

### A Neo-Chasidic Reform Rabbi

You know, it is so funny: sometimes you can plan out everything down to the last detail and you think you have a good idea what's coming and still, you can be caught completely off-guard. That's sort of what happened with one small aspect of my arrival to my first congregation.

When I'd just been ordained from the Reform movement's seminary, Hebrew Union College in New York City, and had matched with my first congregation in Denver, I wrote a short personal introduction for the congregation's newsletter. This being my first interaction with them, I spent a lot of time and thought on writing that short article. I hoped and even *expected* to hear from members about certain parts of my background.

I thought folks would want to talk about the work I'd done with Hospice patients or about the summers I spent working at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. I expected that some would want to hear about the years I'd spent in Israel or, at least, my role in the Navy as a chaplain. Not a single question about any of that! Do you know what captured their attention? It was one little expression that I included. I'll read you a short excerpt from that article. I wrote:

I would describe myself as a neo-Chasidic Reform Jew in the sense that I enjoy participating in fervent, heart-felt, active prayer. My style of *tefillah* is honest, energetic, personal and fun. I don't believe, for a second, in a God who intended for us to sit, bored in *shul*, while someone else *davens* on our behalf. <sup>1</sup>

It was the first sentence that so many individuals responded to. I had thought about that term "neo-Chasidic Reform Jew" for many years. Honestly, I thought I'd coined the term myself (I didn't) and was a bit proud of it but never expected so many to zero in on it. And the variety of responses was what was most amazing. Some were

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<sup>1</sup> TelRav, Rabbi Jay. Newsletter Article, July, 2007. The Keshet, Temple Sinai, Denver, Co.

grateful to see it – resonating with *Hasidut*, themselves. Others were upset and defensive about a *Hasidic* rabbi infiltrating their progressive, modern Jewish community. A few heard the word, “neo” and stopped right there, able only to free associate it with the expression Neo-Nazi. Still others were simply curious without bias and wanted to understand how two, seemingly contradictory terms, could be melded into an apparent oxy-moron: a Neo-Chasidic Reform Jew.

After defending the usage and having a lot of careful conversations to smooth back over my arrival in the community, I more or less, put it away for many years. But in the last few years, I’ve been studying material that has reopened my affinity for the concept and I think it’s time to explore it a bit with you here. So, now I’ll take a few moments to try and explain what it means starting with a brief history lesson.

The Hasidic movement was a grassroots effort to put the ownership of authentic Judaism back in the hands of everyday Jews. Religious Authority had become the privilege of the learned elite of the yeshivas. In the dark days of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish community was broadly depressed following the soul-crushing disappointment of the false messiah, Shabbtai Tzvi. They were tired of looking externally for powerful leaders and were ready for a Judaism that was safe, personal and available. Enter a heretofore unknown presence, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, who taught his followers that there existed an entry point for any Jew who felt passionate and was willing to take his or her own relationship with Spirituality seriously. A marvel approach, it taught that one need not be schooled in the centuries of Jewish Legend or in the intricacies of Jewish Law. It was not even necessary for one to be literate; It was, at its essence, for those who were spiritual but not religious. He cultivated an awareness of Oneness in their lives and encouraged his students to grow closer to that beautiful energy – to experience *devekut*, clinging to God. He introduced the world to a Judaism that burned from within the individual’s sense of joy and awe. It emphasized the power of story-telling, dancing, personal experience and a transcendent, non-dual God that was not separate from the universe but was, in fact the entirety of reality.

As you can imagine, the leadership of the Jewish world was mortified by this. The educated elite of the community who maintained control over what was considered

“normative” and what was “Jewishly out of bounds,” criticized the Baal Shem Tov even during his lifetime. They declared his dancing and joyful prayer antithetical to the holiness of shabbat and that he was leading others to desecrate the dignity of the sacred day.

One of his disciples asked him about this. How could such pure and honest pursuit of God be criticized? He explained it in the traditional style of a parable: Once, there was a wedding party and musicians were seated in the corner and the guests were dancing and swirling around the room wildly in their merriment. But a deaf man passed by outside and looked in the window and saw the guests leaping about the room and whirling their arms about wildly. From his vantage point, the deaf man could not see the instruments, nor could he hear the music to which they danced. And he said ‘see how they fling themselves about, it is a house filled with crazy people!’” The Baal Shem Tov was teaching his student, and us, that there will be personal differences in the way we relate to God – Some may dance, some may study and others will criticize out of their zealotry and jealousy!

And about the second part of that excerpt I read you: My style of *tefillah* is honest, energetic, personal and fun. I don't believe, for a second, in a God who intended for us to sit, bored in *shul*, while someone else *davens* on our behalf.

