

Rosh Hashanah – Day one Sermon: “Losing My Religion”

Religion has a bad name these days. That’s not really a news flash, I know. At a time when stakes have probably never been higher on this little planet that we live on, religion is seen, by and large, as part of the problem, perhaps the central part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

These days, religion is more typically characterized as something that is divisive at root, and leads to violence - at a time when we desperately need to come together to collectively tackle global issues. Whether we are speaking about the conflicts in Israel, Iraq, Iran, and Darfur, or ecological issues like global climate change - religion is usually portrayed as, if not the firestarter, then at least that which adds gasoline to the flames. The religious people who grab the headlines tend to be the Mel Gibsons, or the Sheikh Nasrallahs.

For those of us who are not fundamentalists, we are left wondering about the relationship between fundamentals and fundamentalism. Are the fundamentals of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – their basic tenets - so full of intolerance and hatred that fundamentalism would translate into this? And if not, what’s wrong with all of our religious traditions that their fundamentals could be so easily misappropriated? Is what *we* offer, as a non-fundamentalist, progressive faith community only a watered-down version of ‘the real thing,’ where we selectively edit, hold up the high points of our tradition and duck its darker, more violent side?

In Reconstructionism, we talk about reconstructing words and imbuing them with new meaning, kind of like a new wine in old wineskins sort of thing. I’ve been thinking about what it might mean to reconstruct this word, ‘religion.’ First of all, religion is not going away, and America is one of the more religious societies there is. Religion pervades our lives. The wonderful and erudite contemporary Christian thinker Jim Wallis writes, “The real question is not whether religious faith *should* influence a society and its politics, but rather, *how*: what form of influence would be most consistent with our faith and provide the best opportunity to positively impact our culture?” Some of us may feel all right about this, some of us may feel profoundly uncomfortable. But regardless - I feel that we need to offer alternate clear, persuasive and humane models of what a religious person is or can be, and what a religious path could look like.

I want to make a case for what I will call progressive religion: what *we* are doing here, and what other progressive faith communities around town are doing. I want to make a case for our activism being Jewish activism— whether we are Democrats or Republicans or neither. Abraham Joshua Heschel said that prayer must be subversive, that it must challenge the status quo, that it must be daring and imaginative. Rather than being part of the problem, religion can be the fertile ground from which we might prospect for solutions.

On a political level, faith is a term that has been misused. Headline religion talks about faith as that which we *know*, that which we are sure of. “Our faith tells us this.”

Faith, to me, refers to my relationship to that which is completely mysterious, that which I cannot know but that occasionally winks at me. When I am in authentic relationship to the mystery, I am in relationship to faith. Faith is not about knowing. Faith is about not-knowing. Rather than convey surety and give one a dogma to rally around and shout down others, faith can teach humility - a humility in relationship to both what we know and what we can and cannot control. A religious practice can make us humble. In some conflict resolution training, the first rule is to say 'I don't know.' Because we don't know, we are able to listen deeply to the other, to ourselves, and to the mystery. This model of faith, by definition, makes room for dialogue.

As a progressive Jewish community, in our case as Reconstructionists, we are used to picking and choosing from what we understand as the greater Jewish tradition. We are grounded in Jewish tradition, but we are also informed by democratic, pluralistic values – and we are used to weighing options and making choices. But here's the thing: fundamentalists also pick and choose. There is a series of choices involved in someone's decision to thump his Bible and talk about the overthrow of the infidel, the sinfulness of gays and lesbians, or the coming apocalypse. One could thump one's Bible just as heartily, if not more heartily, and talk about health care for all, the obligation to treat the stranger with compassion and respect, worker's rights, and the fact that the earth does not belong to us, that we are among its caretakers.

Dr. Laura is a nationally syndicated radio host – maybe some of you are her fans, and I can even say that I think at times, she dispenses sage advice. A little judgmental, but sage nonetheless. There is a very funny internet bit where someone plays off of a Dr. Laura quotation in which she says that homosexuality is wrong – plain and simple. Read your Bible and follow it, she admonished a caller. Well, this web author wrote, the shamed caller could have written back to her and asked, “When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?” or “I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?”

