

WHAT DO JEWS BELIEVE, (IF ANYTHING)?

I was trying to think of something profound and deeply spiritual to say this morning and nothing was coming. So, I did what most of us do when inspiration is lacking, I surfed the Internet for something to steal. I came across a discussion (or argument?) between Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and several esteemed scientists, including Professor Richard Dawkins, about whether G-d is true or not. Dawkins had positioned himself as the spokes person for the anti-G-d faction of the scientific community. They started talking about the Akeda, G-d's admonishment to Abraham that child sacrifice is never acceptable; and Rabbi Sacks was trying to convince Dawkins that it was true because it was meaningful. Professor Dawkins was saying that being meaningful doesn't make it true. For Rabbi Sacks, believing in G-d is at the central core of being Jewish. It was obvious very quickly that they were talking past each other, neither really hearing what the other was saying. But it did get me thinking, and since the next ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a time of serious introspection, it might be good to explore some aspects of Jewish identity. And ask the question, what do you have to believe, if anything, to be Jewish?

You certainly don't have to believe in G-d to belong to a synagogue. There are no litmus tests to belong here and lots of good reasons to belong that have nothing to do with belief. People join a synagogue for all sorts of reasons but the reason they stay is because they make friends there. But do we have any kind of shared belief? I have a rabbi friend who says he doesn't eat bacon, not because there is anything wrong with bacon. He imagines that bacon must be really delicious but G-d doesn't want him to eat bacon. Is there anybody here because he or she thinks G-d wants him or her to be here on the second day of Rosh Hashanah? Would G-d be angry at us if we were walking at Lake Paden instead? Maybe, but I doubt it. If you don't believe in G-d, then saying that G-d wants this or G-d doesn't want that, becomes absurd.

To be fair to Richard Dawking, he is not advocating moral anarchy but that moral decisions should not come from some higher power that doesn't exist. He acknowledges that religious stories seen as parable or allegory

can be very instructive but they are not true. It all depends on what you mean by truth. There's religious truth and scientific truth.

But getting back to my original question, do you have to believe anything to be Jewish? From a halachic perspective, if your mother's Jewish, you're Jewish. In fact the Reform Movement prides itself on a lack of religious dogma, although I think these days we have substituted a good deal of political dogma instead. You don't have to believe in G-d, but you do have to believe in gender-neutral bathrooms. The fault lines in our society are no longer theological, they're political.

When my wife became Jewish she was asked a lot of questions about what she learned, but no one ever asked what she believed. She had to know a lot but she didn't have to believe anything. James Koogle, the popular Jewish scholar doesn't believe in a transcendent deity yet he leads an observant life style. So what does he believe? Do you have to believe in G-d to skip the bacon? I suppose if you believe that Jesus was the son of G-d you've gone over the edge, but anything short of that seems to be OK. We've cast the net so wide, that anyone who wants to be caught will be caught. Every Jew in America today is a Jew-by-choice. Everyone is free to just walk away from it, if that's what they want; and many today do just that.

So why are we all here this morning? If it's because G-d wants us to be here then the problem is solved. If it's not because G-d wants us to be here then what is it? Is it tradition like FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, nostalgia for a world long gone that our parents and grand parents fled from? Is it a need for ritual in our lives? Or is it the community we've joined, sitting next to people we hardly know? But we do know that if we were sick they would bring us a meal or drive us to the doctor. Will standing here in our best, but most uncomfortable clothes, praying in a language we don't understand to a G-d we don't believe in enhance our spiritual lives? What do we need to believe in to have a spiritual life? Then what's the glue that holds us together if we no longer believe that G-d wants us to be here?

Of course being Reformed Jews we each have to come up with our own answers. So I'll give you some of my mine. Life is about commitments. I'm not saying life is only about commitments but if you don't make commitments you miss out on a lot of things. We make

commitments to our mates to stay with them through good times and bad, commitments to our children to raise them to adulthood, commitments to our community to participate in it's life. In the 60's we thought life was about doing your own thing. We were wrong. Life is about commitments. The opening line of the 10 Commandments is about commitments.

"I am Adonai your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods besides me."(Exodus 20, v2)

It's asking us to make a commitment to these principals. Without that preamble it's just the ten suggestions.

By being here today we've made a commitment to living a Jewish life. Being Jewish is not about belief. Who knows what the person next to you believes and who cares? It's about a commitment to living a Jewish life however we may interpret what that means.

It's also about being a part of the Jewish People. America is all about being an individual so if we list all the things that make up our identity, where do we place being Jewish on that list? Being a part of the Jewish People means we care about what happens to our fellow Jews, good and bad, because it reflexes on us. We take pride in the accomplishments of our people and experience shame when they stumble. It means we care what happens in Israel. It doesn't mean we agree with everything it's government does, but we know what happens in Israel matters to us. It means that we're always on the lookout for anti-Semitism no matter which direction it comes from.

Is there such a thing as a Jewish soul, or is it just another artificial construct? What are we doing here? What are we getting out of it? Was Rabbi Sacks on a fool's errand by trying to convince these great scientists that G-d exists? What's the point? You can't talk someone into believing something. Someone once said, "You have to have faith to have faith." You might also say you have to be Jewish to be Jewish. Or put another way, you have to be Jewish to experience being Jewish.

I realize I'm preaching to the choir. After all, we're the ones who've shown up on the second day of Rosh Hashanah no less. We must be the serious

ones so this might be a good time to challenge ourselves as to what we believe and don't believe. And does believing matter to being Jewish? Does G-d want us to be here?

Most Jews I know are very uncomfortable talking about G-d. I know I am. Either G-d is the angry father of the Torah that's always threatening to annihilate us, or the entity that Maimonides speaks of that's so undefinable, that anything you say about G-d is immediately a contradiction. It's either too much or not enough. Can you believe in Judaism without believing in G-d? Is God the central concept of being Jewish? Or is it the moral code that G-d wants us to commit to? Is it a personal, spiritual journey? Or being a part of the Jewish People that's at the core? Does being Jewish anchor us to the history of our People? Are we held together by a shared belief or are we held together by a shared commitment? Or maybe showing up is what really counts. Everything else is just castles in the sky.

I look at it this way. It's a little like the tooth fairy. Every time the child loses a tooth he puts it under his pillow and in the morning he finds a dollar that the tooth fairy has left. As he gets a little older he eventually stops believing in the tooth fairy but that doesn't stop him from still taking the dollar. I'm like that kid. Regardless of who's putting it under my pillow, I'm still taking that dollar.

SHANAH TOVAH, have a good, healthy, productive year.