

?למה/ Why Does Religion Matter

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro

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Temple Akiba, Culver City

In the mid 1990's, I served a small congregation as student rabbi in Great Falls, Montana. On the flight over from Cincinnati, I struck up a conversation with the guy sitting next to me. Now, I'm always a little guarded when people ask what I do when I'm on a plane. And in full disclosure, I often want to respond by saying, **"I work in a gefilta fish factory."**

But when I told him I was a student rabbi, he seized the opportunity to say, "I have a quick question. I braced myself, as quick questions don't always mean quick responses. "If there is a God, why do bad things happen to good people." I thought for a moment, and then responded, "Why not?"

It wasn't a satisfactory answer on my part. Nor did it acknowledge in any real way that this person was reaching out for guidance.

Now, that's not where our conversation ended. I asked him what prompted his question. He shared with me some of the very difficult and traumatic events that had plagued him over the past twelve months. As I listened, I realized that he

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had suffered in one year more than what anyone should endure in one hundred lifetimes.

I acknowledged that what was happening was, simply put, not fair.

The plane landed, and we parted ways. To this day, I wish I could have said something brilliant and insightful. I often try to justify that I was just a green student rabbi, without the full training in these life-questions.

But in truth, these difficult timeless dilemmas don't have simple answers.

There is a deep seeded theology that challenges our reality. It's the theology that if we pray hard enough, good things will happen. We find it throughout our Yom Kippur Liturgy and in many parts of the Bible as well. I believe it to be an imperfect theology - one that leads many people to ask, **Why does religion matter?**

Life experience often reveals a very different reality. I look out into our congregation. I see individuals whose spouses or parents died unexpectedly. I see parents who have had to bury their own children. I see parents who struggle with their children. And individuals who struggle to **have** children. There are family members whose loved ones are suffering cancer, Parkinson's, and

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Alzheimer's. Others are living with depression. There is mental illness. There is loneliness. And though many who suffer intellectually grasp that these afflictions are not as a result of their actions, still, we emotionally will ask, **“Why me?”**

“Did I not live my life the right way?”

It must be so hard, so hard to endure this liturgy of “Who shall live and who shall die.”

Friends, so many are searching for meaning. But often we are not finding the answers today in yesterday's paradigms. The theology doesn't always resonate. And if our responses to difficult life issues continue to perpetuate a flawed theology, then we will lose the future generations. Communities will be formed elsewhere. People are finding fewer compelling reasons to be part of organized Judaism.

When people are on the fence, considering whether to join the synagogue or not, it rarely has to do with the financial impact. Rather, it sounds like this:

“Rabbi, I'm an atheist, so being part of a religious institution really doesn't make sense.”

or

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“Rabbi, I find my spirituality when hiking. I don’t feel it during ritual prayer. Why should I join a Temple?”

NPR recently ran a story that asked young adults about their feelings with regard to organized religion. Here are what some of the respondents had to say:

Yusuf Ahmad, 33, raised Muslim, is now an atheist. His doubts set in as a child with sacred stories he just didn't believe. ... “Like the story of Abraham — his God tells him to sacrifice his son. Then he takes his son to sacrifice him, and he turns into a goat. I remember growing up, in like fifth [or] sixth grade I'd hear these stories and be like, 'That's crazy! Why would this guy do this? Just because he heard a voice in his head, he went to sacrifice his son and it turned into a goat?' There's no way that this happened. I wasn't buying it.”

Rigoberto Perez, 30, raised as Seventh-day Adventist: “When I was younger, my father drank a lot. There was abuse in the home. My brother committed suicide in 2001. So at some point you start to say, 'Why does all this stuff happen to people?' And if I pray and nothing good happens, is that supposed to be I'm being tried? Eventually that gets just too hard to believe anymore.”

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Another respondent had a different take-away. And it's this one that I hope resonates.....

Lizz Reeves, 23, raised by a Jewish mother and a Christian father. She lost a brother to cancer.

"I wanted so badly to believe in God and in heaven, and that's where he was going. I wanted to have some sort of purpose and meaning associated with his passing. And ultimately the more time I spent thinking about it, I realized the purpose and meaning of his life had nothing to do with heaven, but it had to do with how I could make choices in my life that give his life meaning. And that had a lot more weight with me than any kind of faith in anything else."¹

You see... Religion for us doesn't need to be vertical - between God and human. It's not a tower. Religion can be joining hands, one human to another, crossing the desert toward the promise of tomorrow. It's not easy, especially if we are in pain. But creating true meaning unfolds every time we accompany another soul on his or her journey.

I am reminded of a favorite passage from the Books of Kings, and I want to acknowledge Rabbi Harold Kushner for accentuating it in his book, The Nine Things I've Learned about Life. The Biblical setting: Elijah the prophet (the

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2013/01/15/169342349/more-young-people-are-moving-away-from-religion-but-why>

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same Elijah we sing about at the Passover Seder), is in despair because of corruption in Israel under **King Ahab**. So Elijah runs away to reconnect with God. **It's the biblical version of going to a retreat at Big Sur**. The passage teaches:

11 And he said, "Go out, and stand upon the mount before Adonai." And, behold, Adonai passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake;

12 And after the earthquake a fire; but Adonai was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

13 And it was so, when Elijah heard it that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice to him, and said, What are you doing here, Elijah?

The voice then tells Elijah he needs to go back to help the people through the difficult period.

In this past month, we have experienced devastating winds/ hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean. There have been horrific earthquakes in Mexico. Fires have erupted not far from us. Some might call these "acts of God." **But if those are acts of God, it is NOT the God I pray to.** Indeed, learning from our

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passage, God is not in the wind. God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire. God is the still, small voice, encouraging people - **US** - to go out and help rebuild the lives of those affected.²

You see, it's not enough to just listen to the voice and feel calm and spiritual. No - it's about allowing that voice to motivate us toward *tikkun olam*, rebuilding the world through our intervention.

