

## Yom Kippur Sermon 2014 – Rabbi Edward Elkin

### *Imagine*

It was 1984, and I was a first year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. I hadn't grown up in the Reform movement, but for a variety of reasons had chosen to attend the Reform movement seminary. So that first year was not only my initiation into intensive study of classic Jewish texts, it was also my initiation into the world of liberal Jewish ritual. One of the things we had to each take a turn doing that year was to lead services, not an unreasonable expectation for aspiring rabbis. Some of us leaned more traditional, and used the opportunity to hone the skill of leading the Hebrew prayers in the siddur. Others in the class leaned more creative, and in keeping with the Reform openness to liturgical change, they brought in all kinds of alternative poetry and music when it was their turn to lead. One of my classmates, Steve, was on the more creative side. He played guitar, which I had quickly learned was almost *de rigueur* for those who had grown up in the movement. And in the middle of Shaharit, he took out his guitar and led us in a group singing of John Lennon's "Imagine". Everybody knew the song of course, and in a way its vision of a better world is entirely in keeping with themes of many of our traditional prayers, which is why Steve had chosen to include it.

But if you think about the actual words, then the image of a group of rabbinical students singing this song during a prayer service becomes more than a little ironic. For what is Lennon's vision of a better world? What is he "imagining" in this song? He mentions a few things, actually, if you can call up the lyrics in your mind. No heaven, no hell – okay, our Jewish tradition is anyway a bit vague on this topic, so that's okay. Nothing to kill or die for, people living in peace – pretty uncontroversial: there are many places in Scripture and in our traditional liturgy which express a similarly fervent desire for shalom. No possessions – perhaps a little communist for our taste but linked in as it is in the song with no greed or hunger, it seemed like a vision of Tikkun Olam we could get behind. But then there's that one line that a lot of us got stuck on and which occasioned much fascinating discussion after services that day and on ensuing days as well – you can probably guess it. "No religion too". There we were, a group of rabbinical students, singing a song in the context of a religious service, a song in which the vision of the world being at peace and living as one, is a world in which there is -- no religion. Now, how weird is that?

Those of us who felt uncomfortable with the lyric asked ourselves – was our reservation only our fear that a world with no religion would probably have rather grim employment prospects for rabbis? I'd like to think that it wasn't

only self-interest at play. Steve's choice of song raised one of the most fundamental issues of modern life – at the end of the day, is religion a force for good or for evil in the world? Lennon clearly saw it as the latter, and there's plenty of empirical data to back up that point of view, from history and up to today's headlines – from ISIS to the Taliban to Boko Haram to sexual predator priests to the Jewish murderers of that Palestinian teen in Israel this past summer – we all know that examples of violence and corruption and true evil abound within every religious community.

This sorry record may at least partly account for the fact that according to the much talked about Pew study of the American Jewish community released last year, it seems that many Jews, like their fellow Americans, are turning away from religion. We don't have comparable stats for our side of the border, but even if the numbers turn out to be bit different, let's examine the broader phenomenon.

This is the statistic that drew many of the headlines: the fastest-growing group in the Jewish community are those who say they have "no religion." There's a clear generational trend here. 93% of Jews born before 1928 identify as Jewish "by religion". But of those born after 1980, 68% identify as Jewish by religion; while 32%, *about a third of all Jews in this age cohort*, say they have "no religion". The trend seems to be clear, and it seems to be going John Lennon's way.

Now I'm well acquainted with Jews who say they have no religion, or are not religious. I bet you are, too. The Narayever, like many shuls, is full of such people. Surprisingly, a fair number even come to services. Don't look now, but some of those Jews who say they aren't religious may even be in this room right now, on Yom Kippur, our most religious day of the year -- a choice at least as ironic as seminarians singing "Imagine" in the middle of davening Shaharit! They're here, you're here, I imagine, because like many of those who responded to the Pew study, you still consider yourselves Jewish, and the quest for Jewish meaning and Jewish community is still important to you. Those who say they have no religion or are not religious still appear to have a desire for something else. Is it a sense of ultimate purpose, something that is larger than one's "sovereign self"<sup>1</sup>?

