

Three Big Jewish Ideas  
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I recently read an article by Neal Gabler, a senior fellow at the University of Southern California. It was titled “The Elusive Big Idea.” The premise of the article is that today we don’t care about ideas in the same way as previous generations did.

“We are living in an increasingly post-idea world,” he writes, “a world in which big, thought-provoking ideas that can’t be monetized are of so little intrinsic value that fewer people are generating them, and fewer outlets are disseminating them. . . . Bold ideas are almost passe.” He argues that “rationality, science, evidence, logical argument and debate” have been replaced by a resurgence of “superstition, faith, opinion and orthodoxy.

Pundits have replaced philosophers. “Outrageousness” has replaced “thoughtfulness.” We need short sound bites that we can absorb quickly, but lack subtlety and nuance, that paint the world as zeroes and ones, and call for allegiance to one end or the other of an often absurd polarity.

Gabler argues that a large part of the problem is simply the explosion of information that is at our fingertips. Past generations used information as the starting point for developing ideas, theories, hypotheses about the universe, how things work, what they mean. Today we are drowning in information. We are unable to process it before the next wave washes over us.

We cannot extract the meaningful from the clutter of noise. And we don't have the time to reflect on what is ultimately original, significant, and lasting.

As I read, and reread the article, I was fascinated not just by his critique of contemporary society - which I can truly relate to - but by the whole notion of the "big idea."

And I asked myself -- what are the Big Ideas that Judaism has brought to the world? What are the unique contributions that Judaism has made to the world, that mold how we understand reality, and can give ultimate purpose and meaning to our lives.

This morning, I want to explore with you three of those Big Jewish Ideas. They are: Portability, Monotheism, and Human Equality.

### *Portability*

Let's start with Portability. What do I mean by that?

First commandment to Abraham is "Go to the land I will show you." However God appears to Abraham, not in Eretz Yisrael, but in Haran. In the midst of Abraham's own society. His pagan birthplace. His parents' idolatrous homeland.

Abraham's God, and God's teaching are not tied to any particular place. God can be experienced, and God's commandments apply, everywhere in the world.

In the *Kedushah* we ask: **איה מקום כבודו?** "Where is the place of God's Glorious Presence?" And the answer comes back: **כבודו מלא עולם**, "God's Glorious

Presence fills the universe.”

Like Abraham, we carry the teaching with us wherever we go. We are often called the People of the Book. Indeed, we are really the People of the Idea. Because ideas transcend every physical and temporal boundary.

This is what has kept the Jewish people alive through the centuries. Not limited to a place, we survived when our place was no longer available to us. Indeed, the Midrash teaches us that when the Jewish people went into exile from our land, God went into exile with us.

This past May, Cindy and I led a group of congregants on a memorable trip to Prague in the Czech Republic, and then to Israel. We visited the site of the concentration camp in Terezin. There, in what had been a wine cellar, or root cellar, Jews imprisoned in the camp created a Hidden Synagogue. They gathered in secret in the most oppressive conditions, and they succeeded in decorating it with artistic renderings of verses from Scripture and the liturgy. Among the verses was the vow, taken from Psalm 137, “If I forget thee, O, Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning.”

But it is not only a matter of exile, when we were driven out of our land. Even during periods when Jews could live in Eretz Yisrael, as, thank God, we can today, there has always been a Diaspora, as there is today. Jews live all over the world. As Bernard Malamud ends his short story “The Jewbird,” truly “There are Jews everywhere!”

And we develop and evolve differently in whatever community we find ourselves. Our interpretation of Torah varies from place to place. Our artwork shows the influence of the countries where Jews reside. And the intersection of Jews from different cultures, responding in various ways to the same text, ideal, or value, does not diminish the power

of our creativity, it enhances it, expands it, and opens new vistas.

We adapt, and we adopt; we survive and we thrive.

In modern day Israel we see this more than anywhere in the world. It is the place where Jewish cultures meet. The mystic and the rationalist. The Ashkenazi and the Sephardi. The isolated communities of Africa and the wired-in communities of the United States. The avant- gard and the self-isolated. The fervent believer and the passionate atheist.

