

You Believe What ?! : Rabbi Joseph Klein on Theology, Faith, Belief and Religion

Framing a Reform Theology

In May of 2011 I traveled through Eastern Europe with 24 members of our congregation. We toured the cities of Budapest, Prague, Krakow and Warsaw—and we spent most of a day at the Auschwitz/Birkenau killing camp. I would absolutely go back to Budapest, Prague and Krakow—there just wasn't time to really experience all that those cities have to offer. But I'm done with Auschwitz/Birkenau. I can't go back there. The sheer magnitude of its extermination operation exhausted me emotionally, and the magnitude of its actual size, acres upon acres, exhausted me physically. I know it was important for me, for us, to be there, to see it, to grasp the enormity of it—but I can't do it again. Once was important, but once was enough.

Of course, none of this was a surprise to me. There's not much I don't know about the Holocaust, more properly identified in Hebrew as *HaShoah*, “the Destruction”. One can't be in any way a spokesperson for the Jewish community without knowing about, and being able to speak about, what happened to the six million Jewish victims of the Nazi extermination. And prior to our departure, I went through my Holocaust files, both hardcopy and electronic, gathering materials that might of interest to our group during the trip, and in the process, and I turned up this story that I saved years ago.

It's a story that takes place at Auschwitz, about a group of girls who decided that as far as it was possible for them, they would observe Yom Kippur. Worship, of course, was out of the question; but fasting, they thought, certainly was not! So they nervously approached their SS supervisor for permission to fast, and asked, with a hopeful hesitancy for, perhaps, a lighter work load that day-- for which, they hastened to assure her, they would make up after Yom Kippur. Furious, their SS supervisor denied both requests, and in fact imposed overtime work ‘in honor of’ the holiday’, and threatened that anyone lagging in work on account of Yom Kippur or the fast, would be sent directly to their death! Undeterred the girls worked and fasted all through the day, exhilarated by the thought that they were sharing this day with Jews the world over. When finally, after sundown they tasted their piece of black bread, “their satisfaction was full”, as they would later describe it. This story of victory, however small, ends ironically. They had miscalculated. They had fasted on the wrong day. So was their prayer for atonement heard?

I know! How could anyone possibly ask such a question!? If the prayer in their fast was not heard, then no prayer, on any Yom Kippur was ever heard, or ever could be heard! Those today who argue that Yom Kippur prayer must only be offered in ‘real’ synagogues, or that the Rosh Hashana call of the shofar is only ‘kosher’ if heard in an ‘authentic’ shul, are certainly silenced by that senseless question! How could their prayer not have been heard, and accepted?!

The truth is that the real significance of Yom Kippur has very little to do with which day it is or in which place we sit, or even with the level of ritual observance or one's knowledge of tradition. It is the power of the shared congregational moment and the intentional focus of the individual that together bring to Yom Kippur the commanding power of its impact and effect. On that day, when we gather purposefully in the sanctuary and reflect upon our liturgy-- we acknowledge that we are part of something so much bigger than any of us individually, or even our congregation collectively.

We come to Yom Kippur ready to confront the worst of what we are, pleased with the good of who we are, and hopeful for the best we might become. And we bring to Yom Kippur a commitment that transcends time and place and prayerbook, a commitment not only to the immediacy of ourselves and our community, but to the values and worth of our Jewish Heritage.

While the story of the girls in the death camp reaffirms our faith in the power of the human spirit, and the transcendent and transformative effect of a community in prayer—the story also reminds us that Yom Kippur after Auschwitz cannot be what ‘at Auschwitz’ it still was! For our generation, it's clear that it was not only our community that was destroyed, it was our theology as well. And we legitimately ask “what can Yom Kippur mean to us after the Holocaust, after *HaShoah*?”

There was a time when Jews stood before the ark on Yom Kippur trembling with fear before the Divine Judge. 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 certain belief that God would decide, before the day was over, their fate for the next year. This day of “atonement” was not “spiritual metaphor”-- but actual and very real. If my promises of repentance were well received, I would be blessed in the year ahead. The Great Book of Life, closed and sealed with the setting sun, would be indelibly inscribed with my next year’s fate. My tomorrows were dependant on my fearful, self-abasing, and sworn promises before God today, on Yom Kippur. This really was a day of awe and dread, of fear and trembling, and the call of *Kol Nidre* brought us to our knees in submission before the righteous judgement of God. Can we come to Yom Kippur affirming God, the Righteous Judge-- after Auschwitz?!

