

Becoming Religious in 5783

Rosh Hashanah Morning, 1 Tishrei

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I want to begin by asking you all a question...don't worry, there's no wrong answer. No judgment...*I mean it is the Day of Judgment, but I'm not the Judge!* The question is how many of you consider yourselves to be "religious," and how many of you consider yourselves to be "spiritual?" By a show of hands, how many of you would describe yourself as a "religious person?" "How about a "spiritual person?" How about both?!

If we didn't all have Rosh Hashanah lunch to get to in a little while, I would ask you how you define those words...Or we could play that game where you tell me the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word "religious" or "spiritual." My guess is that "religious" sounds more institutional while "spiritual" is perhaps more personal. "Religious" is dogmatic, while "spiritual" is more open minded. "Religion" is often associated with rules, regulations, and rituals while "spirituality" is individual, intimate, and internal. "Religious people" are told how to behave and maybe even how to think, while a "spiritual person" is guided by their soul and inner life. Does any of that sound familiar to you?

I would like to ask you to do me a favor. For the next 10 or 15 minutes, I want you to just archive all of that. Just like on your iPhone, just select all, and then archive all of those associations of religious and spiritual we just listed. Whether you delete them permanently or not depends on how persuasive this sermon is!

Do you remember that song, *Dem Bones*?

Dem bones, dem bones dem dry bones, dem bones dem bones dem dry bones now hear the word of the Lord...

That song, it's actually an old spiritual, was inspired by Ezekiel chapter 37, where the Hebrew prophet imagines the Jewish people as a desolate valley of dry bones, but miraculously they come together, and the Jewish people returns to life after a long and bitter exile. And so it goes...

Well, your toe bone connected to your foot bone

Your foot bone connected to your heel bone

Your heel bone connected to your ankle bone, and so on all the way up to your “head bone!”

How, in fact, are bones connected to one another? The song doesn't include that detail. The science teachers and health care professionals in the room will tell you that bones don't just connect as if they were magnets. They're not screwed together like nuts and bolts either. There is a connective tissue that binds every bone in your body to each other, and that connective tissue is called **ligaments**. Your knees, ankles, elbows, shoulders are all wrapped in that tough elastic tissue that holds your bones together and gives you the flexibility to move and to bend. Turns out that the word ligament comes from the very same Latin root as the word Religion. The letters *l.i.g.*, that these two words share, is their common meaning. *Ligare* or *Religare* means to bind together...

-“Ligature” or “ligation” in medicine is the suturing or binding of a tube or hollow structure in your body.

-A “ligature” is that metal device that holds the wooden reed to the mouthpiece of a woodwind instrument.

-Did you know that the origin of the ampersand, that squiggly grammatical symbol [&] is the ligature of the letters e and t, those two letters spelling the Latin word for “and.” A “grammatical ligature” is literally the binding or combining of two letters together.

-In chanting, a “ligature” is the combining of two notes in a single syllable.

And what I want you to consider today, my friends, is that religion, coming from that same root, is what binds or holds *people* together. It's the reason we are all here today. And a religious Jew, is someone who feels bound by and closely connected to the Jewish people. Whether they are ritually observant, Jewishly educated, or Hebrew proficient is another story. I am a religious person first and foremost because I feel bound to each and every one of you; I feel inextricably bound to the Jewish people, the Jewish community, to *klal Yisrael*, wherever Jews may be, and regardless of what they do or don't believe or what they do or don't observe. I am religious because my Jewishness would literally atrophy and die if it was severed from the community. Have you ever considered that there are no Jewish monks. Of all the great leaders and sages in

the Torah and the Talmud, the priests, the prophets, the rabbis...no one was a monk. You know why? Because they needed a minyan! They needed to recite those prayers that can only be said with 9 other Jews. They needed to hear the Torah read. They needed a community. Even Moses, who had this habit of disappearing on mountaintops for 40 days at a time, always returned to the people. His separation from the Jewish people was always temporary. In order for us to live fully actualized Jewish lives, we need each other...we need community.

I'll tell you the Jewish community literally saved me. As an only child of divorced parents being raised by a single mother, in order to support us, my Mom had to a full time job. For years, I was what they used to call a "latch key kid." That meant I came home from school hours before my mother got off from work. In the years before my mother met and married my stepfather we lived in an apartment complex, and there were all kinds of interesting people who lingered in the parking lot and stairwells. Left to my own devices, I could have gotten into all kinds of trouble, and ended up a very different person if that apartment complex was the only place I inhabited. But I had this other life...I went to shul, I was in a Jewish youth group; I had rabbis and educators and youth directors who paid attention to me and kept track of me; I spent my summers at Jewish camps. I knew, even as a kid, that my life didn't only belong to me, but that I belonged to something so much bigger, so much greater than myself.

There is a powerful Hebrew term: *achrayut*. *Achrayut* means responsibility, specifically responsibility toward something or someone else, because the root of *achrayut* is *acher*, which means 'the other.' I was taught early on that I was not only responsible for myself, but that I was also responsible for my fellow Jews. I grew up in the heady days of the First Intifada, the Soviet Jewry movement, Operation Solomon, the Israeli Loan Guarantees crisis. I attended the marches and protests, I wore the wrist bands, wrote letters to politicians and newspapers; I was an activist before I even became a bar mitzvah! But I learned all this--I was mobilized for this....in the synagogue...and the icing on the cake was that it was in those Jewish space there that I also felt uniquely cared for, nurtured, and that I was a part of something important and good for the world. It was in the synagogue I where I first heard that Judaism had a mission, an active role to play in changing the world for the better. It gave me hope. It gave me purpose. It gave me confidence when I needed it the most.

