

JUDAISM IS NOT A RELIGION:

WE ARE AN “AM”

Dear Friends, my beloved congregation, it is time to stop pretending. It's time to stop trying to be something we are not and were never meant to be in the first place.

After almost 40 years in the Rabbinate it is high time to confess the truth, to come clean, and to set the record straight.

Judaism is not religion! There, I said it! In fact, this “revelation” might be the best news we Jews could have ever hoped for! With the exception of one place in the Book of Esther, a very late book of the Bible, there is not even a Hebrew word to describe such a thing. The word DAT is used to convey that notion, but is only used to compare our “religion” to others

in Persia of its day. So as the writer Joshua Hoffman states in his article entitled “The Myth of Normal Judaism: Why Judaism is deteriorating in the West”, “Being Jewish is defined by membership in the people and

not by religion. The Jews have a religion, but Judaism is not a religion”.

In other words, if by definition religion requires belief in a deity and requires by law (Halachah), religious practices and cultural observances which we call Mitzvot, then Judaism **ought** to be called a religion.

If one is a God commanded believer, then the Mitzvot are obligatory and eternally binding. If one is not a God commanded believer, then the mitzvot are not obligatory; they are instead an invaluable collection of customs, traditions, values and spiritual practices. If you don't believe me, answer this question: Can one be a Jewish Atheist? The answer is most certainly yes. By calling yourself a Jew and hence the word “Judaism” all it means at its core is that we are descendants from a geographical area in Israel, known as Judah. In other words, Y'hudim (Jews) come from Y'hudah (Judah). The same is not true for our Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters. To be a Christian means you are a believer in Christ as the savior, messiah and son of God. To deny these assertions is to forfeit your right to salvation and you are not a

Christian. To be a Muslim means you are part of the religion known as Islam, which means in Arabic, "I submit," I submit to the will of Allah. If you do not submit to the will of Allah, you are not a Muslim.

So if we are not a religion, then what are we? We are most authentically defined by history and our sacred texts as an AM, a people or nation. The word AM as in Am Yisrael, the people of Israel, is so ancient that even Pharaoh refers to us as such in the Book of Exodus. The meaning of AM as **nation**, as the nation of Israel, refers to a people with defined borders and sovereignty in the land. This applied to us when we had independence in the land in Biblical times and now in modern times with the establishment of medinat Yisrael, the state of Israel. The meaning of AM as **people** refers to human beings who identify with the culture, traditions, values and spiritual practices of a people who trace their lineage back to Judah no matter where they live now! We clearly understand that we share a common history and our destiny as a people is intertwined.

Due to a diaspora lasting for over 2,000 years, for sure many sub cultures have evolved, including Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi, Jews hailing for centuries from Eastern and Central Europe, Spain and Portugal and the Middle East, not to mention Jews from India, Ethiopia, China and Uganda. Varying customs and traditions regarding food, language, music, liturgy and dress define these sub groups, but still they are Jews. More importantly however, there are underlying powerful currents that bind these disparate communities, together as one people, AM Ehad.

These include unifying values, collective wisdom, a shared history, a sacred literature, and a unique geshtalt, a certain way of viewing the world and life itself that is uniquely Jewish.

So what makes this AM an AM segulah? How is this people, our people, set apart, distinguished from all other peoples and what have been our collective contributions to humanity over time?

Most importantly if the vast majority of Jews today are not beholden to a commanding voice from Heaven then how can we as an AM, rather than a religion, proclaim the importance of passing on these contributions to future generations and to those seeking what we can uniquely offer? In other words, what indeed distinguishes our brand of peoplehood or AM-hood from others in the world?

To expound on this question, I turn to the 2nd: President of the US, John Adams and to Paul Johnson, a Christian historian and author of A History of the Jews to share their thoughts.

Adams wrote “I insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation, . . . fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations”

Johnson amplified these words detailing “how”. He wrote “Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all these Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of

the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift.

To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity and worth of every human being; of conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind.

Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place.” Wow!

Let us consider each of these pieces of furniture which we Jews have carried with us throughout history and see how still they are the building blocks of humanity; perhaps needed now more than ever!

