

Believing, Behaving, and Ritualizing

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One of the quirks I have experienced with Jan's studies at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion is that the young professors who began teaching while I was a student are now the senior faculty if not those who are retiring.

Rabbi Lawrence (Larry) Hoffman is one of the teachers I have always viewed as a mentor, was my thesis advisor, and is now retiring from active teaching. Fortunately, Jan and other rabbinical and cantorial students have one more course that he is concluding this year. The irony is, Jan, who is taking this course in liturgy was once hired by Rabbi Hoffman to teach entering cantorial students Hebrew in a summer program before the cantors were required to study in Israel in the first-year program. He also engaged Jan to teach at a Chavurah, a small group of families who joined together less formally than a synagogue. His innovative thinking regarding liturgy and synagogue life has helped to teach us the need to face the realities of

modernity, often asking the question, "What will be meaningful to Jews in this day and age?" The answers, and I emphasize the plural **answers**, is helping to keep relevance in Jewish life, learning from and cherishing the past but also living in the present.

In one of the volumes in his series of books on the themes and liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, All the World: Universalism and Particularism and the High Holy Days, in his essay, "Why Be Jewish? The Universalist Message of the High Holy Days" he suggests that (p16) humans "make ourselves present in three profound ways - **believing, behaving, and ritualizing...**" Of the three it seems that the majority of Jews generally are most comfortable with the behavioral mode, rather than believing. The reason given by many is that Judaism is based on הלכה, the path of laws of behavior rather than being a religion of belief. What we do generally precedes what we believe. I remember once being told by an Orthodox rabbi who was my teacher in Hebrew High School, to observe the practices and belief would come later. That works for some but is not the case for others. Perhaps we

might reflect during this holy day or in its aftermath as to what are our beliefs, especially in regard to God? The exercise in and of itself is important. I think it might be more important than the answer we come up with, which may be the same or different from an answer we have had at other times.

For many in the Orthodox world and beyond, believing is important. Yet, we find in the non-Orthodox world, which is presently the overwhelming majority of Jews, there is atheism, agnosticism, minimal belief, foxhole faith, and "I just don't think about it." None of these ways of thinking erases anyone from the rolls of who is a Jew. Being a Jew is to be part of the people Israel, which means according to the origin of the word, those who struggle with God, which might mean difficulty in believing or no belief at all.

However, as Hoffman posits, the "Believing mode... [involves the] human propensity to speak the deepest truths that we hold about existence." It includes, "what we believe about God which can be called

theology, human nature which some refer to as religious anthropology, and the universe at large referred to as cosmology."

Here are some of the questions many of us might have pondered at some time in our lives.

Is there a God? If so, does God care about what we do?

... Is God real in our lives?

Do we think people are genuinely good at heart? Or are they untrustworthy?

Are they perfectible or, at least able to change for the better?

Is the world a good place into which to be born, or would it be better not to have been born at all?

Is progress possible? If so, does God have anything to do with it?

Is the universe designed so that moral improvement naturally occurs over time? If not, is it the human condition to struggle against all odds to make the world better anyway?"

The answers to these questions are all part of what each of us believes. The answers we have may change at various times. There are

no given right or wrong answers. They all are rooted in what one believes. Struggling with these questions is fundamental to our being Jewish. Hoffman posits, "... What we ultimately think about God, people, and the world - defines our deepest sense of who we are, ..."

Behaving is the second of the three factors in how we make ourselves present as Jews, according to Hoffman. How do we live our lives? This can be anything from what foods we eat, what associations we make, what organizations we belong to, what causes we work for, or even as mundane for some as how we put on our shoes and socks.

You might not be aware but there is actually a halachic way for one to put on their shoes. Here is the order of in putting on ones shoes and tying them according to the Shulchan Arukh (*Orach Hayim 2:4*)

When putting on shoes one is to honor one's right side and therefore one is to first place on the right shoe without tying the laces, and only then put on the left shoe. If one's shoes have laces then put on his right shoe without tying it, and then put on the left shoe.

Then tie the left shoe and return and tie the right shoe. If one's shoes do not have laces one is to precede by placing on the right prior to the left shoe. When removing shoes from one's feet one is to first remove the left shoe, as this gives honor to the right.

There are even further instructions. One may not place the left shoe on the right foot and the right shoe on the left foot. One who does so draws down enmity and causes one to lose his livelihood. Some are stringent to apply the same law to socks and hence they did not switch socks to different feet until after the socks were washed.

These laws also apply to women, except in regard to tying the shoe because the precedence of tying left first is because generally right-handed men put the tefillin on the left arm and women, in most Orthodox circles, do not don tefillin. In case you're wondering the same custom applies to velcro or any other form of fastening one's shoe.

Rest assured I am not recommending this observance as an important part of how I imagine most of us express our Jewish identities. It is

simply an example of how far some people take what behaviors we do as Jews.

I should mention that one of the reasons given for tying the left shoe first after putting on the right shoe first is to give the inanimate shoe equal status. This is similar to the reason we cover the challah on the Shabbat or holiday table. Since it is the last to be blessed we do not want it to feel the slight or be embarrassed. This custom is often used to emphasize the importance of not embarrassing anyone, even an inanimate object, a loaf of bread.