Following John Donne's classic metaphor, few of us actually want to be an island, entirely of ourselves. We want to be a piece of the continent, a part of the main.<sup>2</sup> But there's a hitch. Most of us don't want to be told what to do or what to believe, and we're as wary as John Lennon of the price the world

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<sup>1</sup> Eisen and Cohen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne "No Man is an Island"

has paid and continues to pay to further the divisive or violent agendas of many who claim to speak in the name of religion. If their actions are what it means to be part of a particular religion, then perhaps the answer is to reject religion and identify with the whole human race – so we can all, to quote the song again, “live as one”. And there is something attractive about that vision, isn’t there? For aren’t we all basically the same? Every human being has the same fundamental needs and wants, don’t we? We all get born, we all get sick, we all die. In between, we all laugh and grieve, work and play, build homes and families, deal with our challenges and losses.<sup>3</sup> Even our spiritual experiences, writes noted atheist Sam Harris in his most recent book Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion, cross cultures and specific religious traditions. Descriptions of experiences of self-transcendence and altered states of consciousness are remarkably similar across the normal human boundaries of culture, geography, language, and religion. Techniques of meditation and contemplation are also widely shared around the world and across generations. In the context of all those deep similarities, isn’t it true that it is misguided to focus on the kind of differences which religions tend to make a big fuss about, differences which are at the end of the day pretty superficial, differences which, when we focus on them will only serve to make it easier for us to hurt each other?

And yet, despite all the awful things we’ve done to each other in the name of religious difference, here we are, a full house in shul today, people who say they’re religious and people who insist that they’re not, all of us here, and by our presence strongly affirming our difference – no? Jews comprise about 1% of the Canadian population – on these holy days, our difference from the other 99% is highlighted more than on any other days of the year. We are here, affirming our sense of comfort with people who are in many ways, if not all, “like us”. Deriving pleasure from being part of a singular people who have a long fascinating history and a rich and varied culture. Singing familiar tunes and even subjecting ourselves to sitting through a rabbi’s sermon. Having a sense of belonging. Observing the fast? Well, not everyone, I’m sure, but lots of you. For those who believe that God commanded us to observe this holiday in this way, it makes sense. For those who don’t, there’s a puzzle here -- and that’s okay. We are all in many ways contradictory, and utter consistency is not the goal. But I thought this Yom Kippur that it might be of interest to try and tease out a little bit what’s going on here. Why do some religious people buy into the notion that a world without religion would be a better world? And why would a self-defined non-religious person attend services on Yom Kippur? These questions are two sides of the same coin -- they share a common discomfort with the role religion plays in the world, coupled with an unwillingness to let it go.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoffmann, p.17.

Part of the answer has to do with what I see as a misunderstanding of the relationship between universalism and particularism. Most of us associate our Jewish identity with particularism. We know we are Jews and we know we are human beings, so we assume that our particularistic identity is as a Jew, and our universalistic identity is as a human being. But while that division may make intuitive sense, I think it's actually rather misleading. For it's not that Judaism is about particularism. Judaism actually encompasses within it *both* universalism and particularism. It's not that as Jews we owe allegiance to the Jewish people, and as human beings we take responsibility for all of humankind. As Rabbi Lawrence Hoffmann writes, Judaism *itself* mandates both the observance of the particular traditions and commandments of our people's covenant with God, and the universalistic task of effecting God's will for justice and goodness throughout all of God's world.<sup>4</sup> We have a mission to the world, not to convert it as some other religions have aspired to -- but to better it. In fact, we don't only *imagine* a better world – as Jews, we need to do our part to achieve it. This is the universalistic message of this very particularistic High Holy Day service. Look at the *Al Het* confessional that is recited so often on Yom Kippur – of all the sins that the rabbis could have chosen to include, not a single one can be described as Jewishly particularistic, there's nothing like “*Al Het* that I didn't keep kosher. *Al Het* that I didn't keep Shabbes.” In this *vidui* section of the Yom Kippur liturgy, the rabbis gave us Jewish language to help us engage with the moral and ethical demands all human beings face, not just Jews. And our concern for the wider world could not be more clearly expressed than in the book the rabbis selected as the haftarah for Yom Kippur afternoon – Jonah, in which the prophet is sent on a mission to warn the people of Nineveh, capital of Israel's great enemy Assyria, of their impending doom, thus saving them from that doom.