1. Equality before the Law: Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof

A fundamental basis for a functioning society is the idea that there is impartial justice and that no one is above the law. The Torah is filled with injunctions such as from Deuteronomy:

“And I charged your Judges at that time, hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between 2 Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you, do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike.” And from Leviticus: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”

This sense of equality extended to other spheres of life including education and burial. The Jews in Israel in ancient times were the first people to provide for free public education for children, regardless of one’s status in life, thus inculcating the value of equality in society in the earliest stages of life. At the other end of the spectrum of life, Rabbi Gamliel in the 2nd century decreed that we are all equal in death and therefore even though he was extremely wealthy, he chose to be buried in a plain wooden box. This became the basis of Jewish law concerning burial in a wooden coffin without adornments of any kind.

In our day, protecting democracy here and in Israel where all are equal before the law, where autocracy and fascism are fought against with all our might is to uphold justice, freedom, and equality for all.

2. Sanctity of Life k'dushat Ha-chayim

In Jewish tradition, the sanctity of life is a fundamental principle that underscores the inherent value of human existence.

The concept of Pikuach Nefesh the mitzvah of saving lives is so paramount that 610 of the 613 commandments must be set aside to fulfill this mitzvah.

Respecting all life including animals is so great that the highest level of keeping kosher is to be a vegetarian, and if we must eat the flesh of an animal, it must be slaughtered in the most humane way possible. For this reason, hunting for sport is seen as an anathema to the Jewish ethic of honoring the sanctity of life. As it states in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5: "Whoever destroys a single life is considered by scripture to have

destroyed the whole world, and whoever saved a single life is considered by scripture to have saved an entire world”

In our day, ensuring quality healthcare for women and reproductive rights for all is to honor the sanctity of life.

3. Dignity B'tzelem Elohim

In our tradition one of the greatest contributions to humanity is the concept of the infinite dignity and worth of every human being regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. In the very first chapter of the Torah, God proclaims that every human being is created B'tzelem Elohim, created in the image and likeness of God.

There is no other culture I am aware of its time that makes such an assertion as this. How breathtaking is this revelation, that all of us are made in the divine image! Our Rabbinic tradition amplifies this notion in Pirkei Avot a tractate of the Talmud that encapsulates the greatest teachings of the Rabbis. For example, it is taught:

“Let the honor, dignity and worth of your fellow human being be as dear to you as your own!”

And

“You dare not despise any human being, nor denigrate anything at all, as there is no one who has not his/her purpose and no one thing that has not its place.

In our day, how dare we disparage any human created in God’s image, including our LGBTQ brothers and sisters or any race or ethnicity. To do any less is to defame and blaspheme God!

4. Conscience – mat spoon

It is interesting to note that the modern Hebrew word for conscience is mat spoon, which is the same word for compass. In other words, our ability to make morally sound choices is by possessing a “moral compass” which we hope more often than not points true North. In our tradition, we honor the freedom to choose our way in any and every given situation. At all times, we must choose to either give into our

Yetzer Ha-ra, our less than noble inclination or choose to follow our Yetzer Tov, our understanding of what is right, good and true.

Exercising this choice is the basis of having a conscience. As Jews we value Freud's conception of a Super Ego, a strong impulse to do the right thing, even when it entails personal risk. It is not a coincidence that Hitler, may his name be erased, desired the extinction of the whole Jewish people, as he defined the Jews in his Magnus Opus, Mein Kampf, as "the conscience of the world". He clearly understood that without a conscience all is possible, even the most unjust, grisly or inhumane behavior. With a conscience, there is a check on the worst impulses and evil designs inherent in the human condition. We Jews through the ages have indeed carried this burden and proudly upheld our sacred vocation as the conscience of the world. To live a life of integrity is to do the right thing, especially when no one is watching. This is what it means to have a conscience.

In our day, having a conscience means to abhor indifference and to abolish apathy. It means not to stand idly by, to turn a blind eye, but to speak truth to power.

