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“I am Religious”

Summertime is “new members season” in synagogue life. Some have moved into the neighborhood and are searching for a congregation to celebrate the High Holy Days; others have children to prepare for *b'nei mitzvah*. For rabbis it is a sweet time of the year to meet people. All the conversations are sincere, and a few are delightfully disarming, like this one back in June:

“Rabbi Davidson,” a well-meaning father began, “we have heard great things about Temple Emanu-El. We are not in the least bit religious, so we think your temple would be perfect for us.”

I swallowed then smiled. “We’d love to have you!” I said.

“I am not religious.” I have heard this declaration countless times, and when the circumstances feel right, I gently inquire, “What do you mean, exactly, when you say you are not religious?”

The answers spin a common thread: “Well, I don’t keep kosher; I only come to temple on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; and last spring in Paris during Passover I ate a baguette.”

“By that definition,” I respond with a laugh, “most of us aren’t religious. So, why do you want to join a temple?”

“Because I’ve always been part of a temple!” may be the startled answer. Or, “because I’m looking for a place to affirm my values.” Or, “because we Jews need to stick together!”

Constancy, Morality, Solidarity – are these not cornerstones of a religious life? Perhaps some people are more religious than they think!

We have read a great deal lately about the waning of religion in America. When Gallup reported that church, synagogue and mosque membership fell from seventy percent in 1999 to forty-seven percent in 2020 it made national headlines.¹ But while the numbers do suggest a decline, note this caveat: the drop is in association with organized movements and houses of worship, not necessarily in belief or other forms of observance. A recent study conducted by Baylor University determined that many with no religious affiliation – the so-called “nones” – nonetheless hold distinct religious ideologies and do indeed practice.² They simply do not fit into the neat categories measured by many surveys.³

The axis of American Jewish identity, too, has moved outside the typical synagogue’s walls. In the last fifty years affiliation plummeted from seventy percent to thirty percent. As a 2020 Pew Research analysis explained: most “American Jews [now] prioritize cultural

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx#:~:text=Story%20Highlights&text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%2D%2D%20Americans'%20membership,2018%20and%2070%25%20in%201999>

² https://www.wsj.com/articles/religion-is-dying-dont-believe-it-nones-others-surveys-faith-institutions-atheists-agnostics-practice-minority-11659017037?mod=opinion_lead_pos10

³ <https://www.baylorisr.org/religious-nones-really-not-religious/>

components of Judaism over *religious*⁴ ones,” such as “remembering the Holocaust, leading a moral and ethical life, working for justice and equality in society...being intellectually curious...[and even] ‘having a good sense of humor.’”⁵

But once again, disaffiliation doesn’t tell the whole story: the American Jewish community is actually growing in size and diversity. The number self-identifying as Jews climbed from five and a half million in 1990 to seven and a half million today,⁶ and represents a beautiful tapestry of cultures, colors and ethnicities awaiting an *atypical* synagogue to draw them in. That is why we established our Streicker Cultural Center eight years ago; why we launched new outreach initiatives for young professionals, unaffiliated families and anyone curious about Judaism last spring; and why we opened a downtown campus in Chelsea where young children and their parents hung the mezuzah just last week.

The conclusion the Baylor team reached is encouraging and important: religion remains a vibrant force in American life.⁷

Constancy

And why shouldn’t it? In an uncertain, rapidly changing world, we all reach for moorings that are stable, constant and enduring.

Among the glorious features of this city are the houses of worship like ours adorning the streets – monuments standing firmly where they have for generations though the avenues have widened and the traffic has grown around them.

What a home we have!

Last month I checked in on a congregant recuperating from surgery. She spoke of how much she longed to be back in our temple this year. “The world is so crazy,” she said. “I just need to get in there and look up at the ceiling! To sit there and feel a sense of peace and of place.”

A sense of peace. The noise outside can be deafening – politicians and pundits screaming over one another; phone calls, emails and text messages ringing and pinging through family dinners and awakening us at night. We need sanctuary against the onslaught.