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So, if you've been paying attention to the emphasis on the personal experience, then I hope you're asking yourself the obvious question: If I am truly opposed to the top-down leadership model for Judaism and I favor the idea of Jews finding their personal connection to God and the World, then why would I spend 5 years in seminary to become one of those educated leaders, those intermediaries standing between the Jewish people and their spirituality, that I claim to oppose?!? It's the right question and one that I'd like to address.

I grew up in a pretty typical Reform-affiliated family. I attended religious school through graduation in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and was growing into an unquestioning Jew until I

suffered the first meaningful loss in my life – a beloved great aunt. In the face of sorrow and confusion, Judaism failed to provide me the comfort and answers I sought. Sadly, as for so many of you sitting here today, the transmission of Judaism from generation to generation had lost some important information along the way.

One of those 12 teachers I had during 12 years of religious school was supposed to tell me that the physical world wasn't created in a literal seven days and that Noah and his Ark was a sacred myth but still – a myth. One of the rabbis I grew up with was supposed to deliver a sermon teaching me that the miracles of nature that Moses witnessed, a burning bush or a sea split wide would not present themselves before me but that we could still make meaning out of them. Somebody, anybody, was supposed to tell me that bad things happen to good people and that, when they do, it does not mean an abandonment or worse, a punishment by an angry God. I was asking the ageless, perhaps universal question: If God will not do what I ask, then what good was this religion to me? But I was asking the wrong people and I was asking the wrong questions – I was looking to others and not myself. I was trusting what *they* knew of the Universe and not what *I* knew. Here is a Chasidic parable:

The king sent a letter to a wise but skeptical man who, in his faraway province, refused to accept it. He was one of those men who think too much, who complicate their lives by complicating small things. He couldn't understand, not in the slightest what the king might want of him: “Why would the sovereign, so powerful and rich, address himself to me, who am less than nothing? There are those more important than I.” Without an answer, he preferred to believe the letter a misunderstanding. Worse: a fraud. Worse yet: a practical joke. “Your king,” he said to the messenger, “does not exist.”<sup>2</sup>

I blamed my rabbis for perpetuating the big hoax. Atheism was the natural reaction and I pitied everyone else around me who believed what they were told. But, then I was lucky enough to meet some dear mentors who led me to explore and taught me

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<sup>2</sup> Souls on Fire, p.173.

what questions I needed to ask and showed me what to read and guided me in my learning. I learned new Jewish ways to understand God and Reality. I learned that my ways were not only permissible but could be found in the ancient texts. And most importantly, learned that Judaism held a place for me.

I decided that I wanted to serve as a partner to those on their journey and to help them begin to form some answers. Answers to big, unasked questions such as: “What is that excited energy I feel when standing in deep connection with nature?” And, “what words can I use to explain the powerful relationship I feel with my soulmate, my children, the sound of cicadas or the sublime joy of a perfect cup of coffee?” And, of course, “What should I be doing with this precious time I have to be alive?” The Universe is so, immensely perfect and, when we pause and see that fact, it is at the same time, wildly invigorating as well as the most peaceful truth we’ve ever discovered.

One of the best parts of my role in congregations is listening to you all share your thoughts in my study and around the Shabbat table and in the grocery store and at community events and at Cove Island Park on Tuesdays and, well you get the idea. One of the most painful parts of my role is when I hear how many of us have been failed and perhaps even injured by a Judaism that was presented as too rigid to accommodate our personal needs. As we grew, too many of us were left unsatisfied by the child-focused Jewish experience. This immature version was absolutely necessary for us...as kids...but then someone forgot to show us a grown-up Jewish worldview and spirituality that would satisfy us as adults. Somehow, the message that “Judaism has something for everyone”, gets lost along the way.

A bat mitzvah student concerned that the rabbi would be upset, recently timidly told me she doesn’t think she believes in God. An old man introduced himself to me two days ago with his name and the fact that he is an atheist. One is just learning how to say it – the other has had decades of practice but both are stating, “these are my terms - can we still be in relationship.” The irony is, if I asked them to describe the God that they don’t believe in, I assure you, I would be able to say, “Well, I don’t believe in that God, either!” Rejecting one Judaism in favor of creating our own version has real value.

A central responsibility of any worthwhile religion must be to provide us with a measure of comfort and meaning when we run up against adversity. If we don't find it where we expected it, we might be tempted to accuse the religion and its leaders of failure. This struggle may even be an essential element of the process of growth. Perhaps you have heard Paulo Coelho's story of the man who found a butterfly's cocoon?

He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. When it seemed unable to make any more progress, the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped a hole in the cocoon and the butterfly then emerged easily.

