

Experience God in All Your Ways

Rosh Hashannah 5777

Rabbi Michael Safra

As we are seated, I invite you to look to the person to the left of you and then look to the right of you, to look around this beautiful sanctuary. Think about the services, the prayers, the Torah reading. And ask yourself: is this all there is? I am not asking about our metaphysical existence. This is not a sermon about God. But particularly those of you who may not have been excited to come to services this morning, particularly those of you who may be bored. Today is one of the holiest days of the year, but is this all there is to being Jewish?

I'm not the first one to ask the question.

Almost 2200 years ago, the prophet Isaiah was preaching to a group of Judeans on Yom Kippur. They were disenchanted. They fasted, they brought their sacrifices according to the prescribed rite, they followed the law, and what did they get? Nothing. I don't know what they were expecting – maybe it was redemption, or maybe they just wanted to feel that what they were doing was worthwhile, that Judaism mattered. But they weren't feeling it and they complained: is this all there is?

Isaiah responded with an emphatic "No." "You are missing the point," he said. God doesn't care if you fast. Or let me say that differently. I want you to fast, but not like this. Instead, he said, "This is the fast that I desire. To unlock the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and take the poor into your home. Clothe the naked; support your people." When you fast, and as you participate in the ritual, remember that there is more. There is so much more than this.

About 1000 years later, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking among the ruins of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem with his disciple Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Joshua was upset. "Alas for us!" he cried out. "This place which atoned for the sins of our people Israel lies in ruins!" Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai spoke words of comfort: "Do not grieve my son. There is another path beyond the Holy Temple. We can now reach God in deed, as the prophet Hosea taught 'ולא זבח' כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח, For God desires lovingkindness, not sacrificial offerings.'"

The Rabbis, as the prophets before them, embraced ritual practice. They prayed every day for the restoration of the Temple and preached about Shabbat and Kashrut – “Be as scrupulous about a minor commandment as you are about a major one!” But they also reminded their followers that this is not all there is. *Being* Jewish is so much more than *doing* the rituals. It is easy to quantify what it means to *do* Jewish; our children learn about Shabbat and prayer and Jewish food. But that is not all there is. We have to look for more.

Have you heard about the time Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip? After dinner and a bottle of wine, they laid down for the night and went to sleep. A few hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his friend: "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions of stars."

"And what does that tell you?"

Watson pondered. "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Meteorologically, I suspect it will be a nice day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, while we are small and insignificant. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes paused before he spoke: "Watson, you idiot. It tells me that someone has stolen our tent!"

Sometimes we have to look for more.

At the end of the 2nd century, the sage Bar Kappara was asked if there might be one portion, one chapter, one verse on which he could hang the entirety of Torah. For Rabbi Akiva it was “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but Bar Kappara wanted something different. He offered a verse from Proverbs: “בכל דרכיך דעהו, Know God in all your ways, and that will make your path smooth.” In the Bible, “knowing, *da’at, da’ehu*” means more than academic understanding; when Adam and Eve “know” each other, they produce children. To “know” means to experience, to connect, to form relationship. And the word “כל, all.” God is not confined by the walls of the synagogue. Judaism is not limited to the

pages of a book. Being Jewish is much more than the ritual. We are asked to be Jewish in *all* walks of life.

Last month, I wrote of an experience I have had more than once. A couple comes into my office. He is Israeli and she is not Jewish. They want to get married, and he wants me to help her convert. A cynic would add that he bought in to the Israeli Rabbinate's narrative that our conversions are quick and easy. (I have to say that I love working with individuals who choose Judaism. I am always inspired by their stories and enthusiasm. But that is not the point of this story.)

I explain the general conversion procedure. There is a class that meets weekly, which covers the basics. In addition, each conversion candidate has a sponsoring rabbi – that could be me. The sponsor helps to ease you into prayer, some level of Shabbat observance, the basics of eating *kosher* and observing the holidays. And that's when he stops me.

"Wait a minute," he says. "I don't do any of those things and I feel very Jewish. Why are you asking her to do those things?" I explain that he feels very Jewish because Judaism is part of his environment; he grew up in the Jewish state; he speaks Hebrew; he takes for granted so much about what it means to *be* Jewish that he already knows. A newcomer needs something to grab onto, and ritual becomes the ticket. I believe it myself, but I know I will never hear from them again. And I admit that he has a point. Being Jewish means more than *this*.

The modern Zionists set out to create a "new Jew." They were culturally assimilated and had little use for the rituals and traditions they considered outdated. The new Jew was to be a farmer, a soldier, strong, an agent of history; not a weak, bookish bystander. "New Judaism" was nationalism; the Jewish national project was to create a model, socialist state that distinguished itself in the modern world. Faith would not bring the Jewish people into modernity. A modern people needed a modern language, a flag, an economy. *Bekhol derakhekha*, Experience Judaism in all your ways – beyond the synagogue, beyond the classroom, in the streets, on the farm, in the international arena.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz argues in his book *Jewish Megatrends* that today's struggle is slightly different. It's no longer "new" vs. "old", but between what he calls "tribal Jews", who fight to maintain strong connections with Israel and obsess with the need to protect Judaism from the mirror-image threats of antisemitism and assimilation; and "covenantal Jews" who dissociate Jewish identity from any

particular time or place and focus instead on Judaism's universal ethical and moral teachings. There are religious Jews and cultural Jews, universalists and particularists.

I keep going back to one question from the 2013 Pew Study, where respondents were asked to name the most essential aspects of being Jewish. Only 19% said observing Jewish law was essential, and 14% said the same of eating traditional Jewish foods. I would have thought those things were important. But what ranked higher? Remembering the Holocaust – tribalism – 73%; leading an ethical and moral life – universalism – 63%; caring about Israel – 43%; and having a good sense of humor – 42%. It appears that belief in God didn't even make the list!

