

On Yom Kippur morning we recite *Mi y'chiyeh, umi yamut*? “Who shall live and who shall die?” just as did our grandparents, and great grandparents, and so many generations before them. Did they believe that God listening in heaven would hear their fervent plea”? Did they hope against hope that God would smile on them, bless them and grant them good health and length of days? I don't know.

But for us on the Days of Awe, we read these words as metaphor and poetic idiom. For us their power is nostalgic, not actual. It is the effect of this worship that brings us a satisfying comfort. No longer are the words an existential cry for salvation. But that leaves us caught on the horns of a serious dilemma. Should we dismiss and dispense with the traditional liturgy? Or can we both recite the prayers for their spiritual affect and still be intellectually honest about what we're saying?! I think we can. The traditional prayers of our siddur and machzor transcend the literal theology of the text. What really matters to us is not what the words say, but how the moment affects us.

Take for example the congregational Prayer for Healing, our *Mi sh'berach*. In naming our friends and family members who are ill we remind ourselves that we care and are concerned about them. Keeping them in mind and saying their names in the sanctuary prompts us to be more diligent in easing their discomfort, and to spend quality-time with them. And for the named, knowingly remembered in the congregation, during worship, brings a sense of well-being that others care. The actual words of the prayer in fact, pale in importance before the effect that the prayer has for both the one bringing the name, and the one who is named.

Which leads to the question: What then is the purpose of that and other prayers? I think we agree that it is not to remind God to fix people who are ill, or remedy destructive events, or bring peace to the world. And in this, Rabbinic tradition agrees with us that prayer is not primarily a plea for intervention. The Hebrew word that we translate as prayer, the word coined by the rabbis almost 2000 years ago, does not mean “petition”, is not a plea or request for. Our Hebrew word of *t'filah* is derived from the verbal reflexive root that means “to search within.” *L'hitpalel* means to “search within oneself.” Thus in our worship service we are to look within for

answers, for guidance, and for direction.

This is very different from the Western notion of “prayer”. Take for example the Old English expression “Pray tell” meaning “Please tell me.” “Prayer” as understood in today’s religious culture is a petition-- we pray for health, peace and joy. And so pervasive is this western understanding of “prayer” that unaware, we have incorporated it into our own theology. To appreciate the Jewish sense of *t’filah* I remind you of a paragraph from the former Reform siddur Gates of Prayer:

*Prayer invites God to let God’s presence suffuse our spirits, to let God’s will prevail in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will.*

These words from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel clearly differentiate our notion of prayer from that of our western neighbors, and also, by the way, from Biblical theology! Prayer is our private and very personal opportunity to search within ourselves for the presence of God. And if prayer is primarily an inward directed examination, then the words we together recite are merely the means by which we inwardly focus on what is “true”.

We Jews do not have a problem-free theological system. Minimally, we are reminded that we’ve always struggled to find and define God, to understand the brit, the Covenant between the Divine and the Human. And even with all its faults, remember that this prayerbook that we have held onto for 2000 years, immediately connects us to countless Jewish generations and a continuous tradition. All of which means that though our communal recitation of this 1st C theology does not at all reflect our 21st C reality, there is great value in preserving the liturgy for it reminds us of where we have come from, while challenging us to decide what we can and do believe today. That challenge of what to ‘really believe’ will be taken up in my message tomorrow.

We know that we cannot rely on the power of prayer to save us or save our world. But on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we do know that prayer can help us find within ourselves the path, the way, the assurance that we can make the world around us better. We speak of *t’shuvah*, a word that means ‘turning’ but often translated as “repentance”. When we consciously and purposely “turn” ourselves inward, and recognize that having erred we can correct those mistakes-- then the renewal of the single person, and the community, and the world is possible.