And often we do require a proper sense of place: a feeling of being at home in surroundings we know and love and have, perhaps, for a lifetime; but also a humble reminder of human finitude in relationship to the world and to God. Religion’s foundation, sociologist Daniel Bell once noted, lies in human beings’ “awareness of...the inexorable limits to their powers.” We “want a sense of wonder and mystery.”⁸ There are moments when we desire to be alone with a God before whom we feel small, whose spirit pervades all creation and watches over us, protecting us. For many, the grandeur of Temple Emanu-El conveys just that. Its space moves the spirit.

⁴ Emphasis added

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Jewish Identity and Belief,” chapter 2 in *Jewish Americans in 2020* in Joshua Stanton and Benjamin Spratt, *Awakenings: American Jewish Transformations in Identity, Leadership, and Belonging*, 49-50

⁶ 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Berman Jewish DataBank; Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020*

⁷ https://www.wsj.com/articles/religion-is-dying-dont-believe-it-nones-others-surveys-faith-institutions-atheists-agnostics-practice-minority-11659017037?mod=opinion_lead_pos10

⁸ Daniel, Bell, *The Winding Passage* in <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/10/28/religion-politics-rebuild-american-democracy/>

Here, joyful song uplifts us and the wisdom of our tradition fortifies us. Here, prayers of fellow worshipers reach out us, and tender memories of loved ones passed brush up against us. “My earliest recollections,” a member writes, “are of being in temple on the Holy Days seated beside my father, mother and sister. I remember holding my parents’ hands. That was sixty years ago. My parents are long gone, but even now I can feel their hands in mine whenever I am here.” Ours is a sanctuary crowded with congregants this New Year’s Day, but even more crowded with memories.

Memory, melody, majesty. All remind us we are not alone, but tightly held in the warp and weft of an enduring faith.

Morality

A congregant called me last spring enraged by the most recent travesty of justice splashed across the day’s headlines. She almost yelled at me: “Rabbi, you’ve got to tell people this is not okay.”

“Don’t you think they know that?” I asked.

“We need to be reminded,” she insisted.

We turn to religion for constancy and stability in our lives, including a moral foundation affirming our deeply held beliefs about right and wrong, and a perspective on truth that cannot be perverted by alternative sets of facts.

Theologian Karl Barth contended that people enter worship with one question in mind: “Is it true?”

Is it true, this sense...of a stationary pole amid changing appearances, of a righteousness not somewhere behind the stars but within the events [of] our present life?”⁹

If reproductive healthcare, gun safety, immigration rights, racial justice, voting access, protecting the planet, and preserving our democracy have become partisan concerns, they have always been moral ones. And we cannot sit on the sidelines while they are contested, as if indifferent to the suffering our diffidence will cause.

Barth believed passionately that our sacred texts, however ancient, speak forcefully and directly to the exigencies of the world around us. But more than that, he maintained that only when taught in response to those challenges does Scripture fulfill its divine purpose,¹⁰ and only when we confront them do we fulfill ours. And we know it. That is why a dozen temple members bussed down to Washington last spring to rally for abortion rights, and why the very next week a dozen more flew to Poland to assist Ukrainian refugees, and why so many of you regularly roll up your sleeves responding to the most urgent global needs. Because we accept these Biblical mandates as binding: to “judge fairly, and with kindness and compassion;”¹¹ to

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 108 in Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice*, 132

¹⁰ Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice*, 118

¹¹ Zechariah 7:9

“care for the stranger having ourselves been strangers in Egypt;”¹² and to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”¹³

According to Pew Research, “roughly half” of America believes Biblical guideposts should stake civil society’s guardrails.¹⁴ What divides America is which verses, and whether those fences should protect or restrict our freedoms.