My point is that although 90% said that being Jewish was very important to them, that identity means more than we might think. There are so many avenues on which to connect. For a synagogue, it means that we have to expand our offerings, and for the individual it means we have to look for more.

Tribal. Covenantal. Universal. Particular, intellectual, communal. I've taken it to Twitter and you are invited to weigh in: Hash-tag "WhatIsJudaismForYou?"

The theme for our annual program guide is "Kaleidoscope of Jewish Living." It's not an educational theme, but rather a metaphor for Jewish identity in 2016. Too often, we fixate on one aspect of Judaism, one little bead so to speak, and fail to see the larger picture. As a case in point, Google Rabbi Jay Michaelson's provocative piece in the Forward: "Why You Shouldn't Go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year." Clearly you are already here, but his message rings true – there are more ways to express Jewishness than this. Try building a *sukkah* or purchasing *lulav* and *etrog*. Or celebrating Shabbat – pick up one of the magnets outside to remind you about the Shabbos Project in November, which is a chance to celebrate together in your own home and in your own way.

The kaleidoscope's images are vast. And they are self-directed. What you see depends on how you turn. Experience God, *be* Jewish in *all your ways*.

Let me pick on Hebrew School for a second, because I hear it too often and for too long: Why doesn't my child love it? Sometimes it is because they experience education as a one-way street. They hear the facts, they learn to read, but they don't engage. In many cases, they don't experience enough outside the classroom and so what they learn is deemed irrelevant. But often it is because we don't encourage them to push back and challenge. *Knowing* God, *knowing* Jewishness – the word implies

experience, it happens in relationship. *Being Jewish* means challenging the tradition and then internalizing it in your own way.

Stop me if you've heard this one before, about the child who came home from Talmud Torah one day and his father asked him what he learned. The boy answered, "It was actually really cool. We learned about how the Jews were being chased by the Egyptian army and they saw the Red Sea in front of them and they were really scared, until suddenly they spotted an Israeli warship and it shot off a few missiles as a warning before two F-16s took off and dropped these huge bombs on the Egyptian cavalry, and then all of a sudden these amphibious ships drove up on to the dry land and attacked until there wasn't a single Egyptian left, and they brought the people across the sea to dry safety!"

The father cannot believe his ears. "Really? Is that what they teach in that school?" To which the boy responds, "Well, not exactly. But if I told you what they told us, there's no way you'd believe it!"

Experience God in all *your* ways. Education works not when you memorize facts, but when you internalize them. Education works when, to borrow a phrase from our Jewish Federation, you "make it yours."

With prayer as well. I hear it often and you may feel it yourself: "I don't understand; I can't relate to these prayers." There are different ways to unpack that issue, but I want to emphasize that meaning goes beyond understanding the words. Meaning is in the music or in the singing or in being together with my community. Meaning is in memories of having once opened the *siddur* with parents or grandparents. Meaning is created by our personal interactions with the book – flipping through to find a nice alternative reading, or spending a little extra time on a particular idea. What is it about this prayer that I find disagreeable? How might I say it differently?

Traditional prayer is an individual pursuit. In the 19th-century, Americanizing Jews were embarrassed about the lack of decorum in traditional services; there was too much shouting and swaying. And so they cleaned things up. That's not entirely bad, but it sent an implicit message that "this" is it, that worship means listening and waiting for the rabbi to tell you what to do. But you can't just *do* or *know* prayer. You have to *experience* prayer by adding your own voice.

Raise your hand if you have been to a Jewish summer camp ... and keep it up if you've been or sent a child to a camp where they sing Birkat HaMazon after meals. The Birkat is different at camp. It isn't boring. Kids like it – the energy, banging on the tables, screaming out certain words. Prayer is the experience. Prayer is you. The banging and shouting? That's prayer too – experience it in *all your ways*, בכל דרכיך דעהו.

The 20th century giant of Reform Judaism, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, compared living Jewishly to walking on a path littered with precious stones. Some jewels are deeply embedded and impossible to dig up. These are practices from the past, like the ancient sacrifices, that can no longer be performed. Other jewels are just lying there waiting for you to pick them up and stick in your pocket. These are the easy commandments, like lighting Chanukah candles, attending a Passover *seder* or High Holy Day services.

The bulk of the path, however, is filled with jewels that are partially embedded and partially exposed. If you walk by too quickly, you could miss something special, but picking them up requires some work, some digging. The essence of Judaism lies in choosing your spot, perfecting a “signature *mitzvah*,” trying new things, hashtag: WhatIsJudaismForYou. Wherever you stop, if you take the time to dig, polish off the dust, fix a few imperfections, there is so much treasure to be had.

There is a story in the Bible of our patriarch Jacob running away from home into a great unknown. He is scared, as he has no idea what he will find. He arrives at a place and spends the night, and he has a remarkable dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending; and he sees God on top of the ladder assuring Jacob that God will be with him wherever he goes. Jacob wakes up in the morning and exclaims, “Surely God is in this place and I did not *know* it, וואנכי לא ידעתי!”

And Jacob's experience became emblematic of the Jewish people. For centuries, our people wandered from one place to another and at each destination they discovered: whatever it was that we knew before, well that's not all there is. Today we have arrived at a point in history when the wandering has ended. We aren't going anywhere; and yet we also know that what we see is not enough.

As we embark on this new journey of 5777, I offer the challenge to each of us – to look to the left, look to the right, discover new ideas, try new things, expand our horizons and add our own individual voices, so that we might know – and not just know – so we might *experience* God, *experience* Judaism “*b'khol d'rakhekha*,” in all its forms and all our ways. May the new year bring blessing, meaning and joy to ourselves, our families, and indeed the entire world. Shanah Tovah.