For former generations, standing before God on Yom Kippur, the world was forbidding and foreboding, dark and dangerous, with even the next day uncertain. For us, we also are fearful, and though we know that our fate in the future is, to a large degree, out of our hands, and even less so in God’s—still we believe that even given the history of the last century, that tomorrow can be better than today, if and only if, we—you and I, make it better. And though our traditional liturgy, written for a different community in a different time, pointedly petitions God to intervene on our behalf, we believe that if God works at all, God works through us, which makes us the answer to God’s prayer!

### **So what is it that we can believe?**

Judaism and our Jewish Heritage has never had an authorized, systematic theology. The closest we’ve come are the “Thirteen Principles of Faith written by Maimonides in his 13th C. commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10). There, Maimonides wrote that Jews were required to believe:

- The existence and unique unity of God, and God’s infinite, incorporeal presence.
- God alone must be the object of worship.
- God’s message was revealed through the Biblical prophets, with Moses the preeminent prophet.
- God’s Torah, given on Mount Sinai, is immutable.
- God has foreknowledge of human actions, rewarding the good and punishing evil.
- The sure and certain coming of the Messiah who will bring the resurrection of the righteous dead.

Though these principles were controversial when first proposed and were in fact effectively ignored by much of the Jewish community for the next several centuries, they have today, come to be widely held and generally accepted by Orthodox Judaism. They are familiar to us in the song *Yigdal*, the closing song on *Kol Nidre* evening, and is based on and directly mirrors Maimonides' 13 Principles.

While Maimonides publicly promoted these mandatory principles of faith in his *Guide for the Perplexed* [Book III, Chapter 28], he privately distinguished what the common folk “needed” to believe, from what was “really true”. He explicitly drew a distinction between “true beliefs”-- namely “beliefs about God that produced intellectual perfection”, and “necessary beliefs”-- which he said were “conducive to improving social order” among the common folk.

For Maimonides and his students, the intellectual elite already knew that God does not reach into, or interact with, our world. God does not directly change or alter our finite reality, and because God exists as an “Infinite Presence,” there is necessarily an unbridgeable separation between our finite world, our finite rational minds, and God’s infinite reality. Because the Infinite can never be confined or exist in the finite, he therefore wrote: we cannot know anything about God.

Our Jewish Heritage has never developed a dogma, a set of certain, sure and true beliefs that define Jewish faith. And though Maimonides' Principles are regarded by many as just such a statement, even Maimonides knew and wrote that these were not “true” beliefs, but rather “necessary for social order,” meant to hold the broader Jewish community together.

But even before Maimonides in the 13<sup>th</sup> C., 1500 years earlier in the 3<sup>rd</sup> C BCE, the book of Ecclesiastes (in Hebrew *Kohelet*) tells us that God’s presumed promise to bless and protect the good and punish evil is just not true! Kohelet writes: “I have seen everything in my ephemeral life: A virtuous person perishing in his virtue, and a wicked person, living long in his evil” (7:15). For well over 2500 years we’ve been challenged by a traditional theology that seems self-evidently wrong. I spoke of this in my message last night.

And more recently, in 1983, echoing Maimonides 800 years earlier, Rabbi Harold Kushner published his first book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. A Conservative rabbi, Kushner declared that God does not, because God cannot, interfere with natural process of day-to-day living. His book was not “Why bad things happen...” but rather “When bad things happen...” He wrote that prayers to God to change reality, to cure a disease, to protect from harm, to insure success, are childlike, wishful, and have no effect. But, he writes, prayers for courage and strength, for patience and understanding—those prayers God does answer. God’s Presence he says is indeed real but only becomes manifest through God’s transformative effect on the human spirit.

Rabbi Kushner in the 20<sup>th</sup> C, and Maimonides in the 13<sup>th</sup>, wrote that the Biblical stories of God “reaching down” and directing events could not have happened. They are stories to inspire and encourage, stories that were written to express the people’s awe and wonder of God’s majestic presence. But God did not, could not, for instance split the sea because God knows that once a single innocent person is saved by the Divine Hand, then a just and righteous God must rescue every single innocent individual, for all time. And that would end the rules of natural law, of cause and effect, and life would become chaos. Kushner and Maimonides wrote that the Creator God set the universe in order according to natural rules, and if God were ever to interfere, even once, the system would collapse.