Judaism as we know it owes its survival and its vitality to portability. It is an affirmation of the primacy of ideas; that what we think, is more important than who we are or where we live, or when we live. Ideas cannot be enslaved, or exiled, or killed. Big ideas, true ideas, take on a life of their own, and always reseed themselves in new, fertile mental soil. Inevitably.

Without portability, Judaism would have died long ago and we would be one of the relics of history, studied as an ancient civilization.

Instead, we are a living, thriving people.

With an eternal future.

This I believe.

## *Monotheism*

The second idea is Monotheism. It is enshrined in the affirmation of our faith, the Sh'ma, which we proclaim each morning and evening, when we go to sleep and wake again, and when we feel death opposing.

Monotheism affirms the idea that God is One. That there is only One God. That all other Gods are imposters. Figments of human imagination and human pretension.

That is not to say that there is only one religion. Judaism asserts that there is one God, but that there are many paths to God. It does not say, as some other religions do, that there is only one way to God, and that if an individual wants to achieve salvation it must be through Judaism.

The righteous of the all religions can achieve eternity.

So what is significance of Monotheism? The alternatives, polytheism and dualism, perceive that the world of essence is a battleground. And that life itself reflects the battles in the heavens above by competing deities.

Monotheism, on the other hand, proclaims that One God is the source of all that exists. Reality is not a conflict of competing essences, but a unity of complementary events.

In a mysterious and ironic passage, the Talmud teaches us that just as we are to bless God for the good that happens to us, so we are to bless God for the bad that we experience!

Now this is problematic. Emotionally, how do we bless God when something bad happens to us? Are we saying that God is the cause of the evil that befalls us?

We struggle with that dilemma, that conundrum, every day. We affirm the existence of One God, whom we believe is Good, and all powerful. And still terrible things happen in the world. How is that possible?

I confess that I have no answer. But some questions are better left unanswered. I prefer to struggle with the question than give a platitudinous answer.

I believe that monotheism tells me more about how I should view the world and my experiences in the world than about the answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people.

Monotheism affirms the unity of reality. That I must embrace life. All of it. The good and the bad. Sometimes things happen that are obviously good and happy. And sometimes things happen which are patently painful, and fill me with sorrow. We would rather have happy times than sad times. Usually it is easier to accept the happy times than the sad times.

We want the sad times to go away. But there is a danger in rushing them off too quickly. Sometimes well meaning friends will tell someone who is ill, or who is grieving for the death of a loved one: Think positively. Don't dwell on pain or sorrow.

To do that, though deprives us of the reality of experience. Inadvertently we are telling them that their pain is not real. That their loss and suffering don't matter. That they should not be feeling what they are feeling.

Need to embrace our most painful moments because otherwise we will never really overcome them. Painful times give us the opportunity to grow and be stronger, more resilient.

Monotheism teaches us not to recoil from the hard times that befall us. Not to pretend that they are not painful. Out of our pain we can find ways of overcoming. Sometimes we just learn to live with it and realize that there is still much we can experience with joy and satisfaction. Sometimes we learn empathy and feeling for others when we confront what pains us.

Monotheism is not a great idea because it teaches us about God.

Monotheism is a great idea because it teaches us how to look at the world. And how we are to live in a world that is often filled with pain and sorrow. And not despair.

In the original version of *Seder Avodah*, there is a version of the Prayer for Mourners that asks God to “strengthen and sustain them in this their time of grief and sorrow, and shelter them and all their loved ones from tears.”

In the new version, I revised the prayer to read: “and remember them and all their loved ones for good and long lives.” I changed the text for two reasons. First, it is a more faithful translation of the original Hebrew prayer. But more importantly, I changed it based on a teaching of my rabbi, the rabbi with whom I grew up at Temple Beth El in Rochester, New York, Rabbi Abraham J. Karp.

Rabbi Karp used to tell how when he was a newly ordained rabbi in Kansas City, MO, he used to leave every Shiva house by saying to the mourners, “May you never again know sadness and tears.”

However, one day he had an insight. “I realized that I was really wishing them a very short life.” If we live long enough, we will inevitably know pain and sorrow, we will weep over loss, failure, and pain. The essential challenge is not to avoid pain but to be able to accept pain and grow from every experience.

