

The Role of Religion in Our Lives — Liberating or Enslaving?



I had never heard of Jefferson Bethke before. But as I listened to his YouTube rap entitled “Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus,” I found it a mesmerizing critique of all organized religion, not just Christianity, while at the same time affirming spiritual faith. Bethke is 22 and his video has gotten over 18 million hits.

According to David Kinnamen, the author of *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*, Bethke is representative of many young people. He

said in an NPR interview, “They’re rejecting institutional forms of church, but they’re not necessarily rejecting spirituality.” The young people studied by Kinnamen find that religion does not sufficiently address the complexity of the life they are living, but they are searching and probing faith traditions for answers that make sense to them, and seeking the wisdom of men and women of faith whose life experience can help them address their probing perplexities.

I found this a very interesting and enlightening observation and analysis. Young Jews are experiencing their religion in much the same way that young Christians are. They embrace their identity, probe their faith, but do not find the strict observance of the dictates of their religion compelling or fulfilling. Of course there are those who do, some of whom embrace the most rigid and limiting manifestations of Judaism. But for most young Jews, and, I venture to say, even for most older adult Jews, Judaism as a “way of life” that governs our whole way of doing things is not the way we experience Judaism.

As a rabbi, this is a sea change in terms of how I look at Judaism. When I became a rabbi, I was taught, and expected to teach, that Judaism was a comprehensive way of living that touched on every aspect of being, and governed every decision, large and small, ritual and moral.

I quickly discovered, however, that this is not the way most people view religion. The demand that each person observe in exactly the same way and feel commanded to do the very same actions, drives many people away from the riches of faith. It makes them a-religious and atheistic.

Rather, as Jews, we need to see Judaism informing our lives, but not governing our lives. We look to our tradition for responses to many of life’s peak experiences, both happy and sad. We dive in when we are touched by the tradition, and we step back when it is irrelevant to our lives. We select those practices that move us and ignore those that do not. We are episodic in our observance, embracing as much as we are able, and which helps us make sense out of life. We do not need consistency. The demand to be consistent will only succeed in making us feel like hypocrites when we do the things that are meaningful and that will drive us away.

I was struck by two recent articles in the newspaper. One spoke of the quest across the line that demarcates the religious from the secular, among those who affirm faith and those who do not, for a “Universal *Shiva*.” The death of a loved one is traumatic for us all, whether we are believers or non-believers. We need to deal with it. There are many who are probing traditions to find a way of responding that adds meaning to this universal experience. I found it fascinating that the term “*Shiva*” would be applied, and many of the lessons of traditional *Shiva* would be adapted in a creative way.

The other article was about the use of the *huppah*, the wedding canopy. The *huppah* is required at every Jewish wedding, and present at many marriages where one of the parties is Jewish. But according to this article, the *huppah* has now found its way into ceremonies where neither party has any connection to Judaism. It has been embraced as a potent symbol of the bond of marriage, and filled with new meaning, far from the religion that originated it. It too demonstrates the universal power of some of our rituals to strike a chord in our common humanity.

Some might find these developments discouraging. However, for me, these are some of the most hopeful expressions of faith in the modern era. Religions with long histories can become devoid of passion and faith and fail to touch the soul. Their practices become oppressive requirements instead of liberating expansiveness of the soul, ways of controlling people instead of empowering people. The selective approach to religious life is a testament to the human spirit and our longing for meaning. It is empowering and regenerative.

Judaism has survived by learning from our surrounding cultures and borrowing from them. We have not survived because of isolation.

Judaism has survived because we have listened to our adherents instead of demanding that they fall in line and get with the program.

Judaism has survived because of creativity, not because of blind obedience to the past.

We are approaching *Pesah*, the time of year when we celebrate our establishment as a free people. It is our season of liberation. The spirit of liberation has always informed the best of our tradition. It is a fearlessness to search for God in the most unlikely places, and to invite God into our lives from the most unlikely places, to lift us from our spiritual confusion to exaltation.

Pesah teaches us that in every generation we must experience the Exodus as if for the first time. I believe that this means that we must fearlessly experience the quest for meaning in our lives, and the meaning of our existence. We must search for fresh answers, unfettered by the limits of the past, to the challenges of this time in our lives. When we do that faithfully, I believe we will find that there is much ancient wisdom in our tradition that will call to us with meaning that we will be able to embrace with whole hearts, not because someone demands it of us, but because our soul is finding joy and meaning in its teaching.

Cindy and I extend our blessings for a meaningful, liberating, fulfilling Passover season for you and all your loved ones.

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