So what are we believe? We have to start from the single most important theological truth that we can never “know” God! Our mortal, finite minds cannot, by definition, grasp the Infinite. So anything we say or believe, or think we know about God is only one’s best guess. David Ariel, in his 1995 book *What Do Jews Believe?* wrote: Every time we talk about God or what we believe about God, we are creating [God] in our own image. It is impossible to avoid committing an act of idolatry if we are to say anything about God. So if we can never “know” the Divine, if God’s Infinite Presence is always beyond our ability to comprehend or apprehend—then every religious system, its rituals and ceremonies, its theologies and beliefs are, at their best, only finite, human-made constructs, the purpose of which are to give expression,

value and meaning to our sense of covenant with God. These constructs we fashion work well within one's own community, confirming to its members value and meaning and truth. Constructs that don't work well, for one reason or another, are discarded. Every religious community does, and should, create its own connecting construct that properly responds to its members' need to "touch" and understand, and be "with" God.

We inherit these relational religious systems of rites and rituals, customs and ceremonies as they have been passed down to us from prior generations. For us, for whom the construct created in the past often does not necessarily express where we are theologically in the present, we decide if or if not to let elements of it go. And we have decided that we can re-define, so to speak, the construct of our systematic religious expression, namely the rites and rituals with which we Jewishly express ourselves. Some expressions, like the Sabbath labor prohibitions, we let go—but some we keep, like the Sabbath candle lighting blessing, even though the blessing represents a theology that we've moved beyond.

Praising *Adonai Elohaynu*, Adonai our God who "has commanded us to kindle these lights" is a problem because if I don't believe that God, personally and in direct communication, commanded our ancestors (to say nothing of speaking to me!) to light these lights—can I, with intellectual honesty, recite "who has commanded us to kindle these lights"?

My answer is 'yes we can'. In singing this blessing with Barb on Friday night, I remember my grandmother and my parents lighting the candles. I remember my mother passing on to my brothers and me that responsibility. I remember teaching our children to sing the blessing, and I now I hear my grandchildren sing them, and I know they will teach their children. The words and the melody of the prayer have value and meaning and "truth" that transcend the literal content of the text.

Without that melody and those words, an important connecting moment to grandparents and parents would be lost. And because when we sing those words on Friday evening, knowing that they are echoed around the world, in millions of Jewish homes, I am also immediately connected to Jews and Jewish families everywhere, reminded that all of us and each of us are connected to more millions of Jewish families from generations past. There is a power and a "truth" to the religious moment of *l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat* that simultaneously connects me, perhaps, to the Infinite Presence of God, but certainly to my family and to my Heritage and History, past, present and future.

When I taught in the synagogue I would regularly speak with our students about the inherent challenge of belief in God. If God's Infinite Reality is beyond the reach and scope of my finite world, then any meaningful answer in our struggle to find God, is just as good as any other. And even a rejection of God's reality must then be equally acceptable. After all, I would say to my Confirmation students, how can I tell you that God is real, that you should believe God is real, if there is no objective evidence of that truth? If mine is a felt and personal "awareness" of the Presence of God, I'm necessarily at a loss to convey the meaning and value of that "awareness" to others.

I would tell my students: There is no proof for the existence of God, or for that matter-- God's goodness or God's love. But if there are moments in your life when you are aware of the Presence of something bigger than you, more important than you, to which you are connected through a transcendent moment of spiritual awareness—then that, for you, is the beginning of "faith" and becomes your "evidence" affirming God. But it's not, of course, the kind of experience that can become evidence for others.

