

Bad Jews
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Yesterday I spoke about our tribe, about the “we”. Today my topic is “I”. It was prompted by this book: *Bad Jew*. I’m not particularly endorsing the book. But it wins for most provocative title. The opening gambit got me thinking. When the author, Emily Tamkin asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the words, ‘bad Jew’?” “The most common answer I got,” she wrote, “was, ‘When I think of a bad Jew I think of myself.’”

Wow. So many reactions. So many questions. Start by dispensing with the meaningless question: “Says who?” Ie “Who gets to decide if someone is a bad Jew?”—It’s a meaningless question because we can – any of us – find someone who will proclaim us a bad Jew. It is far too easy to find someone who will deem any of us deficient in our beliefs, practices or loyalty.

So-never mind how others judge our Jewish bona fides. My only question is **Why would someone call him or herself a bad Jew?**



I have heard people refer to themselves this way, and here are the most common reasons I've heard:

- 1) I don't believe in God
- 2) {I have doubts about God}
- 3) I married a non-Jew
- 4) I do not observe Jewish law and ritual.

All these reasons have one thing in common: you're in good company.

For those who have doubts about God: We have a long history of questioning, either God's existence or God's righteousness. These questions go back to Avraham Avinu, our forefather Avraham, the world's first Jew, (we might argue a pretty good Jew) who turned to God in incredulity when he learned of God's intention to destroy the entire cities of S'dom and Amora (Sodom and G'mora): "Will You bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty? Really?" "Avraham asks, "This is how a God of righteousness behaves?"

Or consider Elie Wiesel's work companion in the concentration camp, a great Rosh Yeshiva from Poland. Wiesel described the night this great scholar convened a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty.

Witnesses were summoned. Arguments were heard. You know the arguments: why, why, why and how long will it last?

After due deliberation, the tribunal issued its verdict, and my teacher, my friend was the one to pronounce it: Guilty. There was a silence then that probably permeated the entire camp and the entire world. Then he shook himself, smiled sadly and said, ‘Nu, let’s daven Ma’ariv.’”

I think that many of us have had doubts about God. Some of us may be here today because we’re hedging our bets. The name for this is agnosticism – the belief that we can never know with certainty about God or even about God’s existence.

Or maybe you are in a wholly different category, atheism: It’s not that you aren’t sure. Rather, you are certain and unwavering that God does not exist. This, too, puts you in good company, like Albert Einstein, who called himself a “religious non-believer”, yet was asked to serve as Israel’s second president. Citing his age, Einstein politely demurred, adding, I am distressed that I must decline, because my relationship with the Jewish people has become my strongest human bond.”

Whether agnostic or atheist, if belief in God does not bring you to this sanctified space on this holy day, then belief in something else brings you here today:

- . You believe in family, and you want to honor your family traditions.
- . You buy into the idea that on a regular basis we should consider our actions of the previous year. We should weigh (ponder) where we've gone wrong and what we're getting better at.
- . You seek forgiveness--from those you have hurt and from yourself -- for your missteps.
- . You feel the vulnerability of the human experience and acknowledge that some things are out of your control. (You wonder a bit about the mystery of that whole who shall live and who shall die thing.)
- . You are looking for the grace and wherewithal to face the uncertainties of the coming year.
- . Maybe you believe in the mission of the Jewish people, and God or no, stand in solidarity with your people.

Philosophy professor Scott Hershovitz explains in a New York Times essay why he continues to fast on Yom Kippur and celebrate Passover Seder when he doesn't believe in G: "...It keeps me connected to a community that I value. When it feels like the world is falling apart, I seek refuge in religious rituals – but not because I believe my prayers will be answered. The prayers we say in synagogue remind me that evil has always been with us, but that people persevere, survive and even thrive. I take my kids to synagogue so that they feel connected to that

tradition, so that they know the world has been falling apart from the start – and that there’s beauty in trying to put it back together.”

Our history is replete with Jews who have been devoted to their people and have lived exemplary lives of righteousness and compassion and never quite fit God into their lives.

I often hear words of self-recrimination from intermarried Jews:

I married someone who is not Jewish, so I have let down the Jewish people.”

I am not advocating for intermarriage. I am not saying that intermarriage is uncomplicated. (Actually, I would not say that *any* marriage is uncomplicated.) I am saying that we know for a fact that if your spouse is not Jewish, you have a place in the Jewish world.

The historian Keren McGinity writes that in earlier decades “the assumption was that those who had intermarried had essentially forsaken their Jewishness; their Jewish identity was no longer important to them and never would be so.” {I actually remember this attitude clearly. My mother’s best friend was counseled to sit shiva when her son intermarried}

But McGinity describes her own journey as a Jewish woman with a Christian husband in her book *Still Jewish*. Pregnant with her first child, she asked herself: “How and to what extent would I impart Jewish heritage and religion to my daughter? The actions that came about in direct response to these questions

encouraged me to reevaluate the role of Judaism in my life. In the process I became ‘more Jewish.’ Was I an anomaly?”