The Bible is complex and nuanced, easily abused, and often weaponized. Psalm 139 declares: “You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb....Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.”¹⁵ But this poetic exaltation of God’s intimate presence in our lives from conception to death was never intended as an assertion of fetal personhood, let alone a cudgel to batter women’s rights. To understand the Bible on abortion, look to Exodus 21 which clearly distinguishes between incipient life and human life: “If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she miscarries...the offender is to be fined,”¹⁶ the Bible says – fined, not executed, because the unborn fetus is not a person.

And yet the religious right would have us believe that faithful Americans oppose abortion. The Bible doesn’t support that; neither do the polls. Only among White evangelical Protestants is it the majority view.¹⁷ On the contrary, there is a storied history of religious leaders across this country laboring heroically to ensure abortion access. Between 1967 and 1973, a group of more than a thousand united under the banner of the Clergy Consultation Service to secure safe procedures for a half a million women and girls – many poor, many the victims of sexual violence, all afraid, all human beings.

And “the most basic ethical question we can [ever] ask,” insists Pastor Scott Black Johnston is: ‘What do I see when I look at another human being.’”¹⁸

Scriptural teachings were not written to be read in the abstract, much less declaimed at political rallies. They must be interpreted in response to human need – the real, sometimes desperate struggles of other people. The genesis of religious ethics lies in the Bible’s first chapter: each of us is created in the image of God.¹⁹ So what do we see when we look at other human beings suffering through no fault of their own the harsh realities of poverty or war or hunger or rape? The image of God is what we see.

That faith is the moral ground on which we stand.

Solidarity

And for Jews, religion means something else, too: peoplehood. We Jews are a people with history, culture, and since 1948, a national homeland. And we are a minority under threat of assimilation, intimidation and outright assault. That, also, is what it means to be a Jew.

¹² Deuteronomy 10:19

¹³ Leviticus 19:18

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/07/05/10-facts-about-religion-and-government-in-the-united-states/>

¹⁵ Psalm 139:13, 16; *New International Version*

¹⁶ Exodus 21:22; *New International Version*

¹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion/>

¹⁸ Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice*, 91

¹⁹ Genesis 1:27

One Friday night shortly after the Tree of Life massacre, a man stopped me in the lobby to tell me he was joining Temple Emanu-El, not in spite of the danger Jews face, but because of it. “I want to stand with my people,” he said.

And every year, I meet with others choosing to join us through conversion. They often explain, “I admire a people of such resilience and courage who have made so many contributions to the world and I want to be a part of them even with the risk,” then adding, “and I cannot wait to visit Israel to see where my new story began.”

That story began with Abraham and Sarah, summoned by God to form a people through whom all other peoples of the earth would be blessed. While many religious communities hear the same calling through their holy texts, this is our sacred story.

Often we have wrestled with its inherent tension, sometimes pulled one way by an innate vigilance for Jewish peoplehood and survival, and sometimes the other by our obligation to the wellbeing of all humanity. We do believe fervently in Isaiah’s mandate to be “a light to the nations.”²⁰

Yet there have been episodes in our history when the urge toward universalism and the desire for acceptance have suffocated our concern for our own people. Ken Burns’ brilliant series “The US and the Holocaust” reminds us that until Franklin Roosevelt’s Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. pressed the President, too many American Jews including some in the highest echelons of government remained too quiet for too long amidst reports that millions of Jews were dying in Europe.

If the example is extreme, the phenomenon endures. Most of us have heard of the principle of *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world.” Even non-Jews know of it. But how many of us speak as passionately of *klal Yisrael*, an abiding concern for “Jewish solidarity,” or *achdut Yisrael*, “Jewish unity.”