When I would go into the younger grades of our Religious School and talk about God, I would explain how difficult it is to know something that we cannot know! The world we live in is measured by weight and length and sound and color. And the finite tools with which we measure the world, simply will not work to explain the Infinite. I would tell our children that questions like "how big is God?" "what color is God?" or "where is God?" are all questions we can't answer because God doesn't have weight or color or place. So I would tell them the real question is not "where is God?" but rather "when is God?" And that, they understood because they can and do know "when is love?" and "when is friendship?". And like God, love and friendship are real, despite not having weight and color.

I join the teachers that came before me: Kohelet over 2000 years ago, and Maimonides 800 years ago, and Kushner 40 years ago who all recognized that God cannot interfere in any tangible way in our world, in my life, or in my future despite what our Scriptures and prayerbook say. But just because God cannot reach down into our world, does not mean that God's Infinite Presence does not occasionally touch me with a tangible connective warmth. And though it passes as quickly as it comes, it is real, experientially felt. And it is in those occasional moments that we know we are not alone, that our covenant with God is real and "true". And for me our covenant with God works and makes sense in the real world we live in, offering a theology drawn explicitly from the ineffable name of God.

## **The Theology of God's Name.**

In framing one's personal theology, we begin by asking (at least I begin by asking) "what makes the most sense?" However it is that one grapples with belief in God-- it somehow has to make sense within the experiential reality of our lives. That path to "finding faith" begins, for me, with the way that our tradition has historically handled the name of God. At the heart of all Jewish theologies are the four letters of the unpronounceable "Ineffable Name of God." In the Book of Exodus, when Moses stands before the burning bush, we read:

*And God/Elohim spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am YHVH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [by the name] El Shadai but [by] my name YHVH I was not known to them." (Exodus 6:2-3)*

Torah tells us that God's unique and personal name consists of the four Hebrew letter יהוה *yud-hey-vov-hey*. Jewish tradition adds that in Temple days "the Name" was spoken out loud but once a year, by the High Priest/Cohen HaGadol, on Yom Kippur, within the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple, as he asked God for personal atonement. The high Priest would pass "the Name" on to his son, who would become the next High Priest. But after the Temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 CE, tradition tells us that the pronunciation of "the Name" was lost.

Of course, according to the rabbis we were never meant to know it. We were always meant to say a substitute when our eyes read it in the Torah text or siddur. The substitute that we use is *Adonai*, derived from the Hebrew 'my Lord'. Some Jewish communities substitute *HaShem* (meaning 'the Name') or *AdoShem* or some other artificial word. So our initial theological question is 'What does it mean that we cannot, and must not, and should not, know God's real name? That we can only know its four consonants?'

What is special about any name is that it is a thing's unique identifier, that which it ultimately and completely is. My personal name, theoretically, represents everything that I am, known and unknown, public and personal. There are adjectives that apply to me: rabbi, husband, father, baseball fan, left-handed—but each only describes a single, small aspect of my total being. But my name theoretically encompasses everything that is me and was me and will be me. And there are cultures where the name one is given at birth is a secret known only to one's family lest an enemy seize and control the name, harming the person. Superstitiously, power over the name means power over the person.

If God's name then describes and discloses God's entirety, how could I possibly know the "Name" of the Infinite God? How could my finite, mortal and human mind, ever grasp or comprehend or understand the Infinite Reality and Transcendent Presence of God? So of course we cannot "say God's Name" for to do so would mean that we, finite mortals, can know the infinite and immutable and ineffable nature of God!

In framing a workable reality-based theology we have to start from the single most obvious theological truth which is that we can never "know" God because our mortal, finite minds cannot, by definition, grasp the Infinite. So anything we say or believe, or "know" about God is only a best guess. And yet, Torah and Jewish Tradition remind us that we do know the consonants of the Name: *yud-hey-vov-hey*. We have a framework, so to speak, upon which we might begin to know and understand and even believe "something" about the Presence of the Infinite God.

