

Why Be Jewish?
Parashat Chayei Sarah;
November 14, 2014

So Sarah dies, and Abraham is faced with the first of a number of tasks he perhaps should have taken care of long before – he must find, secure, and use a burial site for his wife. Having wandered the land he had been promised as an inheritance, Abraham’s first permanent place, our first legally firm foothold on this land where we were to build new lives... is a grave.

But Abraham pivots, he turns now towards the future. He sends his servant Eliezer back where they had all come from, back to Mesopotamia, to find a wife for his son Isaac. A famous scene at a well transpires, with dusty travelers and thirsty camels, and a new and powerful woman walks into Jewish history.

Haggling and the pretense of politeness follow, arguments over arrangements and departure dates ensue, until, astonishingly, it finally occurs to one of the men to actually ask a woman what she wants. “*Vayom’ru: nik’ra l’na’ara, v’nishalah et piy’ha.* Let us call the girl, and see what she has to say. *Vayik’ru l’Rivkah, vayom’ru eleyha: hateilchi im haIsh hazeh?* So they called to Rebecca, and they asked her: ‘will you go with this man?’ *Vatomar: eiylech!* And she said: ‘I will go.’”

Vatomar: eiylech! I will go. Into an unknown future, into the embrace of a stranger, off to a land she had never seen. Compare, if you will, what it had taken Abraham to move. *Lech lecha*, we read, a direct command from God.

“Go,” the Hebrew says, but it took more than that. “Go... unto yourself.” Or, rather, with Rashi, “Go, and it will be for you. It will be for your good. You will benefit from it in the long run.” Two words it took Abraham, and the promise of a benefit. Even one which might be a long time in coming. One single word from Rebecca: “*Eilech.*” I will go. Whatever the future holds. Unconditionally. And, too: with Abraham it took a command from God. With Rebecca, it was her own response.

And we, we stand between Abraham and Rebecca. This thing we do, this life, this faith, this practice and identity... This Jewish thing. Will it be for us, will it be for our benefit, will we get something out of it? Or is it just a response, a way of being. Is it just, simply, who we are?

Several weeks ago, with the support of our Temple member Ash Gerecht and the National Center to Encourage Judaism, we tried an experiment. Taking seriously the verse from Isaiah “*ki veiti veit t’filati yikarei l’chol ha’amin,* My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” we placed ads in local papers, and we opened our doors... to any and all who wanted to ask questions about Judaism. It was just meant for anyone who was curious, for any of your friends who had ever asked you questions about Jews or Jewish tradition. Susan Zemsky helped get cookies and coffee, and Ash’s son, Mike Gerecht and I, sat in the chairs and wondered if we would be chatting alone all evening.

But people came. Four interfaith families were represented, one Mormon couple came, and two (unrelated to each other) African American Baptists. The very first question we got was about what Jews teach about heaven and hell... and from there things got interesting really quickly.

I made it clear that in Jewish tradition – all of Jewish tradition, from secular to Orthodox – whatever we did believe about the afterlife, we did not think that only Jews got in. **If there is an afterlife at all** – a concept some of our visitors had a bit of a hard time processing – **then, Judaism teaches, it is based on action, not belief.** Whatever there is – and there are various Jewish views about the world to come – whatever it is, if it is real, well, **you don't need to be Jewish to get there.**

In fact, actually – and here's a problem we have with our own PR – it may be harder to get there if you're Jewish. After all, our tradition teaches that there are 613 mitzvot, 613 commandments Jews are supposed to follow. And for those who are not Jewish? Don't say Ten! That's actually not right. The Ten Commandments include Shabbat, which was meant for Jews. No, the Jewish teaching on what non-Jews are supposed to follow in order to be considered "good people" is called the Noachide Laws, the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nai Noach*... the seven laws of the Children of Noah.

And suddenly, with a light in her eyes, the young Mormon woman who had come leaned forward and stuck up her hand. It is an obvious question. It's one which, in its own way, has been kind of hurting us for the last several

centuries. **“So you’re saying,” she said, “that if you are Jewish you have to do 613 things to get into heaven? And if you’re not Jewish you have to do seven? So, um, well.” And then she said it straight out. “Why be Jewish?”**

Look, it’s not, you know, a bad question. This was one of the flaws in the philosophy of Moses Mendelssohn. In response to being challenged – Christian society had accepted him, after all, so why did he not do the right thing, people said, and accept Christianity? – in response to a challenge, he developed the notion that ethics were binding and universal for all human beings... but that if you were Jewish, you also had to follow the ritual laws. Otherwise everyone is all the same.

But if that’s it, and there is no other difference – well, that’s not a very compelling reason to stay Jewish. And, indeed, none of his grandchildren, including Felix, the well-known musician, remained within the fold. No qualitative difference or existential benefit to being Jewish? So why bother?

What a troubling question, for religious liberals and non-fundamentalists.

