

President George Washington, on March 3, 1797, did something remarkable and nearly unheard of in world political history. He stepped down from office, allowing for the transition of power to his successor John Adams. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the Laws of Nature and Nature's God impels us to live equally, and that we are endowed by our Creator with unalienable rights.

The founders of America had this in common with the ancient rabbis. In their stories and parables, the rabbis would contrast a *melekh basar va'dam*, a king of flesh and blood, who would rule unwisely, unfairly, or cruelly, with *HaMelekh, Malkhei Hamelakhim, HaKadosh Barukh Hu*, the King, the King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One, who ruled with true justice and mercy. I think the Rabbis would be pleased and amused by the jealous, whimsical, and buffoonish portrayal of King George III in the Broadway musical "Hamilton."

America's founders, despite their varied practices and theologies, were true believers in God and Divine Providence. Their rejection of human kingship was rooted in their ultimate belief in the Divine King. This too was true for the ancient Rabbis. The Sages saw the inauguration of many kings in their day, but in their imagination, those were nothing compared to how they envisioned Rosh Hashanah, the day of the Coronation of the Supreme Sovereign of all Creation. Today, however, Americans do not have the same sense of the Divinely-inspired mission of our Republic, nor do Jews speak about God's supreme majesty with the same spirit and understanding of previous generations.

We are living in an increasingly secular age. In 2020, Gallup found that only 47% of adult Americans belonged to a house of worship, down more than 20 percentage points from the turn of the century. This change is primarily due to the rise in Americans of no religion, "The Nones" as studies call them. The percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religion rose from 8% in 2000 to 21% in 2018. However, even though attendance at houses of worship and identification with traditional organized religion has declined, the human desire to find meaning and purpose, and be part of something greater than ourselves, is as strong as when the earliest human beings looked around and up at the stars and tried to make sense of it all.

Commentator on religion Murtaza Hussain has written, "New systems of morality and belief are already beginning to fill the God-shaped hole that has emerged in America's collective consciousness." For too many of us today, that God-shaped hole is being filled with something that used to be merely transactional: our political affiliations.

Jewish tradition would call this new trend *Avodah Zarah*, the Hebrew term for "foreign worship," or more colloquially, Idolatry. Idolatry means "to imbue a finite thing or person with a power that is above and beyond its capabilities and purpose," to ascribe to people, things, or ideas, the characteristics which belong exclusively to God. The prohibition on idolatry is found in many places in the Torah and further explained by the Rabbis. In fact, according to Rabbinic tradition, idolatry is one of Judaism's three cardinal sins, the other two being sexual immorality and murder, for which one must give up his or her life rather than transgress.

We are experiencing the trend of substituting political commitments for reverence for God and adherence to tradition. Abraham Kuyper, a theologian who served as the prime minister of the Netherlands at the beginning of the 20th century, argued that all strongly held ideologies were effectively faith-based, and that no human being could survive long without some ultimate loyalty. If that loyalty didn't derive from traditional religion, it would find expression through secular commitments, such as nationalism, socialism, or liberalism. The political theorist Samuel Goldman calls this "the law of the conservation of religion." In any given society, there is a relatively constant and finite supply of religious conviction. America has always been a religious nation, and I am quite moved by the numerous parallels, allegories, and allusions to the Hebrew Bible that the leaders of our nation have intentionally used, from our founding to this very day, in speaking about America's greatness and its mission. Furthermore, 20th century sociologist Robert Bellah correctly pointed out that we have an American civil religion, with its own founding myth, its prophets and processions, as well as its scripture: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and The Federalist Papers. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. wished that "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed." The very idea that a nation might have a creed, a word associated primarily with religion, shows the uniqueness of American identity as well as our current predicament.

What we are seeing now, both on the Left and the Right, is religion without God. On the Far Left, we have the "Woke" who challenge the long-dominant narrative that emphasizes the exceptionalism of America's

founding. The Woke have their own religious language, co-opted from Christianity. Original Sin refers to slavery and racism in America. Atonement is admitting your White Privilege. Ritual is posting to social media whatever image corresponds to the cause in vogue. Excommunication is cancel culture. It can be applied to anyone, even those of their own sacred community, because while repentance is demanded, forgiveness is rarely given. Messianism means achieving equity or, in other words, equal outcomes. Wokism is a combination of the goals of Marxism and the rigidity of the American Puritans.

Although the Far Right can not be as conveniently named, and still drapes itself in some of the trappings of organized religion, it also fulfills a religious impulse that is equally as Manichean as the Left. Some on the Right find meaning in conspiracy movements like QAnon, which tell a very religious story of earthly corruption that will be redeemed by a god-like force. This religion has its own savior and martyr, a very flawed individual to say the least, who has been elevated to holy crusader. The Right also has terms like “un-American” and “enemy of the state” that it hurls at those whom it deems as heretical, while the elect are called “patriots” or “great Americans.” When one believes that they are on a religious crusade, as those on the Far Right do, there is nothing that they won’t do to achieve their mission’s goal of a Fascist, ethno-nationalist state.