In our generation, particularism – whether of the religious, or ethnic, or nationalistic variety -- has gotten a bad name for all kinds of very valid reasons. But it is not by losing our identity and becoming pure universalists that we will overcome the ethical problems associated with particularism. We have to form attachments to particular groups, that is our nature. We all have groups to which we belong – groups of family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, fans of the same team or artist, on-line communities – some grouping of people, some subset of humanity, where we feel we belong and to which we consider ourselves accountable. If someone, in the name of universalism, decided that they wouldn't be part of any group, the result would be that they would be completely alone, and most of us would consider that person pathological in some way. The vast majority of us

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<sup>4</sup> All the World, p.18.

healthily cast our lot in with various particularities -- we just have to decide which ones draw our allegiance and our energy, and how our membership in that particularity affects our relationship with others who are not a part of it. So as appealing as universalism may be on one level, we realize that no one can actually be purely universal, any more than we can speak, without speaking a particular language.

So it is not by dissolving religions that we are going to solve the problems of particularism and achieve a better world. We need rather to *deepen* our connection to our own religion, make it even more authentically ours through study and participation and commitment. If we take that deepening process seriously, what will keep us from becoming ISIS? I'm actually not terribly worried about that with the crowd who attends the Narayever, but if we want a theoretical grounding for our religiously tolerant stance, then the key is that even as we advance in our knowledge of and commitment to our own group and our own traditions, at the same time we accept and acknowledge its limitations, thus making room for the dignity and truth of the other. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writes, "The broken truth is the future of truth in a broken world." After the Shoah, after all the horrors that have been committed in our time, we need to recognize that there is no truth so whole, as a broken truth.

No one tradition has all the answers. Like other truths, our Jewish truth is a broken truth. We need to be able to say that with honesty and humility, but we can also say it with some relief because it means that our particular slice of human particularity doesn't have to shoulder the burden of carrying all the wisdom that humankind possesses. There is so much that we still don't understand. I've been thinking lately about some of the great riddles of the past year – among them, how can one of the great comedic talents of the generation, who brought joy and laughter to so many millions, have been plagued by such a depth of sadness and despair as to take his own life? How can we continue to pour more carbon into the atmosphere, year after year, knowing that we are placing our children and grandchildren's world in such grave peril? What are our obligations, and how do we manage our fears, when a horrific contagious disease spreads throughout one of the parts of the world already suffering the ravages of war and poverty? What can we do about an economy in which the rich seem to inexorably get richer and the poor poorer? How do we as individuals and as a society fulfill our obligation of *אל תשליכני לעת זקנה* – "do not cast me off in my old age" when our demographic profile is aging so rapidly, straining resources and raising excruciating ethical dilemmas? What is ubiquitous technology doing to the human soul?

There are fundamental human questions here, spiritual questions. Judaism on its own doesn't have all the answers. Neither does any other single culture, religion, or tradition. But contra Lennon, I'd say the answer isn't to eradicate our particularities as a means of resolving our conflicts and dilemmas -- it's rather to embrace those particularities, nurture them, develop them -- both for the sake of the group itself and so that each particularity can add its unique voice to the ongoing human project. Just as the world benefits from genetic diversity, so too does human society benefit from religious and cultural diversity. We Jews have, in my completely unbiased opinion, contributed a great deal to the world already in our 4,000 year history. I believe our little slice of human particularity has a great deal more left to contribute, if we ourselves have the strength and the commitment and the faith to keep it going in the face of all the assimilatory pressures of the contemporary world, in the face of the tendency to cynicism and pessimism which sap us of the joy and excitement and openness and hope which we need in order to both develop our own community, and work for change in the wider world.

