

Are secular Jewish activities enough to preserve Judaism?

A tale of two families

In the first family, Jewish parents tell their child: "There are two types of commandments in the Torah: Ritual commandments and ethical commandments.

-Ritual commandments are primitive, irrational, and sometimes even barbaric. Civilization has evolved way past the need to keep any of them. We reject them completely. You may consider them dead letter and ignore them.

-But the ethical commandments -- ah! -- they are the soul of Judaism, the core, the essence. That is what we must preserve and pass on. You must not steal. You must not murder. You must honor your parents. You must love your neighbor as yourself. You must pursue justice. You must give charity. These are the eternal values of Judaism. That is what we are all about."

And the child will learn them, and in time will respond, "Yes, Mom and Dad, I will treasure these values, live by them, and pass them on to my children.

-But I learned that these are universal values. It is not clear to me why, at this point, I have to stick the label "Jewish" on them. Or on myself, for that matter.

-And when it comes time for me to marry, it is not clear to me why I should choose a spouse only among the one-third of one percent of people my age who call themselves "Jewish". All I need to do is find someone who shares these eternal values, and together we will pass them on to our children. The label

does not matter. This stuff is now in the public domain, as it were.”

And the parents will stare at the child, speechless.

They won't know how to respond.

Because the logic is sound. The logic is unimpeachable.

-And so, several generations down the pike, these parents will have no descendents who call themselves Jewish.

-And the values we started from will find themselves mixed in with the values of other traditions within the extended family, and the political correctness of the day, and in many cases will no longer be describable, in any way, as “Jewish”.

For some people, that is not a problem. To them I say: “Peace. It's a free country. If you don't understand on your own, I can't explain it to you.” But for others, it is a very big problem. It is to them that I address my remarks.

On to the second family. Jewish parents tell their child, “There are two types of commandments in the Torah: Ritual commandments and ethical commandments. Both are important. Both must be preserved.

You must not steal **and** you must keep Shabbat.

You must not murder **and** you must keep kosher.

You must honor your parents **and** you must put a mezuzah on the doorpost of your house.

You must love your neighbor as yourself **and** you must not worship idols.

You must pursue justice **and** you must fast on Yom Kippur.

You must give charity **and** you must redeem the firstborn.”

And the child will learn them, and in time will respond, “Yes, Mom and Dad, I will treasure these commandments, live by them, and pass them on to my children.”

-But he cannot continue as the child in the first scenario did.

-He cannot say, “Why should I stick the label ‘Jewish’ on these commandments?”, because so many of them are uniquely Jewish. They are not found anywhere else.

-He cannot say, as the first child did, "Why should I marry Jewish?", because the only spouse who will do all these things with him must necessarily be another Jew.
-And that will ensure Jewish continuity, and the survival of the very Jewish values so dear to the hearts of the parents in both scenarios.

What is the difference between the two scenarios? The ritual commandments. That's all.

So, while for many Jews, even many observant Jews, ritual commandments are seen as *chukkim*, or commandments for which no obvious rationale comes to mind, for others their purpose is not so obscure.

The Hebrew writer Ahad Ha-Am once famously said:

More than Israel has kept Shabbat, has Shabbat kept Israel. He might as well have extended it to all ritual commandments. If you kill the ritual commandments, you also kill the goose that lay the golden egg. Then you will have no more golden eggs.

Judaism is a package deal: Ritual plus ethical. It has proved its worth as a package deal by producing good people who have enhanced the welfare of the world. It cannot survive except as a package deal. Take it or leave it. If you do not take it as a package, then your line will surely leave it, willy nilly.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

First family responds

-I hear you, but I am secular. I am a rationalist. I must be true to myself. I could not live a lie. I just don't have it in me to light candles, dance with the Torah, keep kosher, circumcise my sons, put a mezuzah on my door, fast on Yom Kippur, or refrain from work on Shabbat.

-However, in addition to following the ethical commandments, I do three things:

1-Social action. I get involved in many causes. I make sure that all minorities get their full rights and are not discriminated against, that

the poor get basic necessities. "Justice, justice shall you pursue" is very important to me. I was in the vanguard of "freedom for Soviet Jewry" in the 1970s and 1980s.