Fundamentalism – simple two-dimensional literalism - does not hold up. Reading scripture literally is a destructive way to be in relationship to the Bible. You can't read the Torah that way - the Torah is multi-dimensional. The Torah is a book of paradoxes and poetry: rich imagery, narrative, metaphor and ambiguity. It is disturbing and violent and beautiful. It is full of ethical mandates and human folly, cruelty and compassion. It is our world today. A reason to still be religious is that Torah is a source of life for us. It asks that we engage it, as we engage our world; it asks, in the words of the poet Stanley Kunitz, that we *live in the layers*.

Judaism has always taught that there are many ways to read a text. It asks us to study the text together. Where two people study Torah, there God is present – a famous saying goes. Not one person who makes a truth up and clings to it, but two people debating, two people in relationship, two people in tension, in common attention and devotion. There is religion.

Religion doesn't *need* progressive as an adjective. Religion is progressive when practiced deeply, with whole and open heart. There is a Jewish teaching that we are iconoclasts, that a Jewish faith is that which is affirmed, broken, affirmed, broken, affirmed, and broken again. Moses smashing the first set of tablets teaches us this. The second commandment prohibiting idolatry tells us that we cannot hold or concretize the truth. Rabbi Irwin Kula says in our world, we can only know 'moment truths...In Heaven there is Truth, on earth there are truths.'

Rabbi Kula relays an ancient parable where God consults the angels before creating humans. Some angels argue: human beings will lie and kill in pursuit of the Truth. Other angels say, yes, but they will also engage in wonderful acts of love in their search for truth. And so God decides in the end to create humans, but God casts down Truth from heaven to earth, where it shatters into innumerable fragments. 'Absolute truth cannot exist for any human being.' Adam, the first human, is created from *that* dust, from the shards. "From now on," Kula writes, "there will be only partial, multiple, and contradictory truths...Each person, each culture, each religion has part of the truth; none has it all." If we don't have it all, then it is imperative that we listen to others at the table.

There is a fascinating discussion taking shape about the role of religion in the public sphere. We are used to cringing when we hear that conversation begin, as it used to be equated with issues like school prayer, and other areas where Jews get squeezed or forgotten in a majority Christian country. But there are a growing number of progressive voices – again not necessarily Democratic or Republican – that are calling us to look again at the role faith and religion can play in the global crisis today. Jim Wallis compares human politics with what he calls 'God's politics,' and says that while human politics tend to be ideological – we are drawn to sweeping ideas and beliefs – God's politics are always on a case by case basis, and deal with actual human beings in need, not with ideas. Family values has become a vague ideological term, when it should be about the day to day work of protecting families, working to ensure a living wage, working to feed the hungry. Family values are about human beings, not ideologies.

We are used to faith, ostensibly a private matter, being made public in distasteful ways. But faith – that which teaches humility, idol-smashing, hope - is a public matter to the degree that we are all in the same fragile boat on a planet that is in dramatic peril. Illinois Senator Barack Obama gave an address this past summer, in which he talks about why religion is dangerous to democracy and why it is also essential. He argues that, as non-fundamentalists we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse: "when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, rather than in the positive sense of what it tells us about our obligations towards one another; others will fill the vacuum, those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends. Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King - indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history - were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to

say that men and women should not inject their ‘personal morality’ into public policy debates is a practical absurdity.” Faith needs to be in the public debate, but we need a kaleidoscope of faiths, a kaleidoscope of possibilities. Obama also says, “democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific values.” As Reconstructionists, committed to Judaism and democracy, this is refreshingly familiar language.

Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard asks, “What would it mean to seize the opportunity to promote pluralist spiritual expression in the public square as a way of re-engaging us, to make room for new language that welcomes spiritual/religious expression in matters of public policy w/o compromising real separation between church and state?”

Obviously this is a large conversation, one that I hope in the months and years to come we can engage in as a community. I wanted today to begin to imagine a third way: between fundamentalism and anti-religion - a way that takes a committed faithful stance in our community, learning from the root Jewish concepts of humility, mystery, relationship, inclusivity, and iconoclasm. In Proverbs it says, “Without vision, the people perish.” (Mishlei 29:18) It is time to do the work of developing an alternate vision to the current religious one of triumphalism, destruction and exclusivity. As humans, we need faith. Faith opens us up, it does not close us down. It brings us *toward* the other. It offers hope, new visions. A progressive vision might say that faith is grounded in authentic struggle and humility, not absolutism – and that this is a holy struggle that we pray for the strength to do together.

