

In Favor of a Religious Humanistic Judaism

by Rabbi Kenneth Shuster

Humanistic Judaism should be experienced “religiously,” meaning it should be lived holistically, for doing so will help Jews attain a committed practice, one that is not delegated to second-class status after that of more secular pursuits.

1. Introduction

This essay presents my vision for a meaningful practice of liberal Judaism, which I call Religious Humanistic Judaism. Because I believe the liberal Jewish denominations, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism and Secular Humanistic Judaism, possess issues that render them difficult for many Jews to ascribe to, or that otherwise inhibit Judaism from working its magic fully in a life, I begin by addressing those concerns.

I then present the reasons for this situation, toward fashioning an understanding and practice of Religious Humanistic Judaism. This will be of much value to those Jews who take their heritage seriously, and desire to connect to it through unique customs, rituals, and traditions, but who do not necessarily believe in a personal god or wish to follow an Orthodox lifestyle. A religious humanistic liberal Jewish practice provides gains that help its adherents to more meaningful and fulfilling lives. This is particularly important today, when so many persons are turned off to anything religious, which they view as superstitious, uninteresting, nonsense, or just plain irrelevant.

2. Reform, Reconstructionist and Secular Humanistic Judaisms

Reform Judaism has accomplished amazing things in its two hundred year history. It has promoted personal autonomy in the practice of Judaism, returned an aesthetic to the worship service that was lacking in traditional synagogues, stressed the importance of *Tikun Olam*, or working to make the world better via philanthropy and social activism. Most importantly, it was the first liberal branch to provide an alternative to Orthodoxy, which saved countless Jews from assimilation into other faiths or pure secularism.

Yet, much of Reform theology and practice pose challenges for modern Jews. First, Reform Judaism is the only liberal branch that still officially ascribes to belief in a personal God, and, so, insists on the continued use of theistic-focused prayers in traditional formats. This puts those who do not believe in a personal God, but desire to attach themselves to the liberal Jewish community, in the position of having to choose between “going through the motions” or being true to their beliefs.

Second, Reform Judaism has become a form of Jewish Protestantism, if you will, in which rituals, traditions, prayer, and community are enjoyed almost exclusively in temple; anything more than a Friday night candle lighting home-based observance is virtually unheard of among the Reform. For many people, the reality of a limited, non-

holistic, lack of an all-embracing Judaism will result in Reform being unable to inspire a maximally meaningful and fulfilling Jewish practice.

The contributions Reconstructionist Judaism has made to the Jewish world also cannot be overestimated. The movement has provided at least two significant boons. Through the efforts of its founder, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, and those who follow his vision, it has provided a home for those who cannot believe in a personal god, but who yearn to identify with the customs, mores, history, and future of the Jewish people. Kaplan achieved this rescue through a two-pronged process. First, he transformed God from a personal, supernatural entity into a symbol of all that makes life worthwhile, or a “power that makes for salvation.”¹ Second, he denied that Judaism is solely a religion, preferring to see it as an “evolving civilization,”² in which religion is only part of the picture, and must be shared with aspects of art, food, dance, music and other trappings of ethnicity and culture.

Inasmuch as this latter vision is most readily realized through participation in a group, the second reconstructionist gift is its tenet that the community a Jew belongs to is of more moment than what she believes. Taken together, Kaplan’s insistence that Judaism is a communal based civilization in which God is not personal, allows Jews to enjoy the ritual, ethnic, and religious fraternity of other like minded tribe mates, regardless of whether they are theists, atheists, pan(en)theists, deists, etc.

Yet, for the most part, classic Reconstructionist Judaism, like Reform, retains the traditional prayers. Yes, the Reconstructionist *siddur* (prayer book) has made *some* accommodations and variations to the standard texts in the name of mysticism and changes that reflect Kaplanian philosophy. For example, in the “morning blessings”³ it substitutes *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Chai Olamim* (“Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Sovereign and Life Source of All Words”), for *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam* (“Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Sovereign of the World”), to depict God as a natural “force.”

However, even this is formulated as a petition to a Supreme Being. The most probable reason that the Reconstructionist siddur retains most prayers in their traditional form, as expressions to a Supreme Creator, is because community was key to Kaplan’s perception of a meaningful Jewish experience, and Kaplan was raised, trained, and first worked as a pulpit rabbi, in Orthodox circles. He wanted to remain attached to the wider Jewish community, and the atmosphere he was most comfortable with was a traditional one in which prayers are said in their classic fashion, regardless of what a recitant actually believes. Today, however, a Reconstructionist who does not believe in a personal god, but desires to be part of her community, must, like a Reform Jew, frequently choose between sacrificing her intellectual honesty to participate, or keeping apart from group gatherings to honor the integrity of her theology.

