

A "Return" to Religion
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5772
By Rabbi Todd Chizner

I'd like to begin with a question. What does it mean to you to be Jewish? Do me a favor and actually ask yourself the question, "What does it mean to be Jewish?" And come up with a few answers.

Before these services I did an informal survey and asked this same question to quite a few people. Here are some of their answers – maybe there are some that are the same as yours. A few people said "What it means to be Jewish is celebrating the Jewish holidays with family" (I'd call those the *Yuntif* Jews). Some added to that one, "and getting together and eating traditional Jewish foods" (I'd call those the gastronomic Jews or the gefilte fish Jews).

Some of the people asked said, to be Jewish means to support Israel. (Those are El Al Jews) Some said to be Jewish means to be proud of being a part of the Jewish people. (Those are Members of the tribe Jews) By the way, if you have ever forwarded an email listing the large number of Jewish winners of the Nobel prizes compared to the small amount of Jews in the world – you are definitely a Member of the Tribe Jew.

Then are those who define their Jewish identities as that of fighting persecution and anti-Semitism (I won't make a label for these Jews – quite frankly they scare me.) Only a few of the people I asked said to be Jewish means to follow the Jewish rituals – like lighting Shabbat candles. And a only a few said being Jewish means performing acts of kindness or doing social action. Maybe you answered something similar to one of these answers.

While it is true that all of these aspects are part of what it means to be Jewish. What I found most telling about these answers is what wasn't said – no one said "Being Jewish is who I am." It seems to me that we have begun to see being Jewish as something contained in separate parts of our identities. As if - Judaism is compartmentalized within our "real" selves. For example, I act Jewish when I am at temple, I act Jewish when it is the holidays, at weddings, funerals, etc.

I believe that this is a change - historically – in the evolution of how Jews see themselves as being Jewish. Jews of my parents generation and before saw themselves as being Jewish at all times – their answer to my question would have been – "Being Jewish is who I am." Whether they were performing a Jewish ritual or going to the store. They saw themselves as thinking Jewish - a *yiddishe cup* – a Jewish mind. Whether they were sitting in temple or sitting in front of the TV – they thought Jewish.

And when it came to action - the Jew of previous generations strived to act like a Jew at all times – like a mensch - to be an ethical person. This is what it meant to be Jewish. Thinking and acting in Jewishly - at a temple and at work, at home, in the car, on the ball field etc.

Judaism can be a way of thinking and way of behaving in moral and ethical ways – that can guide us and help us find meaning in our "complete" lives. We can return to being Jews at all time – to being religiously Jewish!...

I know I may have just struck a nerve with some of you, by saying a word that sounds a lot like religious. A word that for many of us does not describe many of us. And even makes some of us uncomfortable. Let me assure you I am not suggesting that I believe we should become strictly observant Jews. When I say that we can be religiously Jewish – I am referring to seeing our whole lives as containing Jewish values – in our thoughts and actions.

Yet - I realize that this brings up an important hurdle for us to overcome before I address how we can return to Judaism - I need to address our discomfort with topic of "religion", our aversion to organized religion, our suspicion of religious people.

Lets get right to it - In recent books, such as the one entitled "God is not Great: Religion poisons everything", writer Christopher Hitchens concludes that there are several objections to religious faith, one of which is that Religion is ultimately grounded on nothing more than fanciful wish-thinking. The same conclusion was arrived at by Bill Maher in his movie Religulous - playing on the words religious and ridiculous

On the one hand, Hitchens and Maher and the like are not saying anything new. We even have old Jewish jokes that make fun of this wish thinking - There's the Jewish guy alone in the woods - and he sees a bear walking towards him - growling - the man knows he cant outrun the bear so he prays to God - God - Make please make him a good Jewish bear - and then the man hears a voice from heaven - "Your wish has been granted" But the bear does not stop - and the last thing the man hears coming out of the bears mouth is "hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz." But the funniest part of the joke is more than the wish thinking, it is that it is a total fantasy - when would a Jewish man be camping alone in the woods.