We no longer stand at *Kol Nidre* believing that with sunset God will have decided and determined our fates for the coming year—at least I don’t believe it. And though many of us have questions about God, or are of uncertain faith— we *do* know is that we *don’t believe* that God will protect us merely because we are *shomer shabbat* or *shomer kashrut*; and we *don’t believe* that God rewards the good and righteous with blessings and bounty, and punishes “evil doers”-- because we know all too well that bad things do happen to good people, and not often enough are bad folks properly punished. We live in a world that clearly and demonstrably is not directed by God’s promise to reward believers and punish deniers.

And yet, that is exactly what’s promised in our Shabbat *siddur* and Festival *machzor*. The prayerbooks that define and direct our community worship proclaim a theology with which I am not at all comfortable, and I have always presumed that it is equally rejected by my congregants. I say that with some confidence because if my members believed that observing the *mitzvot* will protect them from misfortune, if they believed that God decides and directs the daily events in your life, that their fate for the new year will be sealed and determined with the setting Yom Kippur sun-- then what in the world were they doing in a Reform synagogue on Yom Kippur!

We all know that bad things do happen to good people, and bad people often go unpunished. And yet the words of our worship are prayers of promise that God will bless us with health and well-being, that God *will* protect and safeguard us. Do we believe that? Or are they just empty phrases, repeatedly and unthinkingly recited because that’s what we’re supposed to do? 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 if we’re good, who harms us if we’re not, who protects us from misfortune because we merit blessing.

Then what are we to do with all these prayers in our *siddur* and *machzor* (our holiday prayerbook) that petition *El rachum v’nachum* (God of compassion and mercy) to 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 what we in fact believe?

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 those before them. But for them, for many of them, the words were filled with fear of God’s immanent decree. Their prayers were a fervent plea to a listening God in heaven, hoping against hope that God would smile on them and grant them good health and length of days. The God they worshipped was omnipotent and compassionate, an intervening deity who listened to and heard their petitions, their praises, and their thanks, and then responded to them. These were quite literally life and death pleas.

How different for us on these Days of Awe, for 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 these words for us an existential cry for salvation. All of which leaves us caught on the horns of a major dilemma. Should we then we dismiss and dispense with the traditional liturgy? Can we still be

intellectually honest within the structure, the order, the *seder* of our *siddur*? If we know in our heart of hearts that, for instance, our *mi sh'berach* prayer for healing will not, can not, cause God to intervene—is then there any value, any benefit in its recitation?

The answer I think is certainly 'Yes.' The traditional prayers of our *siddur* and *machzor* transcend the literal theology of the text. What matters to us is not really what the words say, but how the moment affects us. Using the example of 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 prompts us to be more diligent in helping them with their recovery, in easing their discomfort, and in spending quality-time with them. And knowing that my name is read within the congregation, during worship, can only bring with it a sense of well-being that others are remembering me in my distress and care about me. 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 prayer? I think we agree that it is not to "remind" God to fix people who are ill, or remedy destructive events. And in this, our theology matches with Rabbinic tradition which also rejects the notion that "prayer" is 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 our English word that's derived from Old English as in "Pray tell me..." meaning "Please tell me." "Prayer" as understood in our western religious culture *is* a petition-- we pray *for* health, peace and joy. And so pervasive is this western understanding of "prayer" that, unaware, we incorporate it into our own theology. To appreciate the Jewish sense of *t'filah* I remind you of a paragraph I'm sure you remember from our old *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. It 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 communal means to benefit the focus of the individual.

And though this communal recitation, written almost 2000 years ago, does not particularly reflect our 21st C theology, if the prayerbook they wrote is not a tight, complete and problem-free system for us-- it at least reminds us that we've always struggled to define God, to understand the *brit*, the Covenant between the Divine and the Human, and that even with all its faults-- our best vehicle in that struggle is prayer.

We know that we cannot rely on the power of prayer to save us, or save our world. But on Yom Kippur we know that prayer can help us find within ourselves that power. We speak of *t'shuvah*, a word that means 'turning' but is often translated as "repentance". When we "turn" back, 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, potentially dark and dangerous, with my and your futures uncertain. For us, we too are fearful, and though we know that our fate in the future is, for the most part, out of our hands, and even less so in God's—still we believe (even after the Holocaust) 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, and only through us.

In 1958 the senior rabbi of Sha'arey Zedek Synagogue of Detroit, Rabbi Morris Adler wrote this: "Our prayers are answered, not when we are given what we ask, but when we are challenged to be what we can be. (*National Jewish Monthly*, July 1958)"

So What Can We Believe?