Secular Humanistic Judaism has also made significant contributions to our modern understanding of Judaism and the reality of the “Jewish scene.” It is the first Jewish branch to unabashedly provide a voice and forum for atheists who consider themselves Jews from a purely ethnic and cultural vantage. Moreover, as one would expect from any movement that defines itself as humanistic, the denomination stands for a rational, non-supernatural world-view in which we are appropriately the “measure of all things,” as there is no personal god to rescue us from our follies and misfortunes. Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, the founder of Secular Humanistic Judaism, symbolically concretized

this notion, when he removed the Torah scroll and Ark from his temple's dais to its library, and replaced them with a sculpture dedicated to human achievement.

The above contributions of these movements are worth their weight in gold. Yet, in addition to these intellectual issues, the leaders of all the liberal branches face the problem of being unable to inspire adherents to a "private life" Judaism that includes home-centered customs, traditions, and rituals, on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. True, many Reform, Reconstructionist and Humanistic Jews light candles on the eve of Sabbaths and holidays, including a *Menorah* at *Chanukah*. But most do not celebrate Shabbat and holidays in a manner sufficient to allow those days to work their splendor in a life. This is because for those days to be of maximum value, they must be *lived*, not merely celebrated for discrete periods in synagogue or discussion groups during a Sabbath or holiday.

Consider an environment in which on Fridays the home is cleaned, special foods and *challot* are served in honor of Shabbat, candles are lit, and family and friends sit down to a meal enhanced by a (non-theistic, if you like) *Kiddush*, thanksgiving over challah, song, discussion and conviviality. On Saturdays, those who refuse to work, or otherwise find a million and one things to do just to keep busy, allow the magic of the Sabbath to continue, through enjoying needed "down time" for rest, relaxation, rejuvenation, meditation and the like. Yet, the lack of a complete Shabbat experience is not the only casualty of liberal observance. Many liberals also do not habitually put on the *Tallit* and *Tefillin*, place *mezuzot* on their doors, speak Hebrew or Yiddish, or do other things to advance the uniqueness of Jewish life and the Jewish people.

The reason for this phenomenon is that most liberal Jews, whether reform, reconstructionist or humanist, view Judaism as a secular enterprise. As in other secular areas, such as medicine, philosophy and entertainment, resources one draws from as the need presents itself, the modern Jew consults and employs the rituals and practices of her religion on a need-by-need basis, usually at the High Holidays, life cycle events, or on the deaths of friends and relatives. However, the most assured way in which Judaism can work its magic in a life on a regular basis, is if it is enjoyed *religiously*. Now, by "religious," I do not mean supernatural or even "other worldly." I do not intend a protocol that, like Reform, believes in a Theistic God, or a Reconstructionism that is premised on a redefined god concept. I mean a humanistic Judaism that is primarily intellectual and scientific, non-theistic and human-centered, but which is celebrated in a holistic, regular, and habitual manner.

3. Religious Judaism

My use of religious terminology to describe a non-theistic, human-based conception of Judaism will, no doubt, strike a reader as controversial. Many individuals relate anything "religious" to a personal God, mysticism, supernaturalism, or, at the very least, that which cannot be proven scientifically and empirically. Such an understanding of religious, however, is not necessary. "Religion" and "religious" can mean a lifestyle, a commitment to something, a yearning to be intimately connected to that which is greater than one's self.

Most of us remember a parent, teacher, or doctor, telling us to do something “religiously,” whether it was exercise, take our medicine, do well in school, etc. This did not mean we should pray to a personal god or believe in angels and miracles. It was an invitation to take something of importance *very* seriously. Because, there is no personal God who can grant temporal or otherworldly salvation to the religious, the purpose of all organized religion today is to provide pragmatic gains to its adherents. However, one cannot hope to acquire the gifts Judaism can provide in a life, without fully participating in the mitzvot she would keep, just as one cannot hope to maximally experience the benefits of life in general, without fully engaging them.

To appreciate this more consider an interpersonal relationship. There are those who prefer to be alone or have minimal contact with others. Yet most people who desire intimate relationships find that an involved, committed connection with a significant other is more emotionally satisfying than one in which one sees her lover, spouse, or companion once a week and on holidays, to go to the doctor, etc. Such a heightened quality of togetherness does not merely accrue because of the time one spends with another; it is due to the involvement and commitment such increased attention to another engenders. Yet, such an involvement and attention to one another should not be the end a couple seeks. Passion should be.

Passion is the Great Motivator that gives the pursuits of life their greatest worth. A couple’s engagement with and commitment to each other, then, is of greatest value in that it creates the potential for passion between them. As passion can immeasurably enhance connections to others, it can increase the pleasure one finds in work, hobbies, and most other endeavors. Passion can transform one’s Jewish practice as well. Yet to become passionate about Judaism, one must approach the entire arena of Jewish theology, the choice of which mitzvot to keep, and then how to best observe those traditions, *religiously*, meaning holistically, via a commitment to *live* the ritual, ethical and Jewish identity promoting choices he has made. Before I examine how a Jew might achieve such a religious commitment, I look at whether Liberal Judaism is compatible with Humanism.