For any word, if all we have are the consonants, we can make a guess at how to pronounce it, even a good and educated guess-- but we can never be totally sure of what it is and how it sounds unless it is voweled. Vowels give a word its texture, its fullness-- completes it. Vowels are the connective tissue that makes a word whole. Though the consonants create structure, the vowels give it its particular and individual meaning and value. So to say that we know the consonants of God's Name is to say that we can point to, and understand and appreciate, the finite aspects of God's Creation: namely the world around us. The intricate and interconnected Natural World is the apparent evidence of the God behind the Creation. But how the Infinite becomes the "intimate" which holds it all together, is a "how" that is beyond the capability of finite human knowledge. So it makes perfect theological sense to me that we have access to the consonants of God's Name but can never know the vowels, never know The Name.

The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all of which are consonants, are for the Jewish mystics secret doors that open up worlds of knowledge that exist behind the letters and words and sentences of the divine sacred text of Torah. The mystics, the kabbalists, point to the three letters that make up the four-letter YHVH Name and remind us that these three letters, the *yud*, the *vov* and the *hey* can sometimes function like modern vowels. They alone of the 22 letters serve a double-purpose in the construction of words and were thus seen as being special. In Hebrew, the *hey* can be an 'ah' sound, the *vov* could be 'oh' or 'oo', and the *yud* makes long diphthongs of short vowel sounds. (In English think of the word "fat" becoming "feat" with double vowels, or "fall" and "fail", or "ran" and "rain".)

What then, does it mean that the four-letter name of God is specifically composed of these three letters that can sometimes be vowels?! If God's Name of יהוה might be read as just vowels, God's name might be *ee-ah*, *oo-ah*. And our mystics heard that as the sound of life itself! *Eee-ah-*, *oo-ah* they said, is the sound of breathing! All life breaths and God is the source of all life and God's breath is in all life.

If God's "Name" of *yud-hey-vov-hey* is meant to represent breathing, then our *Sh'ma* might mean: "Listen People Israel, the Breath of Life is the essence of our God, the Breath Alone Brings Life." And isn't that what our prayerbook says:: Oh God, how can we know you? Where can we find You? You are as close to us as breathing. [p.254 GoR]

Maimonides in his 13<sup>th</sup> C. *Guide for the Perplexed* he wrote that the intellectual elite are able to differentiate between what people "need to believe", from what is "really true." Maimonides explicitly draws a distinction between "true beliefs"—what he called "beliefs about God that produce intellectual perfection", and "necessary beliefs"-- which he said were "conducive to improving social order." [Book III, Chapter 28]

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides wrote that the intellectual elite know that God does not reach down into our world, that God does not directly change or alter our finite reality despite what we find in Scripture. Because God exists as an "Infinite Presence," there is necessarily, he wrote, an unbridgeable separation between the reality of our finite world and God's infinite Presence. And yet God is not "absolutely" distant and removed from our world, God is connected to us, not only with every breath we take, but through Torah, which tells us how to behave as God's agents in the management of God's world. Created "in God's image, after God's likeness" we are here in God's stead, the living breathing finite representatives of the Infinite God. In God's image, after God's likeness we are to transform God's "good" world, into a "very good" world.

There is a story of a Jew who continually prays to God that God will end the violence and hatred so abundant and apparent in our world. The Jew prays every day for God to speedily bring redemption and salvation, bring an end to evil. And finally frustrated, the Jew cries out to God: "God, why have You ignored my prayers? Why have You not answered my plea? Why have You not done something!?" And suddenly God speaks and says, "I have not ignored your prayers, I have done something-- I've sent you!"