Religion without God is downright scary. The God of the Bible is both just and merciful. However, because these new religions reject God and find meaning in the winner-take-all nature of political power struggles, they harness our basest drives and bring out the worst in us. Instead of seeing each other as equals, we find new ways to shame each other and deny personal or collective redemption. The dogmatic beliefs of the believers also distract them from real, empirical facts. The Woke promote their ideology without question, despite the evidence of the precipitous decline in racism and race-related crimes in recent decades. The Conspiratorial Right denies reality by rejecting election results and creating misinformation about the safety and efficacy of vaccines. These new movements are just the newest forms of Avodah Zarah, the condemnation of which began in the Torah. We find the ban on idolatry in the laws of Deuteronomy (ch. 12-13), which commands the Israelites to destroy all worship sites in the new land that they will soon be entering. We find it in the Ten Commandments, when God says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). We even find it in one of the most well-known statements from the Torah, although it is so often misquoted, or at least truncated, that we miss its essential meaning.

As I am about to say it now, I can hear Charlton Heston’s booming voice declare, “Thus saith the Lord, God of Israel: Let my people go!” But that’s not how the verse ends. Leaving Egypt is not just freedom for freedom’s sake. The full verse (7:16) says, וְיַעֲבֹדֵנִי בְּמִדְבָּר, “Let my people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness.” The full verse tells us that we are not meant to be servants of Pharaoh or servants of any cause. We are meant to be servants of God. When we put a cause above our service to God, or the elements of religion onto our political commitments, we lose sight of the commonalities that make us all human and all equal, which is exactly how God sees us. The Book of Exodus, and the story of God’s rescue of Israel from Egyptian slavery is not just a political statement, it is a statement about politics itself.

For most of Jewish history, politics was an expansion of who we were, not central to it. Politics was how we got things done. It was strictly transactional. Being a Jew meant being a Jew, living in community with other Jews and by the rhythms of the Jewish year and life cycle. In essence, observing the mitzvot. Jews only acted through the political system in order to advance Jewish interests. Things changed at the beginning of the 20th century because Jews became aware of their lack of power and lack of at-homeness. The promise of emancipation was not fulfilled. Jews were still powerless and subject to pogroms, persecutions, and restrictions.

This gave rise to Jews entering and founding political movements, the most well-known of which were socialism, communism, and Zionism. These were efforts to rectify Jewish powerlessness. However, the consequence of this move was that Judaism for its own sake took a back seat to secular political identification. Jews became defined by their politics, rather than by their practice or adherence to a religious faith. The organizing principle of Jewish life became the politics of securing Jewish agency in response to Jewish powerlessness. And it worked! These efforts resulted in the creation of the State of Israel, the most important Jewish achievement in the modern era.

But the price paid may have been too high. It is unfortunate that politics has become the central application of Jewish meaning, because the result has become a Judaism empty of content. The centralization of

politics in Judaism has moved us away from our core moral, religious, and spiritual convictions, namely the practice of mitzvot and adherence to faith in God. Part of the problem is politics itself, which is about winning, and that politics is completely transactional, but the Jewish mission is to aspire to something higher, something holy.

The consequences of this are all around us. The secularization of America can be seen on the micro level in the Jewish community today. As British Reform Rabbi Lionel Blue put it, “Jews are just like everyone else, only more so.” Just like American society, our communities have become shaped by political affinities. Jewish platforms have replaced Jewish values. We have lost the Jewish sense of multi-vocality. We have a rich textual tradition with a variety of diverse opinions, but politics only speaks to those sources that agree with its platform. For sure, the Torah is a political document, and our tradition lays out a vision of society that attempts to produce equality. However, the moment we reduce our moral aspirations to political positions, we risk trivializing Judaism, and defining it solely by our political expressions. Torah becomes merely window dressing.

Case in point is the term Tikkun Olam. In the Talmud, it originally referred to rabbinic legislation that corrected or mitigated minor injustices. The first use of the Tikkun Olam comes from a discussion about how much money you are allowed to pay to redeem a captive. It also appears in Aleinu, which probably was written around the same time as the Talmud, or possibly earlier, for the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service that will begin in a few moments. It hails God’s sovereignty, and we pray that God will act to fix this world with the perfection of divine rule. In the 16th century, the Kabbalists applied the term to human action, where Jews doing mitzvot would repair God’s shattered vessels of creation, broken by cosmic accident.

Note that the practitioners of Tikkun Olam have evolved over time. First, it was sages and judges who tinkered with legislation to make matters more equitable. Next, it was God who would restore a moral order. Then, it was Jews doing mitzvot, both ritual and interpersonal, to set right the cosmic order. In the 1950s, the term was revived and morphed into center-left political issues. Now, Tikkun Olam is everywhere. Helping others less fortunate by doing acts of kindness is a cornerstone of Jewish life. However, Tikkun Olam has become a catch-all term for social justice causes and the defining aspect of liberal Judaism, stripped of its cosmic, legal, and Divine meanings. A modern joke illustrates this point. An American Jew lands in Israel. After getting off the plane, she says to the first Israeli she meets, “How do you say Tikkun Olam in Hebrew?”