She is not an anomaly. We all know someone like this: committed to Jewish values, observant of Jewish ritual, engaged in synagogue community -- and intermarried. Outside the insular ultra-Orthodox communities, virtually every American Jewish family includes a member who has chosen a non-Jewish partner. Many of these intermarried relatives remain engaged and active in Jewish life. And often this engagement includes the participation of the non-Jewish partner.

Finally, *I do not observe Jewish ritual consistently.*

Let me address here a phrase I often hear in this context, the expression *three day a year Jew*. I understand what this phrase means – it’s a reference to how often one attends synagogue services. But I don’t like this expression. I find it demeaning, even when we do not intend it maliciously. More importantly, there’s no such thing as a three day a year Jew. Because regardless of how many days you spend in this or any sanctuary, you are Jewish **every single day of your life**: in shul, at work, when you encounter poverty or injustice, in your interactions with the elderly and with children. We can look at the world through Jewish lens in every interaction. We can seek holiness in our every encounter even on the days we do not spend in synagogue.

I know there are some Jews who feel out of place in this sanctuary. This is what I've heard: I don't know the secret handshake. All around me people seem to know the protocols of what to do and say in services, but it's all a mystery to me. The traditions and rituals that are familiar and meaningful to them are foreign and meaningless to me. I don't feel I belong here – not in this sanctuary, not in a shiva house, not anywhere in the world of Jewish ritual.

I'm going to share a story I shared once before from the bima. About a friend who grew up in a kosher home but no longer keeps kosher. I mean not at all—not in the house or out. He typically has no misgivings about anything he eats.

But on a business trip during chol ha-moed Pesah (the intermediate days of Passover) and at the banquet was a platter of breaded shrimp, apparently a favorite of his. {You can see where this is going:} He peeled the breading off and ate the shrimp.

That, I will grant you, is spotty observance of Jewish law. But here's what is so important about this story: Jewish law is not all or nothing; it simply cannot be, or none of us would be “good Jews”. Peeling the breading off the shrimp **was** in fact a religious act. Look what it entails: Noting that Passover is the season that we remember that we were redeemed from slavery. Remembering that that redemption ought to inspire gratitude. Understanding that somehow, that gratitude

is expressed by Jews by not eating leavened food for this season. Would not eating the shrimp either have been a fuller embrace of Jewish law? OK, sure. But I think this was a lovely moment. It was a deeply religious, profoundly Jewish statement.

Is there room for more observance? There always is. I don't know any Jew serious about observing halacha— who says – the way I observe Jewish law is just fine and needs no examination, evaluation, evolution. I'm already doing it exactly right.

Torah has 613 mitzvot. The rabbis of the Talmud expanded some of those laws into hundreds more. *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy* is the command in the Torah. In the sacred quest to determine how exactly we fulfill that command the rabbis explicated 39 specific work prohibitions and before you know it writing, texting, even taking the seeds out of the watermelon make the list of forbidden Shabbat activities. It is a complex, messy, complicated system which I buy into it wholeheartedly. But I can see how it is daunting to anyone who just trying to learn about Shabbat.

And so the prophet Micah reminds us to focus on the big picture:

הַגִּיד לִּי אֲדָם מֵה־טוֹב וּמֵה־יְהוָה דּוֹרְשׁ מִמּוֹךְ כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט

וְאַהֲבַת הַחֶסֶד וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ: {ס}

“What does God require of you?

Only to do justice

And to love goodness,

And to walk modestly with your God;

Do justice. Love goodness. Walk modestly with your God. (As we have been taught in another context) The rest is commentary. Go and learn.

Go and learn means don't be satisfied where you are right now. Strive, explore. Ask questions and push boundaries. We are – all of us -- works in progress. We all have more to learn, more to connect, more to take on.

For Jews who don't believe in God with a perfect faith, or even at all. For Jews married to non-Jews, for Jews who do not consistently observe rituals commanded in Torah: We are not bad Jews. Bad Jew and Good Jew are not part of the equation. These are false constructs. They do not exist.

I see two kinds of Jews: Jews who are striving and Jews who have given up. We are either striving to figure out how to live our Jewish lives or we have walked away from our Jewish identity.

As Jews we are imperfect because we as human beings we are imperfect. But we are *shoafim*, we are strivers. We are question-askers and boundary-pushers. We want to learn and grow, and we are inextricably tied to one another's fate.

Let's be done with the labels of Good Jew or Bad Jew. The very essence of Judaism is not holding steady as good or bad but wrestling, pushing deeper, striving to be better in our souls and in our interactions.

May we all have a year of blessing, of health and of striving.