But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with undersized wings and was never able to fly.

What the man, in his kindness and haste, did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid into the butterfly's wings so that it could fly.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes struggle is exactly what we need in our life if we hope to grow.

So, what do I believe? I believe the Sh'ma that says, "Listen, you community of God-wrestlers, The one we call 'Adonai our God,' that Adonai is Oneness." I have experienced what the mystics know which is that I can find greater connection with the Universe in silence than I can in words. I believe that there is no place where I end and God begins; it is a seamless unity. I believe that God's hands are my hands and when I look at humanity with respect and love, I'm seeing them through God's eyes. This is known as "Non-Dual Judaism" and it is to be found throughout our tradition – back to

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<sup>3</sup> Coelho, Paulo. The Lesson of the Butterfly. <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2007/12/10/the-lesson-of-the-butterfly>

our earliest texts. It's familiar to you – you just didn't realize that it was familiar to the rabbis.

Rabbi Art Green writes, “In the midst of life, our ordinariness is interrupted.”<sup>4</sup> It is that moment that comes crashing in on our awareness in which we suddenly have a profound understanding: We are nothing more than one of the tiniest elements of the creativity of evolution. It is a process that goes back 14 billion years and continues to this very moment. Not that there is a mindful being driving it, but it *is* a remarkable process. Maimonides teaches that the anthropomorphism of God is fundamentally a mistake that distorts our view not only of God, but of evil, of the nature of the living universe, and of our ethical obligations to other species.<sup>5</sup> Green, again, writes, “Scientific truth is not “wrong;” it is simply not the entire picture.”<sup>6</sup> This is so reassuring to those of us who are science geeks! Every new understanding of ourselves, our psyche, the physical universe and God is a step forward in evolution...this is what I believe is meant by revelation.

If you are looking around at worship this morning and thinking, “well, he’s leading exactly the Jewish experience he claims is problematic,” remember that the Judaism I’m describing is not for everyone. But, I’ll bet that the worship here today is not like the Yom Kippur services at your grandparents’ synagogue. The changes are slow and they are subtle but they are happening. And, in partnership with Grant Kallen, I’ll be working with a group of about 20 of you this year who want to push further and faster into this spirituality – who are ready to struggle through to an understanding of what non-duality means to them. We’ll take a journey that will have to begin with a strengthening of one’s will to unlearn a lot of early teachings but I assure you, others who’ve already taken this journey of exploration, are wildly grateful for the liberation from the ancient presentations of Judaism that insisted on a theology they could not confess, only restricting their spiritual growth. Maybe this sounds like a journey you’re

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<sup>4</sup> Green, Arthur. *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (The Franz Rosenzweig Lecture Series) (p. 4). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Seidenberg, Rabbi David. *Being Here Now*. Response to Arthur Green’s Review of *KABBALAH AND ECOLOGY: God’s Image in the More- Than- Human World*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.13

ready to take with us – be sure to sign up this afternoon – today is the final day of registration for all of our Sinai Circles.

I rejected the words of my childhood prayerbook and yet I became a professional Jew. I cannot say that I felt compelled by God to be a rabbi? For that matter, I cannot say that I feel compelled by God to do *anything*? But I do feel compelled. I feel like I can do nothing other than be honest with you and with myself about my beliefs. And, to validate the spiritual journey and search for meaning that you're on. So, to answer your question more directly: why would I want to become a rabbi? I will quote Rabbi Jamie Korngold: "people are starving for more out of life". I believe that Judaism has a lot to offer those who are looking. Not just Jewish Culture but also Jewish Thought and Jewish Spirituality. I think that, for those of you who have chosen to be sitting here this evening, there is something that has brought you back, year after year. (My guess is that your mother's guilt stopped working several years ago.) I chose to become a rabbi because I have a path to walk. Maybe you are walking in a similar direction and I would sure enjoy the company. My role as a Neo-Chasidic Reform Rabbi is to help you find your own spiritual paths...to teach you that you don't need me. Community remains essential – and Temple Sinai delivers a beautiful communal experience – but absolute reliance on the rabbi need not be the core of that model. Perhaps, if I am successful in my rabbinate, I will eliminate the demand for my profession and put myself out of a job. Rest assured, if it comes to that, I've always wanted to work in construction as a crane operator – I'll be alright.

5782 has just begun. Don't kill time – sanctify it. Don't assume this is all there is – it isn't. Seek out the ways you can live the life you're living but with greater depth and higher spirits. Let us not be the same people that we are today when we meet again next year.

*Keyn Y'hi Ratzon – Let this be God's will. ~G'mar Chatimah Tovah*