These ideas that religion is nothing more that fantasy is not a new idea. Beginning in the early parts of the modern era, some of the most educated among us have 'informed' us that the primitive humans invented the gods to answer their fears. Sigmund Freud described humanity's faith in God as our need for a father image. Karl Marx declared that religion is the opiate of the people. Some claim that religion is business, kept going by religious leaders for their own financial enrichment. By the way - when you leave tonight be careful not to scratch my new Lamborghini. And in more recent years, religion has been held guilty-by-association because fanatics or extremists have claimed religion as the m.o. for killing innocent people.

On the other hand, while these thinkers are not saying anything new in their critiques of religion, they are reflecting a new growing trend towards a societal distancing from religious affiliation, a separation individuals feel towards organized religion. Synagogues and Churches here and across the world are feeling the effects. Synagogue and church membership have been in a steady rate of decline for the past ten years. By the way, well before the severe economic downturn of more recent years.

I must digress for one moment - It is true that some people can't afford membership - but all temples, including Temple Judea, always make accommodations for families in need. The fact is that most people who say they can't afford it - really don't want to pay for it - or to be involved with it. After all, these same people are still going on vacations or making expensive receptions for their 13 year old children. There is a disconnect with Religion and to affiliation. It is no longer who people are.

Its interesting to note that just last week the Pope Benedict addressed a large gathering in Germany - and he said, "We are witnessing a growing indifference to religion in society." (Wallstreet Journal article written by Laura Stevens, 9/23/11). Tens of thousands of people have left the German Church this year alone.

Why? What has changed? When did we start to become uncomfortable with religion and religiosity?

I had an in insight into the answer to these questions after a high school student of mine - asked me this question a question.

She asked me, "Do you really believe in all that stuff?" What she was really saying was how can an intelligent and modern person actually believe in the prayers in the prayer book, the meaning of ritual, and the existence of a benevolent God.

I for one think it is time we give an honest look at religion. To see what is real and what is not. It is time to take a mature look at where we are – religiously speaking.

The vast majority of us are not like Hitchens and Maher who are “anti-religion” — and yet for many, the honest reality is that religion has become nothing more than a useful fiction. We all agree that religion has its benefits. It can provide psychological comfort to those in need or can be a source of education for our children – it can be there for celebratory moments in our lives – it could provide the ability to do community service. Yet for these folks, maybe some of you, religion is an invented myth – a bunch of stories passed down through the ages with maybe a moral or two within them.

The problem with this is that this thinking not only makes religion a fiction it makes the leaders of religion fools or frauds and it makes the main character in all of the religious stories, God, a figment of some peoples imaginations.

Maybe this is our fault – the clergy. Maybe we have given a fantasy image of religion – and Pollyannaish explanation for the evils of our world. Maybe we have tried to avoid the difficult questions about the validity of religion.

I am here to tell you something that may surprise you to hear from a rabbi – and that may get me kicked out of some rabbi circles. Many of the accusations about the validity of religion contain a measure of truth in them.

Let’s take a look at the truth within some of the accusations. It is true that there are those who abuse religion like an opiate, trying to avoid responsibility for their mistakes and sins. But it is false to think that religion is all about giving us a free pass to purity. In fact, Judaism believes that all our prayers and confessions at services are not nearly enough. We have to face the people we have hurt and rectify the damages we have done – as best as we can. God does not forgive us for sins committed against others – only the one who has been hurt can forgive us.

It is true that there are so-called clergy who scheme people out of money for their own financial gain. It is false to think that that is way with the vast majority of clergy. I mean do we do this with other professions – just because there are few crooked doctors doesn’t mean we should avoid all doctors – just because there are a few unscrupulous politicians – doesn’t mean...lets move on.