5. Social Justice – Tikun Olam

Clearly as a result of all of the above, it should not surprise us that the concept of Tikun Olam, the incessant Jewish pursuit of social justice is a core Jewish value. One need look no further than the Israelite prophets who thundered with passionate resolve words such as these:

“Amos who proclaims, “Let justice roll down like a mighty river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” Micah who taught: God has shown you, O man what is good. It is only this: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Isaiah who demanded: “Is this not the fast I have chosen: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke of oppression, to share your bread with the hungry, to remove lawlessness from your midst?” And Isaiah who

imagined a world where “Nation would no longer lift up sword against Nation, nor would they ever again train for war.”

Words such as these and so many more have helped to embed within the Jewish psyche an inherent instinct to be involved in the great causes of our day, to be engaged in the pursuit of justice in helping to create a more compassionate society. We are forbidden to stand on the sidelines and pretend we don't see. Our uniquely Jewish ethos of Tikun Olam means we must be engaged in the work of repairing the world.

6. Loving Kindness – G'milut Chasadim

Finally, this last virtue is not exclusively Jewish but it is surely part of the furniture we Jews have carried with us throughout history. The ability to feel the pain of others, to know the heart of the stranger, the outsider, the marginalized, is part and parcel of what it means to be Jewish. More than any other verse in the Torah, 36 times we are reminded in one form or another that we must never forget that we, ourselves, were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and therefore we know all

too well the suffering of the oppressed. Therefore, you must not oppress the stranger in your midst. To show compassion and empathy towards even animals in a world where they too were and still are treated inhumanely, is a Jewish moral imperative. What other people decreed that even beasts of burden must observe the Sabbath as a day of rest. Such is a people who cherish the value of chesed, acts of loving kindness.

Each one of the above “gifts of the Jews” according to Paul Johnson, is a commodity today that is so vitally necessary. In a world today where the rule of law is under siege, where a cult of personality has blinded the eyes of craven sycophants, where the proliferation of easy access to guns and weapons of mass destruction has robbed the lives of so many who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, where discrimination, demonization, and demagoguery run rampant, where books are banned and the history of oppression is minimized. It is all

the more imperative that these Jewish values are embraced and shared with others.

My friends these values which define us, these virtues which distinguish us, are in fact the basis of so called Wokism: If being “woke” is somehow something pejorative, I proudly proclaim, guilty as charged. This is not an indictment of any political party or point of view. It is an honest assessment of our inherited Jewish world view as passed down through the ages. All too often as for sure today, they are counter cultural. All too often, we as a people have paid a high price for living the values of our people. Equality, sanctity of life, dignity, conscience, social justice and love, peace and kindness. These are the values that unite us as a people. It is part and parcel of our historic and cultural DNA.

As a Rabbi to be sure, I understand the helpful benefits of belief in a Higher Power, of the life of the spirit, in observance of Jewish customs and traditions. These are part of the “religion” of Judaism. There is

much to be said about keeping the mitzvot, honoring Shabbat and holidays, and living a Jewish life complete with the warm fuzziness that come from passing on traditions and religious practices mi-dor L'dor, from generation to generation. Indeed, this is how we maintain our identity in a world where assimilation is the currency of our times.

Nonetheless, it is our attachment to one another as an AM, as a people with unique ways of relating to an often cruel, unpredictable, and unjust world, that should boost our pride in our Jewish heritage. These “gifts of the Jews”, our treasure trove of enlightening ideals, should be what brings our fellow Jews closer to one another and what we should proclaim proudly to a world desperately in need of these spiritual gifts.

After all, we are first and foremost an AM, not a religion. In a world where liberal religions of all types are struggling to survive, I believe by returning to our core identity we will inspire younger Jews to enthusiastically embrace their Jewish heritage and will also attract the

uncommitted of all faiths to take a fresh look at what we as a people can uniquely offer.

This morning, as we hear the shofar yet again may we be reminded to hearken to the call of our inner most being, to hear the mighty sounds of a vital heritage steeped in wisdom, and humanitarian ideals and to be lifted up with pride as we celebrate our people's invaluable contributions to humanity and let us say . .