Studies show that American Jews in their thirties and forties feel less connected to and less responsible for the wellbeing of world Jewry than their parents.²¹ And last spring an American Jewish Committee survey revealed that barely half of American Jewish millennials consider Israel important to their Jewish identity, with more than a quarter acknowledging reevaluating their commitment to Israel in response to the anti-Israel climate on college campuses and in other settings.²²

If present trends persist, as memories of the rebirth of the State of Israel and its early struggles for survival recede with the passing years, as the last witnesses to the desperate plight of European Jewry prior to Israel’s founding pass from our midst, the particular, tragic, heroic experience of the Jewish people will become less and less significant to future generations of American Jews, despite the fact that anti-Semitism is rampant – in 2020 six out of ten American Jews experienced it²³ – and Israel is under constant attack, if not from Gazan rockets, then from Congressional Representatives, United Nations investigators, campus progressives, and even some Mainline Protestant denominations.

²⁰ Isaiah 49:6

²¹ <https://www.jta.org/2013/09/04/ny/jewish-giving-strong-but-concerns-loom-new-study-finds>

²² <https://www.ajc.org/Jewish-Millennial-Survey-2022/American-Jewish-Millennials>

²³ Pew Research Center, “Antisemitism and Jewish Views on Discrimination,” chapter 6 in *Jewish Americans in 2020* in Joshua Stanton and Benjamin Spratt, *Awakenings: American Jewish Transformations in Identity, Leadership, and Belonging*, 27

Don't misunderstand me. A commitment to peoplehood does not preclude a commitment to fairness. We can and should decry government funded yeshivot that flout state guidelines and forsake their students' educational needs, as long as we guard that criticism against demonization of a community that has been victimized by anti-Semitic violence. And we can and at times should be critical of the policies of Israel's government, as long as we don't forget, or let others sidestep, the broader political, military and diplomatic context of the Middle East, including the expressed desires of Israel's enemies to destroy her from the very first, when the UN unveiled its Partition Plan seventy-five years ago November – a proposal the Jews of Palestine accepted and the Arabs of Palestine occasioned as a pretext for war.

Judaism proclaims two commandments to love our neighbors, Rabbi Avi Weiss teaches: *ahavat habriyot*, “love for humanity;” and *ahavat Yisrael*, “love for the Jewish people.” The first is rooted in that same belief that all human beings are fashioned in God's image; the second in our unique, sometimes complicated, love for family,²⁴ bound together even through disappointment and disagreement by history, empathy and solidarity.²⁵

Despite what anyone else may claim, our two loves do not conflict. And there is no heroism in self-abnegation. Rather attention to our particular experiences as a persecuted people should bolster our universal commitments, and even inspire others to join us.

I am Religious

The renowned American entertainer Isidore Itzkowitz – who changed his name to Eddie Cantor – once counseled: “Religion is not a soothing syrup. It offers no glib, easy answers to life's problems...[But religion] will give you...a sense of unity...the courage to stand up straight...and fight a good fight...[and] the kind of confidence no lesser force can take away.”²⁶

Perhaps more than ever we need religion's message of constancy and permanence – of connection to the past and to one another. We especially need its moral prism and moral compass by which we see clearly and act justly for the wellbeing of the world around us. And when our safety or that of Israel come under assault, we need the unity and solidarity that our religion and history have kindled within us.

When we stand firmly upon the platform of our faith and all it embodies, then our foundations will be secure, our mission will be true, and our people will endure as the light to the nations Isaiah intended us to be.

In *Man's Quest for God*, Abraham Joshua Heschel observed: Just “as a tree torn from the soil [withers, so]...the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself...It is the attachment to what is spiritually superior...loyalty to a sacred...idea...love for a people...which holds our inner life together.”²⁷

²⁴ Rabbi Avraham Weiss, *Spiritual Activism: A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World*, 23-24

²⁵ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek – Listen, My Beloved Knocks*, 51-71 in Rabbi Avraham Weiss, *Spiritual Activism: A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World*, 32

²⁶ *Mandel Treasury*, 333

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 6

This is the season we consider the meaning of our lives and commit ourselves to what will nourish our souls in the year ahead. For each of us, may 5783 be a year of confidence and courage, of peace and of purpose. May our people thrive, and our world know healing. And as we journey on together, may we be proud to call ourselves...religious.