

The Purpose of Judaism

G'mar chatimah tovah everyone, and tzom kal. I hope everyone is doing well at this point in our spiritual marathon. This point of the service is always a big one for the rabbi, one of the major sermons of the year. I spend a great deal of time thinking about what topic is important enough to speak on for my Yom Kippur sermon.

The Jewish Week recently ran an interesting article about the topics of High Holiday sermons.¹ Some rabbis were planning on writing sermons about the political situation in America today. Others were planning on avoiding politics at all cost. The article was about the choice that rabbis needed to make between their role as prophet and their role as pastor. Should the rabbis speak of the political turmoil, criticizing the government like a prophet in the ancient kingdom of Judah? Or should the rabbis focus on their role as spiritual guide?

There were rabbis like Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, who said that people needed a refuge from politics. They needed to be able to go into a place where they could be free of the rancor that fills our political discourse today. Rabbi Irwin Kula, of CLAL, felt that to speak of politics was wasting an opportunity. After all, we are concerned with political things that happen today, and next week we are concerned with something else. Why should we speak about something so ephemeral? Rabbi Kula said that speaking of politics does nothing but make the rabbi

1. The Jewish Week, *Discord Forcing Rabbis to Choose Roles*, September 5th, 2018

and people who agree with him or her feel better, while alienating those who disagree. “And,” he added, “it does not help people accomplish the central job of the High Holidays — which is psychological, spiritual and moral renewal...”

Other rabbis disagreed. “...Rome is burning, and we’ve no choice but to talk about it. To ignore the proverbial elephant in the room would amount to spiritual malpractice. ...”² said Rabbi Joshua Hammerman.

Other rabbis wanted to speak about the current political situation, but were afraid to anger congregants. Some thought they might lose their jobs, and some wondered how to be a rabbi for someone whose political position they had criticized over the High Holidays.

The question is really this: What is the purpose of Judaism? If you asked different kinds of Jews, you would get different kinds of answers. Some might say our purpose is to do *mitzvot*, and by doing so, bring the Messiah. Some might say our purpose is to be a light unto the nations. Some might say our purpose is to be true to the Torah.

Reform Jews often say that our purpose is to do Tikkun Olam, which literally means to repair the world. Many people take this to mean social justice. We are to right wrongs and champion the oppressed, until we bring a world of peace and justice. If this is the case, then surely the High Holiday sermons should be about the bizarre way we ignore global warming. It should be about the treatment of immigrants, the gap between rich and poor. If so, then our goal is to comfort those who are suffering, and to inflict a little righteous suffering on those who are too comfortable!

2. Ibid, *Rabbis' Moment of 'Truth is Truth,'* August 8th, 2018

Reform Judaism began in the Age of Enlightenment, and it shares many goals with that movement. The equality of all people, human rights, democracy, all were important elements of both movements. At the same time, the old paradigm, that our job as Jews was to follow the *mitzvot*, because Gd told us to, was collapsing. When people began to question whether we should be religious out of fear of punishment or desire for reward, when people were no longer Jewish or Christian because they had no other option, we needed another reason to be religious. Different Jewish groups found different reasons. Some decided that the point of Judaism was to bring the Messiah. Some decided it was the mystical reunification of a shattered world and a shattered Gd. For others it was the creation of a Jewish homeland, and for Reform Jews, the purpose became ethics.

In the 20's and 30's Reform Judaism embraced a progressive agenda, supporting the New Deal, unions, and anti-poverty programs. When the Civil Rights movement came, closely followed by protests over Vietnam and Watergate, Reform Judaism was at the vanguard. Some of my teachers marched with Martin Luther King, and Hebrew Union College stopped requiring graduates to become military chaplains in protest over the war in Vietnam.

Of course, the Jewish inclination to protest goes back a long time. In the golden age of prophecy, from the 8th to the 5th century BCE, prophets stood before kings and priests and ‘spoke truth to power.’ The prophet Amos condemned Israel “because they have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals.”³ Jeremiah stood before the king of Judah and told him that his kingdom would be destroyed, that Jerusalem would fall and the Temple be brought down because of the sins of the leaders and the people. Isaiah declared that Gd would bring destruction because “your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one avid for presents and greedy for gifts. They do not judge the case of the orphan, and the widow’s cause never reaches them.”⁴

When famine and wildfire and disaster struck, Gd sent the prophets to say ‘I have sent you warnings but you have not heeded them!’ When times were good, the prophets asked ‘Why do the rich lie at ease while the poor still struggle to find food and shelter?’ These prophets were the inspiration for the great activist rabbis, most of them Reform rabbis, and for the Jewish men and women who fought injustice all over the world.