Judaism 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). Maimonides viewed the following as the thirteen required beliefs of Judaism:

The existence and unique unity of God, and God's infinite, incorporeal presence. That God alone must be the object of worship. That God's message was revealed through the Biblical prophets, with Moses the preeminent prophet. That God's law, Torah, was given on Mount Sinai and is immutable. That God has foreknowledge of human actions, rewards the good and punishes evil. And finally that the certain coming of the Messiah will bring the resurrection of the righteous dead.

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

As formative as these principles of faith or belief have become, Maimonides was quick to distinguish what people "needed" to believe, from what was "really true." In his *Guide for the Perplexed* [Book III, Chapter 28] Maimonides explicitly draws a distinction between "true beliefs"-- namely "beliefs about God that produced intellectual perfection", and "necessary beliefs"-- which were "conducive to improving social order."

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides is writing for the intellectual elite, as he calls them, those who know that God does not reach down into our world, that God does not directly change or alter our finite reality, and that because God exists as an "Infinite Presence," there is necessarily an unbridgable separation between our finite world and God's infinite reality.

Judaism has never developed a dogma, a set of certain and sure 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 beliefs to improve social order."

And even before Maimonides in the 13th C.-- in the 3rd C BCE we read in the book of Ecclesiastes/ *Kohelet* that the religious promise that God will bless and protect the good, and will 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). And later in the book we read: *Again I saw in the world that the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the understanding, nor favor to the learned, but time and death happen to them all.* (9:11)

From Ecclesiastes/*Kohelet* to today we've continued to be challenged by a traditional theology that seems self-evidently wrong. In 1983 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..." And he says that prayers to God to change reality 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 in God's transformative effect on the human spirit.

Rabbi Kushner in the 20th C, echoed Maimonides in the 13th, saying that the Biblical stories of God "reaching down" and directing events could not have been. 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, split the sea because God knows that once a single innocent person is saved by the Divine Hand, then every single innocent individual for all time must be so rescued by a just and righteous God. And that would end the rules of natural law, of cause and effect, and life would become chaos. Kushner and Maimonides and *Kohelet* 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 collapses.

So what *can* we believe? We have to start from the single most important theological truth: which is that we can never “know” God! 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. In his 1995 book *What Do Jews Believe?* David Ariel wrote: “Every time we talk about God or what we believe about God, we are creating Him in our own image. It is impossible to avoid committing an act of idolatry if we are to say anything about God. Jewish belief must always be critical of itself and constantly attempt to challenge itself.”

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 that give value and meaning to our sense of covenant with God. These constructs we fashion work well within our own community, confirming to its members value and meaning and truth. Constructs that don’t work well, for one reason or another, are discarded—for example Sabbath labor prohibitions in our Reform community. Every religious community does, and should, create its own connecting construct that properly responds to its members’ need to “touch” and understand, and be together with, God.

We inherit these relational religious systems of rites and rituals, customs and ceremonies as they have been passed down to us from generations past. And, speaking now for us, even though our rational world view has changed what we believe, even though the construct created in the past does not express where we theologially are in the present, we are often hesitant to let elements of it go. And so each generation re-defines, so to speak, the construct of its systematic religious expression—the rites and rituals with which it expresses itself. Some, like the Sabbath prohibitions, we let go—but some we keep even though they represent a theology that we’ve moved beyond. A good example is our candlelighting blessing.

We praise *Adonai Elohaynu*, Adonai our God who “has commanded us to kindle these lights.” If I don’t believe that God, personally and in direct communication, commanded my ancestors (to say nothing of speaking to me!) to light these lights—can I, with intellectual honesty, recite that blessing? And my answer is certainly ‘yes’. In repeating these words on Friday night, I remember my grandmother and my parents saying the blessing. 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” far beyond the literal content of the text. Without the melody and words those connecting moments to grandparents and parents would be lost. And because when I 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, with an additional awareness that all of us and each of us are also 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 to the Infinite Presence of God, 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 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, in my own way, I am aware of the Presence of God, regularly or occasionally, how can I possibly convey the meaning and value of that “awareness” to others? I can only say “it’s there”. And saying “it’s there” for me, at this moment or a remembered moment, is hardly in any way a convincing argument.