## What does it mean to be "religious"?

Beginning with a challenge to Biblical and rabbinic theology I have offered a reasonable and rational affirmation of what it means to be a believing Jew. Though we cannot know God, we might occasionally sense a Transcendent Presence that gives life meaning. We sense a connection to that Infinite Presence, and then as a community we fabricate rites and rituals, ceremonies and celebrations that reflect that connection, creating a "construct", a "system", which we call "religion". My point is that all religions necessarily arise from the bottom up, not descend from the top down! So what makes something a "religion"? Here is my definition: Any religion is a mutually-affirmed, community-created construct that organizes the universe in a way that its members/believers may order the information they experience into an understandable and acceptable conception of reality.

What then does it mean when we say 'we're religious'? Since I maintain that traditional theologies fall flat in the reality of our day-to-day experience-- we're left with the challenge of making sense of what we believe. And if faith and belief are ultimately only personal conclusions, then in what way are we religious-in-community? If being "religious" is just what I myself believe, if it only means what it means to me, then for the community it means nothing at all!

Looking back over our collective shoulder, what has brought us to this conundrum?

- Many of us reject the Biblical theology that God blesses and protects those who believe, and curses those who don't.
- We are seriously faith-challenged by our day-to-day experiential reality, to say nothing of the purposeful slaughter of Europe's Jewish communities.
- The secular Enlightenment and Jewish Haskalah over 200 years ago forced us to re-imagine belief in God, and divine Revelation, and the "choseness" of our people.
- And if we are not in the same head-space as the Orthodox Jewish community, choosing not to live in their black-and-white world, what do we even mean by "religion" and "religious"?

Decades ago I realized that there is no Hebrew word or Biblical equivalent for the English word "religion"! And even the origin of that word is indefinite and imprecise. Most scholars trace it to the Latin *religio* meaning to bind or fasten or tie. If "religion" is only that which binds us together, if that's all it is, then what are we left with? A square-dancing club, or Kiwanis, or a bird watchers society or a neighborhood watch-group connects, binds, brings together its members. And though each of these groups affirms clear values that identify its community, values that create a unique social and 'spiritual' bond-- we don't call them 'religions'.

So what is it that makes Kiwanis not a religion, and says that Judaism is? The Latin origin of the word is no help. We know that Judaism 'is' one and Kiwanis 'is not', so there are apparently social, cultural norms that separate square-dancing, Kiwanis, bird-watchers and neighborhood organizations from religious groups.

Somewhere, along the developmental path of this word "religion", culture has decided that to be "religious" must mean affirming faith in a god or deity, and then behaving in accordance with that faith. So what are the qualities which make one "religious"? How do we understand "being religious"? And for us, the question is what makes one "Jewishly religious"? How is a religious Jew supposed to act?

For me, the place to start is the infamous story of Abraham leading Isaac up the mountain as a sacrificial offering [Genesis 22]. The traditional explanation of Abraham's easy acquiescence is his dedication and faith, that *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, is the model of religious commitment because he obeyed the word of God to sacrifice his own child, making him the epitome of an obedient and faithful 'religious' person.

But if we make Abraham our religious model, we seriously jeopardize our own religious integrity. Abraham is a problem for us because in taking his son to be sacrificed, he obeys God at the expense of everything he must know to be moral, right and true. With Abraham as the model, religion means unfaltering obedience and blind submission to God's command. Is this Judaism? I suppose it is in the black-and-white traditional Jewish community where God's *mitzvot* are clear and definite, where the commandments are accepted and affirmed as God's Divine directive. But with Abraham as our religious model, where is there room

for “conscience”? Is there a place for moral judgement, for righteousness, for just and ethical behavior? In following precisely and completely Torah’s ‘objective’ *mitzvot*, what do I do with what I ‘subjectively’ know to be just and moral and true? And isn’t “religion” supposed to be all about doing what is “right”?! Abraham is certainly obedient, but I cannot say that he is religious if religion promotes a moral, ethical way of living in partnership with a moral ethical God. So I reject Abraham’s action in chapter 22 of Genesis as not-religious.