This is why religion matters.

Before I came to Temple Akiba, I was the High Holy Day Rabbi for three weeks in Johannesburg, South Africa. I served the community of Hillbrow, which was once the center of Jewish culture in Joburg. But times change, and the neighborhood went downhill. It is now drug infested with a very high crime rate. But many in the Jewish community stayed put, and the congregation still serves a small number of mostly older adults and lower-income families.

The Chair of the congregation was Reva Forman, a wonderful, deep hearted, and eccentric woman. This is a coded way of saying she is a little *meshuga*! But she will be the first to admit it!

² Inspired by Harold Kushner's teaching in chapter three, "God Does Not Send the Problem; God Sends Us the Strength to Deal with the Problem"

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Every Shabbat, we offered prayers in the same Reform *siddur* most American congregations used at the time. The prayers included supplications to God to feed the hungry and protect the poor. We sang familiar songs, some with guitar, some with choir. At the conclusion of the service, most people would go home for a *Shabbos* meal.

But not Reva.

She would go out to her car and open the trunk to reveal bread and cheese and eggs. When she did, the homeless would line their way up the street and around the corner. One by one, Reva would hand out food.

I asked her, "Aren't you afraid?" She responded, "If anyone dares lay a hand on me, each of these souls will jump to my defense."

For Reva, religion was not about saying the prayers. That was theology. Religion was not about the feeling of the music. That was spirituality. For Reva, religion was about going out and making a difference in other people's lives.

Rabbi David Wolpe puts it best, as he shares:

Theology is what we believe.

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Spirituality is what we feel

Religion is what we do.³

Whenever I meet with a family in preparation for an upcoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah, I bring them into the sanctuary and place the Torah into the arms of each parent. I ask them to share the most important treasure of Judaism they want to hand down to their child. I ask this of both Jewish and non Jewish parents. The breadth of responses is powerful and inspiring:

Family

Learning

Asking questions

Social Justice

Survival

Israel

³ Inspired by words of Rabbi David Wolpe

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Commitment to the Jewish community.

Tikkun Olam.

In my 20 years in the rabbinate, I have never witnessed a parent say, “I want my child to be able to recite the Kiddush perfectly” or “I hope my child understands the importance of maintaining a kosher home.” While these may be hopes, they are not the core values.

Many years ago, **Fern Salka**, who was then the president of University Synagogue, asked me, “What is the difference between being a progressive Jew and being a good person? If the values are the same, why be Jewish? You don’t have to be Jewish to do *tikkun olam*.”

A powerful question ... I want to allow British Author, Alain de Botton, respond. He gave a Ted Talk entitled “Atheism 2.0.” The talk explains what religion can offer offer for Atheists that can’t be found by taking note of spring flowers or engaging in community service:

- 1) **Synchronized time** - namely, the opportunity to bond at specific rather than random times with a large community when we are all connected with a similar theme (like the holy days)

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- 2) **Repetition (or tradition).** Religion tells us the same story and prayers over and over. The story doesn't change. But we do. So it speaks to us differently every time. In a world where we all want the next big thing, we also have need for timelessness (hearing the cantor chant Kol Nidre)
- 3) **Guidance.** Even the most independent among us needs a system that can hold our hands through life's challenges. Often those who are most secular want to know about the specific rules with regard to the laws of mourning. They want to do it "right."
- 4) **Institutions/ Sacred space:** We all need a place to be together. It's no wonder that in the face of national tragedies on a universal level or Jewish targeting that hits close to home - our institutions give us a place to be together.

Judaism is our treasure trove of time, tradition, guidance, and sacred space.

When the world out there is in turmoil, we are here. And when we gather here - we learn how to best go out and face that turmoil.

This is why religion matters.

Our Torah teaches that when the Children of Israel stood at the foot of Sinai, ready to accept the covenant, they said, "*Na-aseh v'nishma/ We will do - and we will believe.*" It's no mistake that their unifying voice was in this order. For they

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were saying that the most important thing about being Jewish is in the doing. This comes before all else.

So we go out and do Judaism. We send letters to those who are sick. We celebrate with wedding couples. We play softball. We go on retreats. We send kids to Jewish summer camp. We laugh on Purim. We study on Shavuot. We struggle. We celebrate. And yes, we pray too.

One final story, shared by my college, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg:

“Levi Yitzchak found himself before the Creator, and he said, “God, you expect too much of Your people. We suffer and do our best. Please have compassion on us.”

God said, “You know, Levi Yitzchak, you have a point. I will be merciful.”

Levi Yitzchak realized that he had caught God in a great mood and decided to press his case. “God, why not save the world now? Bring the Messiah.”

God seemed opened to the idea. Levi Yitzchak knew he could save the world today, if he had just a few minutes to convince God.

But in the corner of his eye, Levi Yitzchak saw that, back on Earth at the shul, Samuel the grocer had fainted. He needed to eat. Samuel was not a

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particularly nice man. And he was stubborn. He would only eat when Levi Yitzchak concluded the service. But to do that, Levi Yitzchak's soul would have to return from heaven. He would not be able to convince God to save the world. But if Levi Yitzchak waited, he knew that Samuel would die.

Levi Yitzchak turned around and went back to Earth. Instead of saving the world, he returned to save one human[...]"⁴

This is why religions matters.

Friends, as we are on this journey of renewal together, let's allow the still, small Voice to guide us toward embracing one human soul at a time.

⁴ Excerpt From: Rabbi Edwin Goldberg, DHL. "Saying No and Letting Go."