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 in a transcendent moment of spiritual awareness—then that, for you, is the beginning of “faith,” and becomes “evidence” for you with which you may affirm “God.” But it’s not 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 know something that we cannot know! The world we live in is measured by weight and length and color. And the tools with which we measure the world simply will not work when we turn from the finite to 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 length or color or place. And our children

understand that. 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?”—because like God, love and friendship are real, despite not having weight and length and color.

I join the teachers that came before me: *Kohelet* over 2000 years ago, and Maimonides 800 years ago, and Kushner over 30 years ago, and so many others past and present, 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 an intangible connective warmth that comes as quickly as it goes—but which is as real as anything can be. And it is in those moments that we know we are not alone, that our covenant with God is real and “true”.

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, somehow it has to make sense within the reality of the world we live in, reflecting what we experience in life. We are assisted in our struggle to ‘find faith’ with the way that our tradition has chosen to handle the name of God. At the heart of all Jewish theologies are the four-letters that are called the unpronounceable “Ineffable Name of God.” In the Book of Exodus, at 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)

God’s unique and personal name consists (Torah says) of these four letters *yud-hey-vov-hey*. Jewish tradition tells us that “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 personally asked God for atonement. The high Priest passed on to his son, the next High Priest, “the Name”, who passed it on to his son. But ever since the Temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 CE, pronunciation of “the Name” has been lost. Of course, we were *never* meant to know it, rabbinic tradition says. 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*, meaning ‘my Lord’, but some communities will substitute *HaShem* (meaning ‘the Name’) or *AdoShem* or some other artificial word.

So we ask the theological question: What does it mean that we can not know “God’s Name”, and can only know its four consonants? A thing’s name is its unique identifier, that which it ultimately and completely is. My name represents everything that I am, known and unknown, public and personal. How then, could I possibly “know” God’s Name? How could my finite, mortal and human mind, ever grasp or comprehend or understand the Infinite Reality and Presence of God? Of course I cannot “say God’s Name”—to do so would be to say that I can “know” God, and as I said last Friday night:

We have to start from the single most important theological truth: which is that we can never “know” God! 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. Yet because we do know the consonants, the *yud-hey-vov-hey*, we know and understand and can comprehend, the formative rubric, the apparent appearance of God’s Presence. If all we have are the consonants of any word, we can make a guess at how to pronounce it, even a good guess-- but we can never be sure of how it sounds when voweled. The vowels give a word its texture, they bring a fullness to a word, they are the connective tissue that makes a word whole. The consonants create structure, the vowels give it its particular and intrinsic meaning and value.

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 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 our finite knowledge. It makes perfect theological sense to me that we have access to the consonants of God’s Name, but will never access the vowels.

In the world of Jewish Mysticism, the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are special doors that open up worlds of knowledge that exist behind the letters and words and sentences of the sacred text. And the Mystics point to the three letters that make up the four-letter Name and remind us that these three letters, the *yud*, the *vov* and the *hey* the English equivalent of which are “Y”, “V” and “H”, that they can sometimes function like modern vowels. They serve a double-purpose in the construction of words, and were thus seen as being special. In Hebrew, the *hey* can represent an 'ah' sound, the *vov* could become 'oh' or 'oo', and the *yud* makes long diphthongs of short vowel sounds.

What then, does it mean that the four letter name of God is composed of these three letters?! If they alone are combined as a “word”, how would one pronounce a word with only vowels? Forced to read with only vowel sounds, one might sound out God’s name as *ee-ah, oo-ah*. And our Jewish mystics heard that as the sound of life itself! *Ee-ah, oo-ah*, they said, is the sound of breathing! All life breaths and God is in all life.

If *yud-hey-vov-hey* is meant to represent the “Breath of Life”, when we look at how we might translate the *Sh’ma* we might say: “Listen People Israel, the Breath of Life is the essence of our God, the Breath of Life is One in the universe.” And that indeed is the notion expressed in a reading you remember from our old *Gates of Prayer*:

You are remote, but oh, how near! Ordering the stars in the vast solitudes of the dark, yet whispering in the mind that You are closer than the air we breathe [p.147 GoP]

Maimonides in his 13th C. *Guide for the Perplexed* 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”-- namely “beliefs about God that produce intellectual perfection”, and “necessary beliefs”-- which are “conducive to improving social order.” [Book III, Chapter 28]

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides says of the intellectual elite that they know that God does not “reach down into our world”, that God does not directly change or alter our finite reality, and that because God exists as an “Infinite Presence,” there is necessarily an unbridgeable separation between our finite world and God’s infinite reality. Yet God is not “absolutely” distant and removed from our world, God is connected to us-- for God has revealed, Maimonides wrote, through our prophets and specifically through Moses, how we are 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, 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.