Monotheism gives us that courage to be human, and neither deny or be defeated by the evil that happens to us.

In the Book of Job, his wife urges him “Curse God and die.”

Job refuses. He says,

גַּם אֶת־הַטּוֹב נִקְבֵּל מֵאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־הָרָע לֹא נִקְבֵּל?

“Shall we accept good from God, and not also accept evil?”

Now just change one word in that sentence. Instead of “God,” read “Life.” “Shall we accept good from life, and not also accept evil?”

Monotheism teaches us that God is One. That life is One. That we need to embrace the totality of experience and develop strength, and courage. There is blessing in every moment, every experience, in the whole of living.

### *Human Equality*

Now let’s move from the unity of God to the unity of humanity. This is a fundamental teaching of Judaism.

In the opening chapters of the Torah, we are told that in the beginning, God

created just one human being.

Why just one? Why not a whole civilization?

In the *Mishnah*, in tractate *Sanhedrin*, we are taught:

לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, מפני שלום הבריות, שלא יאמר אדם לחברו אבא גדול מאביך. ושלא יהו מינין אומרים, הרבה רשויות בשמים. ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד וכולן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחברו. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא העולם.

“In the beginning, God created just one human being, in order for there to be peace among all humanity. This way, no person could say, ‘My ancestor is better than your ancestor,’ because we are all descended from the same ancestor. Moreover, God did not want anyone to believe that there were many Gods, each one creating a distinct race or civilization. Moreover, this teaches God’s greatness. For humans stamp coins from the same mold and each coin is the same as another. But God creates every person from the same mold as the original human being, but no two are ever alike. Therefore every person can say ‘For me was the world created.’”

This is truly a grand affirmation of human equality. No one is better than another because of ancestry. We all are the children of one God. We do not represent turmoil in the heavens. We are not destined to fight one another. We are all essentially the same, and yet each one is different, and that is God’s greatness, not our greatness or weakness. And every person has the right to say, “The world was created for me. I am that important.”

But we must also add, “And so are you. That important. Because the world was created for you too!”

And yet we continue to create and perpetuate divisions in the world. And at the root of it all is the notion that some groups are better, more important, more worthy than others. We never learn.

The turmoil goes on. We divide the world. Into Jews and Gentiles; Israelis and Arabs; citizens and illegal aliens; white and black, Latino and Asian; Gay and Straight; Blue State and Red State.

We let our differences divide us. We pre-judge because of these differences. We are trying so hard to feel good about ourselves, that we have to lessen the worth of others to do it.

It is so easy to demonize the other rather than to see us all as flesh and blood human beings, who, like you and I, is just trying to survive and thrive in this short life.

Equality of humankind is an ideal we probably will never achieve fully. But it is the noble force that needs to drive us.

We may not be able to make everyone equal in society, but the reason for that failure ought not to be our will, but our ability.

The bar ought to be low for inclusion, and high for exclusion.

It ought to recognize the vitality that every human being can bring to society. We need to recognize the utter uniqueness, particularity of every human being, and honor

each other for our essential human equality.

### *Why We Are Here*

These, then, are three Big Jewish Ideas. Portability, Monotheism, and Human Equality.

What do they have in common? What makes them “Big,” fundamental?

They are all ideas that influence our actions by influencing how we perceive the world. They teach us to embrace the world, and to change the world. They inspire us to grow the human spirit within us. That it is never too late; there are no limits; and no one is excluded.

*For me* the world was created. *And for you.*

It is up to each of us to embrace all of life as a blessing. It is up to each of us how we will make the world a better place for ourselves, and for others who are, of essence, no different from ourselves.

That’s why we are here. Granted this brief opportunity for living.

May God give us the will to embrace these three great ideas of Judaism, that make life possible.

That the teachings of Torah are portable, and that they are accessible to us in every generation and in every place where each of us is.

That God is one, and therefore life is one, and we must face each experience with courage and appreciation in order to live.

That humanity is one, and we must acknowledge the innate worth of every human being, and not prejudge individuals based on stereotypes, just as we would not want others to prejudge us.

At this season of a new year, may it be God's will for us to take these lessons to heart and live them.