

ROSH HASHANAH I
5777

Morry Schwartz is standing at the proverbial Pearly Gates and the admitting angel asks him what good deeds he did when he lived on earth. Morry tells the angel that he wasn't such a good person and did not really do good deeds. The angel says that surely there must be something. Morry thinks for a moment and says: "Well, I was walking through the park and I saw a motorcycle gang accosting this elderly woman. The leader of the gang pushed her down and took her purse. I went up to him and grabbed the purse back and told him what a horrible and despicable person he was. The angel is very impressed and asks Morry when did this happen? Morry said: "About ten minutes ago."

One of my favorite movies is "the Frisco Kid" with Gene Wilder, *alav hashalom*. There is a scene in the latter part of the movie when Gene Wilder, Rabbi Avram, and Harrison Ford, Tommy, are attacked by bandits and Rabbi Avram is in the position to save either the little Torah scroll he brought from Poland or save Tommy whom the bandits are ready to shoot. Rabbi Avram hesitates for an existential moment and then saves Tommy. Afterwards, Rabbi Avram feels terrible and when Tommy asks him why he responds that he is ashamed that he hesitated even for a moment as to what God would want him to do—to save a human life or a Torah scroll.

Rosh HaShanah commemorates the creation of the world and humanity. It is significant that our High Holy Day period begins not with a particular focus on the Jewish people but with a universal focus on all of life. So much religious observance is not concerned with life at all. People are being murdered, injured, persecuted, oppressed and discriminated against all in the name of God. Our rabbis tell us that an extremely observant Jew who is not concerned with another person's physical safety, feelings and dignity is like one who goes into a mikvah holding an impure reptile. Such a person can immerse a thousand times and never be clean.

Sadly the debate as to "Who Is a Jew" continues but for me this is not the question we need to be asking. The question we must ask is what is it to be living as a Jew? There are commandments, laws and values that determine whether at any given moment we are being Jewish. This applies to all Jews whether we are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or secular; whether we are Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal; whether we live in Israel or in the United States. There are many who technically are not Jewish but who live Jewish lives and are raising Jewish children.

Traditional observance is essential to Conservative Judaism knowing how it can contribute significantly to our lives. Observance is necessary but not sufficient. Our observance must line up with Jewish ethics. For example, we need to be as concerned with how our kosher food gets to our tables as we are with whether it is certified. It is not either/or; it is both. Concern for how workers and animals are treated is as important as the knife used and the blessings recited. When we are concerned with not only the letter of the law but also with the spirit of the law we are being preeminently Jewish.

We are told in our Torah that we are created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim*. What does this mean? Our rabbis teach that we are to be like God by imitating God; God is compassionate and we are to be compassionate, God is forgiving and we are to be forgiving. Maimonides, Rambam, understands being created in the image of God as a statement of the very purpose of our being alive. When we appreciate that every human being is created equally in the image of God we are preeminently being Jewish. When we are not being compassionate, when we are being judgmental and condemning whether of a homeless person or a poor single mother, of immigrants and refugees, of someone who is different from us or with whom we disagree, we are not being Jewish. When compassion determines what we do and say, we are not only preeminently being Jewish, we are being like God in Whose image we are created.

Asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness are prerequisites for living Jewishly. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin asks: "In how many of our families, at the level of first cousin or closer, are there people not on speaking terms?" How many in synagogues today throughout the Jewish world are angry, hurt, resentful and unforgiving? How many are there who refuse to ask for forgiveness or grant forgiveness? The author, Bruce Feiler, says: "Being Jewish means to be a human being who strives to be kinder and more forgiving." The only parashah that we read from three times a year, *Ki Tisa*, is the portion with the sin of the Golden Calf and with G-d's forgiveness for it. God was hurt and angry but compassion moved God to forgiveness. Our being created in God's image allows us to do the same. A Jew who does not ask for forgiveness or who does not forgive is like one who immerses in a mikvah every day holding an impure reptile. Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda emphasizes that the Torah commands us to transform an enemy into a friend; how much the more so are we obligated to make peace with our own family members? Letting go of hurt and anger is some of the hardest work there is. "Who is mighty?" Ben Zoma asks. "The person who transforms one who hates into one who loves." When we do this we are preeminently being Jewish.

Yehudah Amichai wrote: "The eve of Rosh HaShanah. At the house that's being built, a man makes a vow; not to do anything wrong in it, only to love." Our Torah readings for Rosh HaShanah are not about kings and power brokers. Our Torah readings on Rosh HaShanah are about homes and families, dysfunction, jealousy, sibling rivalry, parental favoritism, family members hurting other family members. Our Torah also tells us of families coming together, reuniting and embracing. Why do we bless our children in the names of Ephraim and Menasseh? Because they were the first Jewish siblings to live at peace with one another. Rambam taught that the more loving and forgiving we are, the more we are living in God's image. Rabbi Isaac Luria explained that the only way to fulfill the commandment to love God is by loving other human beings and the only way to do this is by being compassionate and forgiving. This is being Jewish. How much clearer can this be?