I close with this story of a man who continually prays to God that God will end the violence and hatred so abundant and apparent in our world. The man prays every day that God will bring redemption and salvation, an end to evil, speedily and soon. And finally frustrated, the man 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 to the man and says, “I have not ignored your prayers, I have done something-- I’ve sent you!”

What Makes Us Religious?

Beyond the challenge of finding faith and affirming belief in this post-biblical, post-Holocaust, rational world, an important question remains: what do we even mean by “religion” and “religious”? I had always thought that I knew what “religion” was, it’s my business after all! Aware that there is no Hebrew or Biblical equivalent for this English word, I was somewhat surprised to learn that the origin of the English word ‘religion’ is indefinite and imprecise. Though scholars debate its source, most sources I found trace it to the Latin “religio” meaning to bind or fasten or tie. If then, “religion” is that which binds us, what have we learned? Nothing! A square-dancing club, or Kiwanis, or a bird watchers society connects, binds, brings together its members into an identity group-- yet we don’t call these ‘religions’. And though each of these groups certainly does affirm clear values at the heart of its community, and each group does bring its members together with almost ‘spiritual’ bonds-- 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. But because we “know” that Judaism ‘is’ one and Kiwanis ‘is not’, there apparently are social, cultural norms that separate square-dancing, Kiwanis and bird-watching groups 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 then, what makes one Jewishly “religious”?, and how is a religious Jew to act? And what better place to start than with the infamous story of Abraham leading Isaac up the mountain as a sacrificial offering [Genesis 22].

When this story is read each year as the Torah Portion for Rosh Hashana morning, I suspect that the sermons in most synagogues praise Abraham for his dedication and faith. I suspect that those sermons praise *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, as the model of religious commitment as he obeys the word of God, even when God asks him to sacrifice his own child. The epitome of a ‘religious’ person, Abraham is obedient and faithful.

But if we make Abraham our religious model, we seriously jeopardize our 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 knows 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 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 and just and ethical behavior? In following precisely and completely the ‘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! I understand religion to be a moral, ethical way of living, in consonance with the affirmation of a moral ethical God-- so I reject Abraham’s action here in chapter 22 of Genesis as not-religious.

So I’m back to my original question: What is it that makes us religious? Scripture, ironically, is no help to us because there is no word in Hebrew that means “religion”! The word that Hebrew does use is *dat*, but *dat* is not at all what we mean by “religion”. *Dat* means ‘decree, edict or law’. In 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 *dati*, meaning that he or she accepts and observes *Halacha*, rabbinic law. And it’s only recently that *dat* has come to be associated with “religion”. Only recently has the Israeli Orthodox community defined the quality of one’s Jewishness, by one’s observance of Orthodox Jewish law. Though Orthodoxy uses *dat*, as “proper behavior” as adherence to *halacha*-- interestingly, there is no word to describe “proper belief”. The best that Hebrew Scripture and rabbinic commentary can do is the word *emunah* that is often translated as “faith”. *Emunah* is related to the word *emet*, truth. *Emunah* therefore is that which I believe because of what I know to be true. Because I “know”-- I “believe” and thus I “behave”.

But this is not what our Western culture understands as “faith”! We use “faith” to mean what we believe or “know”, despite the fact that we don’t know! We speak of faith as “blind” because it reaches beyond the perceived reality of our senses. We speak of a “leap of faith” meaning that we believe something to be true despite any supportive 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 demonstrated to be dependable and true. Which means that *emunah* is essentially relational. I have “faith”, for instance, that my car will start every morning, precisely because it regularly starts for me. I have “faith” in the promise of a friend, or the quality of a plumber’s work, because with each I already have a dependable relationship.

Emunah is the basis of our relationship to God, to Judaism and to our fellow Jews. And that is what we mean by “religious”. To be religious is to have a trusting, confident connection to God, to our people or to our heritage. And it is because of the surety, the value, the meaning—the dependable “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 *dat* in Hebrew for “religion”, is that it defines it as only observance, an objective, authoritative definition of acceptable behavior. In deciding that “proper behavior” is 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 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? And does it reflect my own sense of Jewish self and fulfill my Jewish needs?

I have chosen not to be an “observant” Jew if “proper observance” is defined by the Orthodox *halachic* community. But I am a “religious” Jew if my behavior is an honest reflection of 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.

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