And yet I tell you that fixing the world is not the purpose of Judaism. The meaning of Judaism is not to inspire people to fight for the environment. Judaism is not about fighting for the workers, the poor, the homeless, the refugees. This is not the point of Judaism.

3. Amos 2:6

4. Isaiah 1:23

Judaism does not exist so that we can make the world a better place. Nor does it exist so that we can bring the Messiah, or go to The World to Come. The very heart of Judaism is one single simple thing.

Judaism has always been about our relationship with Gd. Gd the Creator, Gd the Redeemer, Gd who freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his great book *God in Search of Man*, the entire Torah is a record of Gd's attempt to establish a relationship with human beings. This is the relationship that has become Judaism. This is why we are here. This is the purpose of Judaism.

This view of Judaism, of religion in general, fell out of favor at the beginning of modernity as people began to question traditional and oversimplified concepts of Gd. We should question those, and we should use our greater understanding to obtain a deeper and more complex view of Gd. As we make our way towards that understanding, we should keep in mind these basic things that we know to be true:

Gd is holy. Everything that is holy, that is sacred, is part of Gd and connected to Gd. Gd is the creator. So the beauty of the world and the complexity of life is an expression of Gd. Gd has a passionate desire to live in relationship with each and every person. So everyone is of value and everyone has an obligation to Gd which should affect how we live our lives. Gd is one. So we are related to every other person and to every living being through our relationship with the one Gd. Gd is infinite and eternal in ways we cannot fully understand. Therefore the meaning of our existence does not end with our

death. Gd cares about how we behave. Therefore everything we do has meaning, and we perform no action that is not noticed and judged.

So to repeat, the world is a holy place, and we are to live in relationship with that holiness. What we do matters, and how we behave has meaning. This affects how we live.

If we truly live in relationship with the Holy One, blessed be He, then we become those prophets we read about. If we believe that everyone was created b'tzelem Elokim, in the image of Gd, then we fight for the rights of those who have been denied those rights. If we believe that Gd cares for each person equally, then we must speak up when we see a system that allows some to keep millions of dollars while others cannot afford a place to live. If we believe that the world is a holy place, then we fight pollution and environmental degradation.

Tikkun Olam is not the point of Judaism. But it is the inevitable result of Judaism. We have a choice. If we accept Judaism we must live our lives in relationship with the sacred. If we don't, if we value our possessions and positions more than the holiness of the world, then we will not be filled with the need to make this world a better place. But then we will be the idol worshippers the Torah condemns. If we embrace the meaning of Judaism, and see this world as a holy place, if we see our decisions as important and meaningful, if we see every person as being of equal value, then we will behave in certain ways.

We will protect the environment. We will care for those who are suffering. We will do our best to avoid war. We will treat the refugee with respect. Not incidentally, this is exactly the way the Torah tells us to live. Over and over we hear that we are to take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Over and over we are told that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and therefore we must treat the stranger like a brother. Not incidentally, this is also basically the goal of those who also want to bring the Messiah or the messianic age. A world free of hunger, poverty, and illness. A world in which no one must leave home out of fear for her life. A world in which they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...and every man shall sit beneath his vine or fig tree and no one will make him afraid.⁵

This does not mean that the Torah, Gd forbid, tells us to vote for one political party or another. This does not mean that there is only one way to be a Jew in the world, only one way to try to make this world a better place. But it does mean we must lift up the fallen, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. It does mean we must treat the homeless and the immigrant and the refugee with respect, that we must give to all others the rights we would want for ourselves.

5. Micah 4:3-4

There is no dichotomy between pastor and prophet. There is no division between the world of the spirit and the world of the flesh. The Jew who keeps Shabbat and the Jew who protests the incarceration of immigrant children are saying the same thing. The Jew who keeps kosher and the Jew who marches against climate change are no different. They are both saying that this world is a holy place. They are both saying that everything we do matters. They are both living in relationship to the Holy Gd.

Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths.⁶ It is so holy that we may not do such mundane things as work, or even eat. We reach the same level of holiness as angels. It is the only day on which we wear a talis at night and say ‘Baruch shem kavod’ as loudly as we say the Sh’ma. This day will fill us with holiness. But we will not go back to our ordinary mundane lives after the sun goes down. We will leave this beautiful room with our bodies buzzing with holiness, and we will bring that holiness to everything we do. We will bind up wounds and we will heal the brokenhearted.⁷ We will do Tikkun Olam because we live in relationship to the Holy Gd. Because what we do matters. And because the whole world, all of it, is holy. Shanah tovah u’kdusha.

6. Leviticus 16:31

7. Psalm 147:3