In the past Jewish identity was a given. There was no need to ask, "Why be Jewish?" Today, for many, according to Hoffman the "challenge of our time is that the behavioral mode...is relevant only after a prior decision to affirm Jewish identity in the first place." Belief, is often an area not always comfortable for many Jews.

This brings us to the third of the three modes of how we present ourselves as Jews, ritual.

For some Jews the realm of ritual does not hold the same principle as the belief mode. We can do rituals seemingly with all belief absent from our acts, not giving it any thought at the time. Think of those who join in the Seder or other family holiday meals. Many people who can be defined as Jews, by their own self-identification or biological status may light the Chanukiah to celebrate the holiday but neither believe in God or the miracle. Some attend worship services and even recite prayers by rote or sing songs without any belief. There is no judgement being attached to these observations. This is one of the reasons the rabbis desire a combination of "keva" fixed prayers to be done with "kavannah," intentionality. The service words might remain the same, but we should be careful not to fall into reciting them by mechanically.

I can say that at times, without thinking deeply I will recite a prayer out of a ritual mode and not a belief mode. In the past when I grew up in my Conservative synagogue I sang about the rituals of sacrifice, וְבִיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, שְׁנֵי כִבְשִׁים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה תְּמִימִים, וְשְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרֵנִים סֵלֶת מִנְחָה

בְּלוּלָהּ בַּשֶּׁמֶן וְנִסְכּוֹ: on the Shabbat two yearling lambs unblemished with two tenths of a measure of fine flour mixed with oil as a meal offering... la, la, la.

I remember singing this with gusto and yet I had no desire to return to the ancient sacrificial system or even commemorate it in prayerful song. And these days when we sing the traditional version of Aleinu there are words that make me uncomfortable. I do not believe that we are **not** part of the entire human family even with our unique heritage. And yet, I sing this prayer often without thinking of the message. Other times I try to reinterpret realizing that in some ways we are different; not better or superior, just different.

Like these prayers, there are many ritualized demonstrations of identity such as I mentioned before, Chanukah candle lighting, attending the Seder, etc. Hoffman's sense is that, "They symbolize the fact that we choose to be Jewish, but simultaneously, they symbolize an underlying reason for so choosing." They "allude to... beliefs that underlie the behavior..."

His thinking is that when Prayers are "morally offensive" often we choose to take them out of the book, change the words, or simply not recite them. That was the case when the reference in Aleinu was that others payed homage and worshipped emptiness and gods who could not save them. This was a direct statement of negating other religions and their beliefs; an idea we should find offensive.

When we see words that are not offensive but in opposition to our literal beliefs we might preserve them, look for a deeper or alternative meaning, and say them in what Hoffman calls a "ritual mode," rather than a "belief mode."

Hoffman describes ritual in the following ways: "Ritual is the regularized affirmation of order that matters..."

Ritual is a sacred drama of our fondest aspirations: what we were, what we are, and what we hope to be.

Ritual provides the exclamation points for our lives, more than it does the periods.

Ritual is the wrapping that makes the outrageous ideas believable.”

Ritual can also be viewed as the possibility of affirmation of transcendent Jewish purpose.

A Rabbi recounted this story: It seems to demonstrate an action that might at first seem to be based on belief but is more connected with a less religious part of the ritual.

The rabbi wrote: With all the instant messaging and texting lingo going around - with abbreviations like "LOL" and "OMG" and "BTW" - I asked a young lady named Kaila if she would be going to shul this Shabbat, and she replied to me "JFK."

"JFK? Is that the airport? What does that mean?", I asked.

Kaila answered politely, JFK, "Just for Kiddush."

We come here today to participate in a service or worship experience. We come for many reasons. (Today no one is here for the Kiddush.) Some come out of habit. Others to be with the community on the holiest day of the year. Others come to reflect on their behavior and dedicate themselves towards self-improvement. And many come to participate in what we refer to as prayer.

In an article entitled "The Prayer for the State of Israel," Rabbi Dalia Marx, professor at HUC Jerusalem wrote the following:

"Prayer is conversation. Primarily we speak with God, but we also converse with other people, both those in our community and those outside of it. We even communicate indirectly with those who are not part of our people and religion - although they are probably not aware of our discourse and indeed, need not be, because the statements we make to or about them are intended for our own benefit as much as for theirs."

Yes, we are here, but why? For many Jews today, especially in the younger generation of adults an important question arises. "Why be Jewish?" One answer derived from Hoffman's teaching is, "We Jews are people who stand not only for ourselves and our own destiny but also for the greater purpose of humankind as a whole. Were the Jewish people not to exist in the world, the world would be impoverished. ...We continue to impact humanity as a whole because - at least in our ritual moments - we come to believe that God put us here to do just that. We have a mission in the world, not to convert it but to better it..."

Whether we present ourselves as Jews through belief, behavior, or ritual we all know there are many paths to being Jewish and each of us must find our own way.