It is true that there are still those in our world who have claimed to be acting in a religious manner while they have savagely slaughter innocent lives. This is so present in our hearts as we have just commemorated 10 years since the 9 / 11 attacks. But we know that it is false to think that all people religious are evil. It is false to think that all Muslims are evil. In fact, we must remember that the greatest advances made in the development of the human heart have been done by religious giants. Of course I could mention the spiritual giants of all time – like Moses and Jesus and Buddha, but even if we just looked at the last 100 years. Where would our world be without be without the passion of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, the need for compassion as shown by Mother Teresa, the strength to use spirit and not might as shown by Mahatma Gandhi, the wisdom to see all others made in the image of God taught to us by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Just because there is a measure of truth in the accusations against religion, it does not mean we should discard religion entirely. Much of what is wrong with organized religion – has nothing to do with the religious principles but with people who have no principles. We should not, we cannot throw out the good baby with the dirty bath water.

Beyond the problems with people who give religion a bad name – there have been accusations that religion itself is invalid because of it questionable origins.

It is true that religion began within the earliest civilizations and was expressed in primitive forms and cultic practices. It is true that Religion did start out with weird and spooky practices of human sacrifice and idol worship. Even Judaism began with the odd practice of killing animals to show their appreciation to God.

Besides, many other belief systems also have questionable origins and we don't question them or discard them because of their weird beginnings. For example, modern astronomy – the study of stars and space – began with astrology – when people looked up to the stars and believed that their position determined their fate. We don't say that the study of space is pointless or silly because the earliest stargazers were foolish. Or take this example, modern chemistry developed out of alchemy: when people sought to change all metals into gold. (((It is really too bad that one didn't work out. Because At \$1800 an ounce – i could really use that knowledge now.)))

Essentially, the validity of an idea, is not determined by its origins. That applies to religion – or any other belief system.

There are other fallacious claims made against religion. Sadly, there are many anti-religious people who blame religion for all the world wars. They cite religion for causing so many wars between different groups rather than seeing the truth – that it is the ego of dictators and kings who have used the trappings of religion as a tool. Not to mention that millions and millions of people died at the hands of people who abandoned religion or tried to create their own religion fashioned after their own ego – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot – to name a few.

What about the claim that Religion tries to create fear in the hearts of the believers to keep them in line. I can't speak for all religions but for Judaism. You might find it interesting to note that the most repeated command in the torah is "though shall not fear." Fear is considered to be a destructive contagion that leads people to inaction, cowardice and immoral choices. Instilling fear is forbidden within Jewish law. Instilling guilt is allowed – but not fear.

There are also those that falsely believe that each religion claims that only through obeisance to it can one find eternal salvation. Certainly that is true of some religions, but I will not speak about other faiths, I can say with certainty that in Judaism – that is not one of our doctrines. In our tradition, we judge people based on how they act, not on what they believe. In a breathtaking teaching in the Talmud, our rabbis proclaim, *hassidei umot ha'olam yesh lahem chelek ba'olam ha'ba...*the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come. Notice they do not say the Jews, the believers, the monotheists, the faithful, or the converts to Judaism of the world will have life eternal. Rather our Sages teach that people who live lives of righteous *behavior*; who use their talents and resources to bring about goodness in the world—these are the people who inherit eternity.

I will conclude with the poet, Edmund Fleg's – definition of what it means to be a Jew

I am a Jew because Judaism demands no abdication of the mind.
I am a Jew because Judaism asks every possible sacrifice of my life.
I am a Jew because wherever there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.
I am a Jew because whenever the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.
I am a Jew because the message of Judaism is the oldest and the newest.
I am a Jew because the promise of Judaism is a universal promise.
I am a Jew because for the Jew, the world is not finished; human beings will complete it.
I am a Jew because for the Jew, humanity is not finished; we are still creating humanity.
I am a Jew because Judaism places human dignity above all things, even Judaism itself.
I am a Jew because Judaism places human dignity within the oneness of God

Over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I will share with you some of the ways I believe that Judaism enlightens all which exists in our lives.

We will engage in realistic *teshuva* – returning Judaism to us and our lives.

Cain y'hi ratzon – may this be God's will.