Many of us encounter Judaism as a set of inexplicable rules: do's and don'ts, sits and stands. I can't deny that our tradition has a lot of rules -- about what we eat and don't eat, what we may do on certain days and not on others, how many times per day we need to pray, etc. That was the instinct of both the Torah and the rabbis as to how to help people actualize their membership in the Jewish covenant with God -- give 'em lots of rules. Many in our community experience these rules as being irrelevant or superficial or boring. Even if we acknowledge the historical role these rules have had in preserving our people across the generations, is that enough to move us to observe them today? For some of us, yes. Some of us derive spiritual joy very naturally from observing the mitzvot which govern our lives as members of a covenant with God. Others of us have come to see the rules as inert, or dead.<sup>5</sup> If that's you, at this time in your life, then I urge you this Yom Kippur to look below what you see as dead skin and find that thriving organism underneath -- it is there for you to grasp, to embrace, to be nurtured by, and challenged by in the year ahead. In the process, it's possible the skin will come to look and feel beautiful and life-giving as well. Yom Kippur itself, if we take it seriously, challenges us to think about the important and universal themes of forgiveness, the potential for renewal, and our own mortality. Its demands on our are heavy, but ultimately rewarding. Or maybe you can start with Sukkot next week, a beautiful holiday, one of the most joyful holidays on our Jewish calendar. If you're used to observing the festival, find a new meaning or interpretation of it this year that will deepen your experience of it. If you're not used to observing

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Michaels, Forward September 12, 2014.

Sukkot, how about giving it a try? The rituals of Sukkot are old, but powerful, and in many ways the themes are quite contemporary. See what it feels like to pick up a lulav and an etrog, or to take a meal in a sukkah. And Shabbat, which we are also celebrating today, neatly straddles the universal-particular tension in its dual identity as זכרון למעשה בראשית and זכר ליציאת מצריים. Wherever we are on the spectrum of observance and Jewish knowledge, there's always room to grow and learn. I've certainly been doing so throughout the 30 years since I started rabbinical school.

Religion doesn't automatically elevate us, that's for sure. In fact, we know it can also debase us if we let it. But if we are open to religion's life affirming source, and if we are humble about our understanding of it, then religion, in our case our Jewish religion, can challenge us in a positive way to be better than we are. And I think that's why we're here. Tonight is the night (*or – today is the day*) to ask ourselves the questions of Yom Kippur: As the new year of 5775 stretches out before us, who will make Judaism live, and who will not? Who among us will keep our precious legacy alive, to share with all the world through our word and deed, and in which homes and families will the flame die out? Who shall rise up to teach our children, and our children's children, the laws of Israel and the testimonies of Jacob? Who will break the chain, and who will make it stronger – *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation? <sup>6</sup>

Let's indeed imagine a better world. With apologies to John Lennon *alav hashalom*, I conclude with my personal version of *Imagine* -- one that expresses my own sense of the right combination of particular and universal for our time. Maybe a Yom Kippur spiritual exercise could be to think about and discuss with others what your own version would be, and what you can do to achieve it.

Imagine there's no boredom, it's easy if you try.  
Jewish learning inspires us, for we can always ask "why?".  
Imagine all the people, living life in Brit.

Imagine no religious hatred, it isn't hard to do.  
So much to live for, thriving religions too.  
Imagine all the people, living life in peace.

Imagine feeling part of the community, I wonder if you can.  
God's presence gives insight, to every tribe and clan  
Imagine every people, sharing its wisdom with all the world

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Janet Marder, Rosh Hashanah sermon 2013.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.  
Let's join together in all our diversity, and a great new world will have begun.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.