2-Support for the State of Israel. I am always defending Israel in various fora. Remember, secular Jews built the State of Israel!

3-Activity in local Jewish community. I serve on Board of my synagogue; I chaired many committees, such as fundraising, membership drive, building and grounds upkeep, etc.

Question: Are these three things enough?

Answer: Enough for what?

To keep YOU Jewish and fulfilling the mission of Judaism? Yes.

To keep your children Jewish and perpetuate our values? No.

Social action, support for Israel, and non-religious involvement in Jewish communities are three religions, none of them Judaism.

Note that in non-Orthodox congregations, those who lead it and those who use it for its intended purpose (services and study) are typically two different sets of people.

Why are many young Jews alienated from Judaism?

-Parents give their children education and goods they did not have as children, but not what they DID have as children: A Jewish home environment.

-Parents send message that secular subjects more important than Jewish studies (far less time is devoted to religious instruction).

-Parents' involvement in Jewish activities that do not involve the child do nothing for a child's Jewish identity.

-Parents communicate few distinctly Jewish standards.

-- Even Jewishly committed parents say Jews must survive, but don't say why.

-Parents push a universalistic outlook. But true universalism is rooted in a particular form of expression.

-Santayana: I can't express spirituality without belonging to a particular religion any more than I can talk without using a particular language.

-Proverbs: Train a child in the way that he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it. [Proverbs 22:6]

Result: See 1973 *Mad Magazine* parody of *Fiddler on the Roof*

[Antenna on the Roof, Mad Magazine 156, January 1973]

An antenna on the roof! What's so strange about that? Nothing, except that this antenna is on the roof of our kennel. You may ask: Why did we buy a Zenith Color TV Console for our dog? Why not just a simple black-and-white Emerson portable? This, I can tell you in one word: Possessions. Possessions! Possessions!

[To the tune of *Matchmaker*]

Husband:

Head-shrinker, head-shrinker, I'm a success
Three-car garage, fancy address
Head-shrinker, Head-shrinker, look deep inside
And find out why I'm a mess

Wife:

Head-shrinker, Head-shrinker, I am his spouse
Two minks I own; one's for the house
I'm just a typical rich pampered wife
So why do I hate my life?

Daughters:

I'm Sheila, a free-sex fanatic
I'm Nancy, a speed freak just now
I'm Joy, who makes bombs in the attic
And answers the phone with quotations from Mao

Tikkun 'Olam

Non-traditional Judaism pushes *Tikkun Olam*, the “repair of the world”, making the world a better place.

Origin of term: Mishnah. Rabbis rendered rulings “*Mip'nei tikkun ha-'olam* -- for the sake of the repair of the world”. מפני תיקון העולם

Not required by Torah, but deemed necessary to keep order in the world. [Gittin 32a].

In the second half of the 'Alenu, which some congregations omit, we hope for the day when we will be able “to perfect the world under God's kingship” -- *l'takken 'olam b'malkhut Shaddai*.

Traditional Judaism: The way to *tikkun 'olam* is to perform commandments, both ritual and ethical. The more performance, the more the world will inch towards perfection in the Messianic age.

Joel Alperson, past national campaign chairman of Jewish Federations of North America, said:

Judaism is more than 'tikkun 'olam'... Jews increasingly try to find their Judaic meaning in social [or] political causes, [such as] immigration reform, Supreme Court appointments, environmentalism, women's rights, etc. Putting aside the merit of the positions taken, let's be honest: These "tikkun olam" pursuits might feel good and even do some good, but they do little to build Jewish communities...

If Jews continue to prioritize these social [or] political efforts over proven religious practices, we must have the courage to acknowledge that we have substituted all these secular causes for Judaism... They are increasingly taking the place of serious Jewish education and Jewish practice...

It is the discipline of leading a traditional Jewish life that also reminds us how best to engage in repairing the world... Ironically, by overemphasizing tikkun 'olam we could ultimately, through lack of Jewish knowledge and experience, lose the very impetus that put us in the tikkun olam business in the first place.

...We will be severely weakened if we don't acknowledge that we must repair ourselves far more urgently than we must repair the world.

[<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/07/27/3088736/op-ed-judaism-is-more-than-tikkun-olam>]