

Sermon on the Pursuit of Relevance and Meaning
Rabbi David Jay Kaufman
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At the last biennial convention of the Union of Reform Judaism in San Diego, California, there was a panel discussion about inspiration. The members of the panel were Rabbi Laura Geller, Rabbi David Wolpe, and Pastor Rick Warren. Each shared his or her perspective on what inspires the members of his or her congregation. In essence, they talked about "Why we are who we are."

Each of their answers is relevant and meaningful. Each is in some way problematic. Yet, thinking about them together may help us to better understand the meaning of Judaism in our own lives. I will show how in some way all of their answers are important as we face the changes in our world and the changes in our own lives.

Let me begin with Rabbi Laura Geller. Rabbi Geller, the Senior Rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, CA was the third woman to be ordained as a rabbi by the Hebrew Union College. She is one of the leading rabbis of her generation. Rabbi Geller argued that what inspires members of her congregation is a desire for justice, for social action. Members of her congregation believe that being a Reform Jew means reaching out to others, doing Tikkun Olam.

The Modern Reform Jewish idea of Tikkun Olam is based in no small part on the teachings of one of our movement's best known scholars, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who taught at the Reform rabbinical seminary, Hebrew Union College for many years, though he was not truly a Reform Jew himself.

Rabbi Heschel taught that:

It is not enough to be concerned for the life to come. Our immediate concern must be with justice and compassion in life here and now, with human dignity, welfare, and security.

Abraham Joshua Heschel argued against the idea that we should be so concerned with the world to come that we ignore those actions that better this world, this life. He believed that we should stand in defense of human dignity and work for the welfare of all humanity. Heschel wanted us to be concerned with others and with making our world, this world, this life, a better place for all. For prospective rabbis entering Hebrew Union College in the late 1960s, Heschel's philosophy was a dominant influence.

The very purpose of Reform Judaism in the eyes of many came to be Tikkun Olam in the form of social action. It was our responsibility to make our world a better place for all. Reform Jews elevated women, admitting women to the college to study to become rabbis, protested wars, and fought against discrimination on the basis of race even as relations between the Jewish and black communities weakened after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King.

That said, the concept of social justice has played a prominent role throughout the history of American Reform Judaism. It did not suddenly appear during the 1960s. In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, essentially establishing the guidelines of Classical Reform Judaism, we find the basic principle of Tikkun Olam:

In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

In the 1937 Columbus Platform of Reform Judaism, social justice more or less as we know it today became a major tenet:

Social justice. Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations between warring classes on the basis of equity and justice, and the creation of conditions under which human personality may flourish. It pleads for the safeguarding of childhood against exploitation. It champions the cause of all who work and of their right to an adequate standard of living, as prior to the rights of property. Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect men against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.

Eventually, being a Reform Jew, as Rabbi Geller stated at the convention, came to mean helping the stranger. Our concern came to be primarily centered on what we can do to help others. This philosophy has led Jews to become leaders in a multitude of social action organizations and social service agencies beyond the Jewish community. Jewish benefactors, Jewish volunteers, Jewish time, energy, and resources find their way into a plethora of secular organizations in our communities. We feel good knowing that we have helped others. This is very much in line with the commandments in the Torah, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Remember the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Tikkun Olam is certainly a big part of what I believe Reform Judaism to be about as well. It is for this reason that I have worked to create the Rabbis' Mitzvah Corps, which will involve 6th through 8th graders and their families from both the Temple and Tifereth in doing various kinds of Mitzvot in our community and will occasionally involve the broader Jewish community in projects such as those once done through Operation Good Mensch not too many years ago. You will be hearing more details about the Rabbis' Mitzvah Corps and its projects in the weeks and months ahead. This idea is also why I work with numerous interfaith organizations and clergy members on social issues from health care to marriage equality, from racial and ethnic coexistence and cooperation to advocacy for the nation of Israel and education about anti-Jewish sentiments. To some extent, everything I do as a rabbi involves Tikkun Olam in some way.

Yet, the dominance of community based Tikkun Olam in Reform Judaism is also problematic for our Jewish communities. Why? That time, that energy, and those financial resources that are indeed helping make our broader communities better are leaving the Jewish community. Jewish events, Jewish organizations, Jewish programs are finding themselves short of volunteers, short of attendees, and short of financial backing. People who could be members of congregations and in former years would have been members, benefactors, and even leaders, too often feel that they can be good Jews while living completely outside of Jewish community life. This is a challenge for us. How do we ensure that our organizations continue into the future as healthy and vibrant places where the ideal of helping the stranger is a central theme, but wherein making our organizations healthy and vibrant places to practice and learn about Judaism is the primary one?

Rabbi David Wolpe, the Sr. Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, CA and perhaps the leading Conservative congregational rabbi today, believes that inspiration comes from collective effervescence, group energy, group spirituality. He leads services often attended by well over a thousand people at worship for Shabbat. Services at his congregation are a social gathering for hundreds upon hundreds of young Jewish adults in Los Angeles. The spirituality of the services comes from the group's singing and praying as one. Each individual Jew feels connected to something greater, the congregation at prayer. Inspiration comes not from helping the stranger through social action, though the congregation certainly does social action, but in immersing oneself into a group consciousness, sharing joy and sadness with each other.

Our Tradition has known this for millennia. This is one purpose of the minyan, the group of ten into which the presence of God comes. It has been long understood that being joyous or being sad alongside others magnifies the emotional effects.