Which brings me back to my original question: What is it that makes us religious? Scripture, ironically, is no help to us because, as I previously said, there is no word in Scripture for “religion”! The word that modern Hebrew does use is *da-at*, but *da-at* means ‘decree, edict or law’ which we already rejected from the Abraham story when God issued a “decree” to Abraham. You may know the word *da-at* from the marriage vows a bride and groom say to each other “I betroth you to me *k’dat Moshe v’Yisrael*, according to the law of Moses and Israel”. In Israel today a “religious” Jew is called in Hebrew *dati*, meaning that he or she accepts and observes Halacha, rabbinic law. The Orthodox community defines the quality of one’s Jewishness by one’s strict observance of Orthodox Jewish law. One is “religious” if one properly and fully observes the commandments.

And interestingly, not only does our tradition have no Hebrew word for “religion”, but it has no word for “proper belief”. The best that Hebrew Scripture and rabbinic commentary can do is the word *emunah*, often translated as “faith” or “belief”. But *emunah* is related to the word *emet*, truth. *Emunah* therefore is that which I believe because of what I know to be experientially true. Because I “know” something to be true-- I “believe” it to be true and thus I “behave” accordingly. Because I “know” my car started this morning (and because it always has!), I “believe” it will tomorrow, and I behave accordingly. While that meaning of “belief” works for me, it’s not what our Western culture understands as “faith” or “belief”!

Western culture thinks of “faith” as believing despite the fact that we don’t know! We speak of faith as “blind” because it exists beyond the perceived reality of our senses. A “leap of faith” means that we believe something to be true despite any supportive experiential evidence. But the Hebrew word *emunah* is just the opposite. With *emunah* one trusts, relies on, “believes” something because we in fact know it to be true. The opposite of ‘blind faith’, *emunah* is faith or belief in something that has been empirically, experientially demonstrated to be dependable and true. Which means that *emunah* is essentially relational and rational. I have “faith” in my car, in the promise of a friend, or in the quality of my plumber’s work, because with each I already have a dependable relationship.

And *Emunah* becomes the basis of our relationship to God, to Judaism and to our fellow Jews. And that begins to explain what we mean by “religious”. To be religious is to have a trusting, confident connection to God, and to our people, and to our heritage. It is because of the surety, the value, the meaning—the dependable and reliable “truth” of those relationships that we then behave in particularly “religious ways”. If you are connected, then you are religious-- indeed, one’s religious behavior is the evidence of that connection and a reflection of the quality of that connection. Do we live our lives as the People Israel with *emunah*, in ‘faithful’ reflection of our relationship to the God of Israel? If so, we are “religious” Jews.

My objection to equating the Hebrew term *da-at* for “religion”, is that it only defines observance, an objective, authoritative, black-and-white definition of acceptable behavior. In deciding that only their Jewish definition of “proper behavior” is in-and-of-itself the goal, Orthodoxy ignores the Jewish imperative that “obeying the law” ought to be secondary to doing what is moral, just and right. And that’s what so bothers me about portraying Abraham as a religious man, a man of faith. If Abraham is the heroic patriarch because he “faithfully” obeys God, then his religion forces him to violate what he as a father must truly believe—and that truly troubles me.

What makes us religious? If what you do as a Jew is an accurate reflection of what you believe as a Jew--then you are “religious”. What we should ask ourselves is this: Does my religious behavior have a positive, beneficial effect on my Jewish community? Does it enhance the quality of my Jewish family? Does it reflect my own values of morality and ethics? And does it fulfill my Jewish needs? Better than saying that Judaism is a religion, I prefer to say that it is a covenant-community of horizontal relationships (between people) because of what I am aware of vertically, between me and God.

I am not an “observant” Jew if “proper observance” is unilaterally defined by the Orthodox *halachic* community. But I am a “religious” Jew if my behavior not only reflects my connection to Jewish communities past, present and future, but also the Jewish values I affirm. I was taught long ago that the word “believe” ought to mean “live by” if it is to have any value at all.