4. Humanism and Judaism

Humanism is perhaps best understood as an ethical practice, whereby human interests and aspirations, and the individual and collective abilities of human beings to attain them, are promoted. It denies faith-based doctrines, all forms of supernaturalism, and all that is not rational, scientific and empirical. Finally, Humanism teaches that what human beings can do to bring prosperity to their fellows, animals, and the global environment in the here and now is of the most moment. There may or may not be a “God,” but even if there is, God is not going to remedy our failures, and there is no future world in which we will be compensated for what we did not achieve in this one.

Modern Liberal Judaism is eminently compatible with a humanistic worldview. First, ethics, specifically as applied to interpersonal relationships, is a cornerstone of the Jewish experience. Hillel’s famous dictum that, “What is hateful to you do not do unto others; this is the most important precept in the Torah, all the rest of which is its commentary,”⁴ best exemplifies this. The prophet Micah bids us perform acts of justice

and loving-kindness. The Mishnaic tractate “Avot” is concerned almost exclusively with how to acquire ethical behavior. Second, in contrast to Near-Eastern and Christian religions, which offer temporal and otherworldly redemption via faith, Judaism is primarily a “deed-based,” and not “creed-based,” way of life, in that its mitzvot require human action for their fulfillment. Such emphasis on physical performance symbolizes that, in Judaism, human beings are responsible for their own salvation.

Third, contemporary Liberal Judaism eschews the supernatural, mystical, and archaic aspects of its inherited traditions, in favor of all that is scientific, rational and coherent in light of modern sensibilities. Both Reconstructionist and Secular Humanistic Judaism aid this aspect of their regimens through non-theistic notions of “God.” Even Reform Judaism, which professes belief in a personal God, does not see that God as the overwhelming, terrifying Old Testament Deity, but as an entity we can and should “partner with” to make the world better. Such views, in denying or mitigating a personal God, help to change the focus of Jewish theology from a “God-centered one” to one that empowers us to bring our aspirations and needs to fruition.

Humanism can also further Liberal Judaism’s human-centered approaches to ritual and world-betterment programs, for Humanism, whether of the secular or religious variety, is, strictly speaking, not really concerned with theology at all, as much as it is with fostering a life style that is human-focused. Yes, many humanists are atheists; perhaps most humanists are atheists. However, there are also humanistic theists, deists, pantheists, panentheists, pandiists, etc. As such, one of the boons of a Humanistic Judaism, is that a humanistic Jew can subscribe to just about any theology she wishes, and, as a humanist, still consider the role of the human in society to be paramount, and work toward the prosperity of society, unencumbered by archaic traditional dogma.

Another manner in which Humanism proves itself uniquely compatible with Jewish values, is in its insistence that, because we humans are the only entities that can ensure our well being, we must work on ourselves to be the most we can be. This mounts to a contemporary reworking of the ancient myth that we are created in the “image of God.” If “God” represents the best we can aspire to, then polishing our intellects, revving our ambitions, working for social welfare, and transcending our petty concerns and differences—just to mention some worthy goals—amounts to a modern fulfillment of the obligation to imitate the divine. As such, Humanism may be said, at least in a very broad sense, to provide a means by which modern Judaism can remain faithful to some form of Ethical Monotheism, even in a non-theistic context. This is worthwhile, for Judaism remains identified with Monotheism in the eyes of most people.

One final way in which humanistic teaching aids Jewish practice is that, in its call to maximize human potential, Humanism is the Great Equalizer, with the potential to create an authentic merit-based egalitarianism. This is because persons who must accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, without the benefit of blaming God, the establishment, or fate, must look to themselves and their innate gifts, or lack of them, to prosper themselves. One tragedy of the world’s organized religions is that they have created “outs” for the lazy, delusional, and otherwise non-motivated among us, to rationalize each and every setback in life, by recourse to fanciful, wishful thinking that usually has no relation to reality. Examples include, “It’s not my fault because it wasn’t meant to happen.” “God didn’t want this for me.” “It’s because I believe in God (or

don't believe) that I didn't get the job." "I couldn't go after what I truly wanted in life, because my religion's laws or teachings held me back."

Humanistic Judaism calls on its adherents to make the world a better place, with the understanding that, unfortunately, things do not always succeed, but that fact is simply the background music of life, and does not absolve us of the responsibility for our own lives, especially as there is nothing out there with which we can share that responsibility. To the extent we truly believe, albeit in modern terms, that we are created in "God's image," and that all of us are duty-bound to work for a better world, this is a Jewish value.