All of us in some way have the ability to sense and adapt to group emotions. Seeing or hearing another cry in sadness may bring a tear to our eye. Have you ever started laughing because someone else was laughing and only then asked them what is so funny? Have you ever found yourself emotional at a sporting event? To some extent and often to a great extent, we are affected by the emotions in our environment, joy, sadness, stress, concern, devotion, caring, anger and elation.

The effects of collective emotions can be intensely powerful and have been manipulated by all of the charismatic leaders in history, all those who have addressed throngs of admirers. Many such leaders even create grand scale events so that the effects of collective emotions are magnified. Some psychologists believe the effect of the collective upon

individuals to be a form of hypnosis in which people may act differently than they would outside of the group. The emotions of the group can overwhelm the emotions of the individual.

While experiencing the highs of a group consciousness can be a wonderful and inspiring experience, there are tremendous negatives connected to this kind of inspiration. It is exactly this kind of inspiration which has resulted in mob actions against individuals and against entire communities historically. Following communal gatherings and rousing speeches, often done with religious overtones, time and time again angry mobs have been motivated to act in ways that they might not have otherwise. Our people have too often been the target of such inspired mobs.

While collective effervescence can elevate a worship experience tremendously, it is difficult to achieve in our relatively small and diverse community. We tend to be most effective at creating collective effervescence with music. However, even song are most effective when we invest emotions in them. For example, one of the most emotionally powerful songs sung on September 11, 2001, when we were all anxious and afraid, in fear of more violence, was Oseh Shalom. We were emotionally invested in a desire for peace and in singing together, that emotion was magnified. Saying the Kaddish prayer together with others in mourning is also a way to experience collective effervescence, as their emotions become our emotions.

The most important thing, however, is that people simply be present. There has to be a "collective" for there to be collective effervescence. We need our Jews in the pews.

Pastor Rick Warren, author of the best-selling book The Purpose driven life and the Sr. Pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California doesn't have Jews in his pews, but they are filled with his church's 22,000 Christian members

on a weekly basis and his book has sold 25 million copies. Pastor Warren spoke to those in attendance at the URJ convention about purpose. Rick Warren's argument is essentially that what inspires people is that which is personally meaningful to them. His message is largely a message of enhancing self-esteem through the use of some aspects of Christian theology and an understanding of a personal relationship with God.

As Jews, we often feel a bit squeamish when we hear that phrase, "personal relationship with God." For many of us, it carries significant Christian overtones. Yet, it is not entirely foreign to Jewish thought.

The prophet Micah tells us, "God has shown you what is good and what Adonai requires of you: only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" That at least has overtones of a "personal relationship with God."

Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, had a similar theory, he called it "I – Thou." Martin Buber believed that if we are open to having a relationship with God and do not pursue it, God would eventually connect with us. How this would be done is different for each individual.

Practically speaking, however, since many today find it difficult or awkward to engage in religious activities, either because of time constraints or a limited understanding of Jewish traditions, the opportunities for such a relationship to develop for today's Jews without "seeking it" in some fashion are rare. We are not very good at "walking with God" to use the words of Micah.

Moreover, few of today's Jews would say that seeking a relationship with God is the primary purpose of their involvement in congregational life, though it may be on their list. Most Jews come to congregations for other reasons such as a desire for community or the education of their children.

In my view of Reform Judaism, it is not collective effervescence or social action that truly inspires, though they have an impact individually, but something that includes both and also, to a degree, a greater purpose. It is a desire to be in relationship with others: to be significant to others, to be relevant to others, to be loved and cared for by others, that truly inspires us. Martin Buber's teachings are once again relevant, not as they relate to God, but as his I-Thou philosophy is applied to our relationships with others.

Martin Buber taught that:

When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying: 'Have faith and take your troubles to God!' Act instead as if there were no God, as though there were only one person in all the world who could help—only yourself.

The Mission of Israel, the Jewish people, to be an Or L'goyim, a Light unto the Nations, was long the answer when Reform Jews were asked of our purpose. We were to teach and demonstrate the way of righteousness to the world. It was a mission that made meaningful our dispersion as a people, for we could better instruct all of humanity while dispersed among the nations of the world. It was also a mission, a purpose, not only for all of us together, but for each of us individually. We could conduct this mission in our Temples, but also in our places of business, our social sphere, and our homes. The Mission made being a Jew in the modern world something special, not because of blessings uniquely put upon us, but because of an ideal of purpose, a purpose to better our world.

To quote Robert Byrne, author and chess grandmaster, "The purpose of life is a life of purpose."

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson said it a different way, "There is a fundamental human need for context, a need for meaning, a larger narrative in which our own personal story makes sense."

When we interact with others in the real world, seeing them for who they are, for what they are, for where they are—and we figure out how to engage in relationship with them, whether it is, as Rabbi Geller would suggest, through helping to solve issues of social justice and social righteousness; whether it is, as Rabbi Wolpe would suggest, through joining them in happiness or sadness to celebrate with them or offer support; or it is to use the interaction to better ourselves, to be the best we can be—we have found purpose, we have found meaning, we have found relevance.

Abraham Joshua Heschel offered what I feel is an appropriate conclusion to this argument. He said, "For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship of the people Israel."

We have to be there for each other.

May we strive to be in relationship with others: to be significant to others – present and noticed in their lives, to be relevant to others – helping, caring, supporting, and loving them, and in turn may we be loved and cared for by others. That is what a Jewish congregation is all about.

Good Yom Tov.