This is true on the political Right as well, through the politics of being Pro-Israel. Zionism is a fundamental aspect of modern Jewish identity, which I will say much more about on the evening of Yom Kippur. However, for some American Jews, Zionism has become an end in and of itself, and the only way that they judge other Jews, to the detriment of the value of K’lal Yisrael, the affirmation of the collective Jewish People. It has become a cudgel for right-wing American Jews who use it to bash those who are not in lock-step with them on Israeli politics, specifically right-wing policies of the Israeli government. To be clear, there are certainly Anti-Zionist Jews who question or reject the existence of the state of Israel. However, this is different from committed Zionists who critique the Israeli policies from a place of Ahavat Yisrael, love of the Jewish People and the Jewish State. Some on the Jewish Right do not make this distinction. A cartoon from some years ago portrayed Moses proudly leading the Israelites through the wilderness. At the back of the long line of people, one Israelite said to another, “But is he good for Israel?”

It has always been a Jewish aspiration to fulfill the prophetic exhortation to be a light unto the nations. Perhaps we can be a light unto this nation by returning to our tradition of multivocality and respectful dissent, guided by a renewed commitment to God and tradition. Perhaps we could find a set of American Jewish values with which we were all aligned. Some of these might be liberty, freedom, and justice. What if we returned to a conversation about morality instead of partisanship and empty slogans? What if, instead of serving the false gods of political positions, we returned to the service of God?

The biblical prophets called us to do justice, but they also called for living one’s life in relationship with God. Rabbinic Tradition speaks about many things that can point a person to peace and a better world, but they place the study of Torah, God’s word, above everything. A Kabbalistic meditation that appears in our Torah service goes: *Ana Avda d’Kudsha brikh hu*, “I am a servant of the Holy Blessed One.” Activism certainly does good in the world, but it is limited in its ability to deepen our souls, to nourish the spirit, and to pass traditions on to the next generation.

Although a Jew does not have to acknowledge the existence of God to be Jewish, God is central to the Jewish message. Although a person does not have to acknowledge God to be good, God's uniqueness is the antidote to human arrogance, and faith can be the quality that moves us from good to great. God can give us the strength to build a life of meaning while we are in pain, guiding us out of the valley of the shadow of death. God can inspire us to walk a path of spiritual and moral improvement during the very brief time we are allotted here on Earth.

Monotheism is hard. It requires discipline and the ability to look deeper than the concrete world of our senses and the self-righteousness of our inflated egos. We have been struggling with monotheism since the moment of Sinai, when our people built the Golden Calf. Since our earliest experiences as a people, we find warnings against idolatry, whether as statues, wonders of nature, or other human beings. We still struggle with it, when we elevate individuals to more-than-human status or when we put secular causes above our mission as servants of God.

On Rosh Hashanah, we acclaim God as Creator and Sovereign of all Creation. The natural human response to this is radical humility, how much less we are than the Divine. And yet, God has shared this divinity with us, inviting us into a covenant of partnership. The religious life is both a call to humility and a call to aspire to our full capacity and responsibility as agents doing God's work.

In order to fully embrace our charge, we must awaken to the idea that we have been living in spiritual exile for quite some time. This is the season of *teshuvah*, the season of return, when we are called to rediscover our truest selves and set a new course on life's journey. The shofar beckons us to come back to our Divine Sovereign, who also happens to be our Divine Parent, as we join together the notion that we are not just the subject of a king, but a beloved child as well. A Hasidic tale tells,

"There was a king who sent his only son away to a distant land, for some reason known only to him. As time passed, the son became accustomed to the ways of the villagers among whom he lived. He became a wayward fellow, forgetting the niceties of life with the king. Even his mind and his most intimate nature grew vulgar and ill-mannered. In his mind, he came to think ill of the kingdom.

"One day, the son heard that the king was going to visit the province where he lived. When the king arrived, the son entered the palace where he was staying and began to shout out in a strange voice. His shout was in wordless sound, as he had forgotten the king's language, the language of his own birth. When the king heard his son's voice and realized that he had even forgotten how to speak, his heart was filled with compassion. This is the meaning of sounding the shofar." (Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, *Shemu'ah Tovah*)

As a new year begins, let the blasts of the shofar awaken us from our moral slumber, calling us to affirm God's singular sovereignty, smashing the idols and tearing down the altars of the false gods within our midst. May we be called to bless God as the source for everything in the world around us, to do mitzvot which enrich our lives and connect us to our people, to love and care for our family, to serve our community; to reject Idolatry and become true servants of God. Shanah Tovah U'metukah! May the New Year be sweet and good for us all.