5. Religious Humanistic Judaism

Religious Humanistic Judaism, then, combines ritual and Jewish identity behavior with philanthropy, acts of loving-kindness, social activism, and other manifestations of ethical conduct to enrich the lives of adherents with the benefits of its protocols. Humanistic Judaism should be experienced "religiously," meaning it should be lived holistically, for doing so will help Jews attain a committed practice, one that is not delegated to second-class status after that of more secular pursuits. I suggest a four-step process to achieve the goal of a religious, or committed, humanistic Judaism.

First, one must ask herself whether she is comfortable with a humanistic outlook. Does she see the human being as the "measure of all things?" Does she believe we are responsible for our own realities, and we should not look to God, or another supernatural force, to come to the rescue? Does she consider all human beings as prime agents in their own salvation, and essentially the same and privy to the same rights regardless of gender, background, ethnicity or race? Does she feel obliged to work for a better world, unencumbered by superstitious doctrine and magical thinking?

Second, one who finds himself amenable to general Humanism must then decide whether he can countenance what a committed Jewish Humanism will entail. To be sure, it will, frankly, be counterproductive to wrangle with theological, ritual and religious considerations, if one is not at least willing to entertain that Jewish values have the potential to pragmatically enrich a life. On the other hand, one who appreciates that a Jewish practice is designed to afford gains (such as rest on Shabbat, enjoyment of the holidays, tribal pride and affiliation, and family cohesiveness), especially when Judaism is lived maximally, may be open to a modicum of Jewishness in his life.

Third, the would-be humanistic Jew must surround himself with those who share at least some of his values and worldviews if he is to become passionate about his practice. He must not attempt to find meaning in Judaism just by himself, but should be part of a community. In his private life, he should try to influence his family to participate in at least some of the traditions that speak to him and to fashion Jewish rituals that move them. These strategies are important, for many persons find religious observance increasingly emotionally, if not practically, difficult in our increasingly secular world. As in many areas of life, those who enjoy a strong religious support network, stand a better chance from the outset to achieve a meaningful Jewish practice.

Finally, one must be willing to live the Judaism she has chosen religiously. This is best realized via celebrating Judaism in the home, synagogue, and community, i.e., the private, religiously communal and secular. This enjoyment of Judaism should manifest

itself in some combination of core traditions, such as Shabbat, holidays, life-cycle events and philanthropy, with acts that foster a unique Jewish identity, such as the placing of *mezuzot* on doors, wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*, employing at least some Hebrew during prayer, and perhaps keeping a kosher home.

6. Conclusion

Humanism may very appropriately be employed to inform the practice of modern Liberal Judaism. To be sure, Humanism teaches the responsibility of the human being to determine the quality of her reality, respect for human and animal life, and an aversion to all things supernatural and irrational that tend to make one rely on non-empirical sources of deliverance. Humanism also encourages work toward a better world, through philanthropy, activism, and a general caring about our (global) environment. Both of these aims have unique resonance in Liberal Judaism, which was formulated to promote them. Humanism is also compatible with a liberal Jewish practice, for it is “human-centered,” and so is not truly concerned with theology. Liberal Jews can pretty much believe whatever they want about God, and still be admirable humanists, provided they honor the ethical and world-bettering tenets of Humanism.

However, the humanistic aspect of a liberal Jewish practice is not enough to achieve a maximally meaningful Jewish experience. This is because Judaism has two other components that must be honored if it is to contribute fully in a life. First, it possesses acts that have no value except inasmuch as they further a unique Jewish identity. Such rituals and traditions include Jewish weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, funerals, and the circumcision rite. In a Jew’s daily private life, they may be realized in the placing of mezuzot on doors, the wearing of the tallit and tefillin during morning prayer or affirmation, and keeping one’s kitchen according to the ritual dietary laws. Such doings are not informed by humanistic thought, but they are not contradicted by it either.

Second, Judaism has core rituals, like Shabbat and holidays, which traditionally were related to the existence, and providence, of a personal god. Although most but not all liberals deny such a deity, many will find that continued observance of such traditions still yields significant gains if they are *lived*, i.e., engaged in holistically, or in a religious, meaning functional, sense. To be sure, such boons may transcend the particulars of any given ritual observance, by bringing purpose, fulfillment, and passion to one’s practice of Judaism. It is to underscore this potential dynamic that I call for a Religious Humanistic Judaism as opposed to a secular one.

Notes

¹ Mordecai M. Kaplan. “What Is Our Human Destiny?” *Judaism* 2/3, July, 1953

² Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1994, p. 279

³ Kohl Haneshamah: Daily, Reconstructionist Press, Wyncote, PA, 1966.

⁴ Shabbat 31a. (Talmud) R. Jospe, "Hillel's Rule" *Jewish Philosophy: Foundations and Extensions*, vol. 1, University Press of America, Lanham, MD 2008, pp. 191-204.