When asked how else we can love God, our rabbis tell us by taking care of God's creation. Jewish environmentalism began in our Torah. Too many of us do not understand this or want to accept this. In Genesis we are commanded, literally, to be guardians of the earth, *shomrei*

adamah. For over three thousand years Jews have been obligated to be such guardians. When we are not, we are not being Jewish. When, for whatever reasons, we harm our world including denying or minimizing the environmental threats to our world, we are not being Jewish. There are reasons the Heschel Center for Sustainability exists in Tel Aviv and has as its mission to lead Israel to become a society based on caring for the future of the land and its inhabitants. The astrophysicist Hubert Reeves describes human beings “as the most insane species. We worship an invisible God and destroy a visible Nature. Unaware that the Nature we are destroying was created by this God we are worshipping.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch when asked why he wasted time to travel to Switzerland responded: “I do not want to be asked when I get to heaven why I did not go to see God’s majestic Alps. Rabbi Heschel taught us that to live a quality life we must experience what he called radical amazement: sunrises and sunsets, child birth, how the human brain works or how our diaphragms expand and contract. When we are experiencing a moment of radical amazement we are experiencing life preeminently as Jews.

To be Jewish requires being thankful. In Judaism thankfulness is not a matter of politeness or etiquette; it is a matter of awareness and consciousness. Therefore, being thankful defines at any given moment whether we are being Jewish. Americans throw away close to 40 million tons of food every year. We could feed the entire world every day with the food we waste every day including the food thrown away every Shabbat at synagogues throughout this country. Much of the food we waste we take ourselves filling our own plates. Studies show that our children learn their eating habits from their parents and yes, our children waste a lot of food. When we are not thankful at a given moment we are not being Jewish. When we waste our world—throw our world away—we are not living as Jews. When we truly value the food we have and all of our good fortune, when we offer a blessing of thanksgiving before we eat and before we get up from the table—albeit quietly, briefly and in English—we are preeminently being Jewish.

The author Neal Gabler observes: “American Jews overwhelmingly continue to stand up for the oppressed, fight for the rights of others, donate to charities and causes that defend the powerless or in other words, we continue to act as Jews even when we do not have to. This is not surprising given that for over 3000 years our Torah has commanded us to do so: “Justice, justice you must pursue; stand up for and protect the widow, orphan and stranger; never do to anyone what the Egyptians did to you.” When we do not fulfill these commandments we are not living as Jews. Albert Einstein wrote that that Judaism possesses “an almost fanatic love for justice and that the bond that unites Jews over thousands of years is the democratic ideal of social justice coupled with the ideal of mutual aid and tolerance for all people.” We have gotten a lot of “nachus mileage” from Einstein being a Jew and a Zionist. For our own integrity we must try to live by Einstein’s Jewish values. Rabbi Jack Riemer teaches that we owe God for our lives and all of our blessings and that the only currency that counts in the divine economy to pay God back with is our good deeds.

When we are not concerned about the injustice in our society, be it on the streets, in the courtroom and in our penal system, when we do not care about hundreds of thousands of

young poor people mostly of color locked up for years for minor crimes and the consequences of this on the individuals themselves, their futures and their families, we are not living as Jews. When, for example, we do not care about the state of Alabama having 19 appellate judges who review death sentences all being white, 41 of the 42 elected District Attorneys in Alabama being white, Alabama judges routinely overruling juries that vote against imposing the death penalty and that Alabama imposes the death penalty at the highest rate in our nation—we are not living as Jews; when we do care deeply about such injustices in Alabama and throughout our country, we are.

Wherever there is power, there is the potential for injustice and abuse—be it in Washington or Cincinnati, between police and citizens, employers and employees, teachers and students, adults and children. We are commanded to pursue justice and stand up against injustice. This is not a suggestion; it is a mitzvah. When we do not concern ourselves with economic justice whether for fair wages or equal wages, we are not being Jewish. It is 2016 and women still are paid significantly less than men while holding the same credentials and doing the same job; the same certainly true for people of color. There are many people who are working two jobs and still live in poverty. When we fail to respond to issues of economic injustice out of indifference or because of our own self-interest, racism and greed, we are not living as Jews. Rambam taught that the more just we are the more we are living in God's image. Justice is not a privilege but a right; and when Jews pursue justice we are living preeminently as Jews.

To be Jewish we must be hopeful. When we are not hopeful, when we are cynical, when we give up on trying to make our lives and the lives of others better we are not living as Jews. We must have faith that we can learn, grow and improve and we can live ethical and responsible lives; we do not have to be stuck and remain where and as we are. The fruits of our labor come over time, not overnight. Our biblical ancestors and many others throughout Jewish history did not see the fulfillment of their hopes but remained hopeful. Abraham was told he had to wait 400 years for God's promise to be fulfilled and yet he remained faithful. We are his descendants. The founders of the State of Israel waited 2000 years to return and we are their descendants. Talk about delayed gratification!

To be Jewish at any given moment means we are prepared to make sacrifices to improve ourselves and our communities and to bring more justice and peace to our world. This requires self-discipline and altruism as compared to the self-indulgence, self-entitlement and narcissism so prevalent today. Not being prepared to do this and/or not believing that it is possible is not living as a Jew. As Jews we work on ourselves, we engage in self-reflection and self-criticism, we dedicate ourselves to self-improvement. Jews do what is called *tikkun atzmi*—the repair and fixing of ourselves so that we can do *tikkun Olam*—systemic fixing and transforming of our world. When we do not genuinely do the work of taking an account of our lives and our behavior—*cheshbon hanefesh*—with determination and confidence we are not being Jews. When we do, we are.

When we see the divine image in ourselves and others we are living preeminently as Jews. When we pursue justice having faith and hope for the future we are preeminently being Jewish. When we look at our lives honestly and take responsibility, we are preeminently being Jewish. When we are serving as guardians of God's creation so that we will pass it down to generations to come we are preeminently being Jewish. When we live like this we are living as Jews and as God wants us to live. So, what do we want our ticket into heaven to be; one good deed that costs us our lives? Or living Jewish lives every day filled and overflowing with compassion, forgiveness and thankfulness?

SHANAH TOVAH