I am struck by a detail in the Torah portion this morning. Hagar, the spurned concubine of Abraham, forced out of the house by Sarah, finds herself alone with her son Ishmael in the harsh wilderness. It was hot, they had run out of water, everything seemed like a lost cause. Another desperate single mother and helpless child. What does Hagar do? She places the child under a shrub, and she walks away! *Al ereh b'mot ha'yeled*, she says to herself, that way I won't have to bear the sight of my own child's death.¹ *Va'teishv la mineged harcheik*, and she sat off to a distance from him, and began to weep.² In certain ways this feels like a metaphor for part of my own childhood. I spent a lot of time alone, at least apart from my parents. And I know that my mother spent plenty of time weeping and wondering how she would put food on the table and, as a single parent working as a secretary in a doctor's office, somehow find the means to support the two of us. In the Torah, an angel appears and tells Hagar that she could not leave her son alone in the bushes. While that might have helped her cope with the severity of the situation in that moment, what that kid needed was his mom, what this kid needed was his family. Only when she returns to Ishmael does the well of lifesaving water become visible to her. Separate and alone, there was no future. But together, they discovered a way forward.

In a recent New York Times Op-Ed,³ Ruth Whippman wrote that the billion dollar happiness industry has emphasized finding contentment in solitary, internal pursuits...That happiness is chiefly a result of emotional independence as opposed to engagement with others. Self-care, self-help, self-discovery, self-actualization are all the buzzwords of what she calls an "isolationist philosophy." Whippman acknowledges that "self-reflection, introspection and some degree of solitude are important parts of a psychologically healthy life," but that the balance has been tipped so much in that direction.

Citing a recent report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Whippman notes that "the average American now spends less than four minutes a day "hosting [or] attending social events," a category that covers everything from parties to other organized social occasions. That's 24 hours a year, barely enough to cover [Rosh Hashanah]⁴ dinner, and perhaps your child's birthday party." Half of all meals in this country are eaten alone. And teenagers are spending less time

¹Genesis 21:16

² ibid

³ [Opinion | Happiness Is Other People - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/18/opinion/18whippman.html)

⁴The original article said "Thanksgiving Dinner"

than ever before hanging out in-person with friends, a phenomenon that has been largely replaced by screens and phones. After spending years researching one scientific happiness study after another, Whippman discovered that “there is one point on which virtually every piece of research into the nature and causes of human happiness agrees, it is this: our happiness depends on other people.” Cutting across every category, age, race, gender, socioeconomic condition, it turns out that the single most important indicator of human happiness is our connection to other people. In short “if we want to be happy, we should really be aiming to spend less time alone.”

This new year on the Jewish calendar is called *Sh'nat Hakhel*, or the year of ingathering. Its origins go all the way back to the Torah, Deuteronomy Chapter 31 to be exact, when there was a great convening of the entire nation, every single Jew, young and old, who would come to Jerusalem on the festival of Sukkot, in the year following the *shmittah*. That's the seventh year when the land would lie fallow and uncultivated. The year that ended yesterday, 5782, was a *shmittah* year, and 5783 is a *Hakhel* year. Our ancestors would all gather together in a year such as this one, as one great Jewish family; the king would read publicly from the Torah for all to hear, and there would be a festive celebration of Jewish unity. Nowadays, Hakhel doesn't happen in quite the same way; we don't walk to Israel, we fly; and while England may have a new king, the Jewish people as yet do not. Nevertheless, the spirit of Hakhel could not have come at a better time. We need a great ingathering now more than ever. We have been separated for too long. We have been apart for what feels like seven years even if it was only two. Covid took too much away from us...including too many loved ones and friends. God forbid that Covid should take away our sense of community as well. God forbid that the pandemic should convince us that virtual connection is equal to face-to-face connection. God forbid that any of us should accept isolation, seclusion, separation, as the new norm, Jewish or otherwise.

A few days ago, we were awoken by the sound of heavy machinery outside our house. A few years after cutting down the tree in the middle of our cul-de-sac, the county finally decided to return to our little street to remove the stump. The tree was probably about 30 feet tall, and the roots were positively sprawling. This enormous digger spent about an hour excavating massive roots from underground and loading them into the back of a dump truck. I was totally mesmerized. It made me think of how ingenious God's creation is...For that tree to withstand

the winds, the storms, the changes in weather, the driving rains, and not be blown away, it had to be deeply rooted underground, otherwise it would have been toppled many times over. We all need deep roots...especially now...We are facing strong winds of antisemitism, storm surges of anti-Zionism, squalls of political uncertainty, monsoons of violence, a tempest of environmental crises. Where are our roots? Where is our anchor in all this tumult? Where do we find perspective, perseverance...*peace*? Friends, I believe this too is the great gift of community and the synagogue. We need a place to come together, to process together what's going on in this *meshugganeh* world, to strategize, to pray.

I am not calling for a *shnat Hakhel* solely because of dangers exist in the world. I am calling for a *shnat Hakhel*, a great return to community and synagogue life in 5783, because the *beit kneset*, this house of gathering is our home, when we are celebrating and when we are grieving; when we are marking Jewish time; and when we are learning the great wisdom of our people. When we seek solace and reassurance. And when we are working hard to inspire the next generation to *achrayut*, to sacred responsibility for the Jewish people and for the larger world. This is our home. And remember what Robert Frost said: Home is the place where...they have to take you in. That's our *achrayut*, that's our commitment to each other. I've got news for you though: We don't only have to take you in, we want to take you in. We love you...every single one of you. And we are all better, stronger, and yes, happier, when we are together.

So do I want you to be more religious...You bet I do! Who didn't see that coming?! I want you to be religious because I want you to be more connected and bound to one another, to our community, to our tradition, to the destiny of the Jewish people, and selfishly, to me too! Let's all become truly religious in this New Year...may our ligaments, our connections to one another be stronger than ever!

L'shana Tova