Why is it a challenge, in particular for us? Because there is one other easy answer, which we also can’t use. It is an ancient attitude, from the days when we were the only ones in the world with a relationship with the One God, and it is a danger which lurks in the DNA of all monotheistic faiths. It is a

facile and superficial application of the concept of being chosen, the idea that we're just better than others.

So, the first answer was that we get an eternal reward, a special prize for doing this – which our tradition as I understand it flat out denies. And the second relies on some sense of inherent superiority – an assertion which neither evidence nor experience can possibly support.

(There are some ethnic, secular Jews who still cling to the notion of our being the chosen people, without any sense of responsibility that comes with it. But let's be clear about this: chosenness towards a task *may be* defensible. Chosenness without content is simply chauvinism.)

I am sure – or at least I hope – that all of you have your own answers to the question of why be Jewish. I would love to hear them at some point, to share in how you sift through the compelling calls of a tradition which has not, always, been that easy to follow or obvious about its benefits. Here, now, though, is part of my answer.

First, as I said to the woman who asked the question, the idea that good people of all faiths earn a place in the world to come, whatever that world to come might be... this just seems... well, first of all it seems nice, and I like it.

But secondly, it also seems *right*, by which I mean correct, accurate. I can't believe that what we believe matters so much more than what we do; I *do* believe that, whatever there is beyond this world, we face it in equal measure,

as part of the human experience. At some level, I am Jewish because the totality of this system – certainly not many of its parts, but taken as a whole... it makes a lot of sense to me!

But a calmly considered rational analysis is not going to move mountains, as it were, nor inspire masses. **To some extent the *personal* question “Why be Jewish” points towards the ultimate communal question of “what is the purpose of Judaism?” Or, better: what does Judaism teach about our role in this world, as human beings?**

Every spiritual tradition answers some questions really well. Buddhism, I believe, has a terrific answer for “why is there suffering in the world, and what can we do about it?” The answer is: there is suffering because things change, and we are attached to what is. The response: separate from those attachments! If we are detached, then change will no longer be a source of pain. Christianity, perhaps, has a better answer than Judaism does to the question of personal sin. Let’s imagine, for a moment, that you are a repentant murderer. You killed someone, not in self-defense and not out of necessity, and you feel bad about it. Christianity offers a path of salvation and redemption here that, well, in Judaism you have to repair the damage you have done as part of the path of repentance. And some things just can’t be fixed.

Some of you know the story that once I wrote a piece called “The Kaddish and the Grateful Dead,” which appeared in print in a magazine, which somehow found its way into a prison in the Midwest. In the article I wrote that

Jewish tradition teaches that murderers do not earn a place in the world to come. So not long after the article appeared I get a letter from this Jewish murderer. Why, he asked, if there is no salvation for him, shouldn't he just kill again? This letter came to my home address in Buffalo. In response, we moved to Washington. (Well, we were already in the process of coming here.) And I did write him back, of course. The substance of that exchange is still available on our website, in a sermon called "Letter from a Murderer."

After all these years, though, I am still troubled by the realization that on the level of individual and personal salvation, Christianity has a better, or at least more obvious path forward here.

But there are some questions that Judaism answers in a way which feel deeply, powerfully right – not right in a slow nod of the head, but in a way which can touch our soul and change our lives.

Why are we here? We are a people, yes – and as a people our connection with one another is inherent and inalienable. It goes beyond belief, it does not depend on doctrine or practice. And yet, originally and somehow still, we are a people with a purpose. God, we are told, or whatever made this world we live in, clearly, obviously left it... a bit of a mess. Undone. Incomplete. And, instead of railing against the imperfection, we teach that this was done for us. Because it leaves us a task, it bequeaths to us a destiny. **We are here, we teach, "l'taken Olam b'Malchut Shadai; to perfect the world in the service of God." We are partners with the Holy One, in fixing, repairing,**

mending the brokenness of the world. We are here to heal, to help and to hope! And, even for one who does not believe in God in a traditional way: we are here to make the world a better place, in goodness and godliness.

Unlike Mendelssohn, unlike, indeed, even the early founders of Reform Judaism, this is not just about ethics. All the rituals, all the rhythm and movement, all the practices, all the arguments in Judaism and all aspects of identity... pull together towards a complete picture, they prop up a people and in pursuit of a purpose. They are instrumental, yes, but not therefore unimportant. Some of our practices just focus on us, on the particular; they promote survival of the group... But that is because the group bears a mission, and so something that looks inward ultimately supports that which looks outward. That is why I am not among those who say: oh, all that really matters is being a good person. No, identity embraces it all: the old and the new, tradition and creativity, connection and culture and emotion and commitment, sound and song as well as words and acts.

Why be Jewish? Because Judaism teaches that we have work to do. It is the most important work there is. And almost any aspect of Jewish life and culture and faith and practice can resonate to support that work.

Our first foothold in the land, as we learn this week, might well have been a grave. But our purpose can be summed up with a different word. *L'chaim!* An embrace of life, to make all our lives as holy, as healthy, as whole, and yes, often, even as happy as they can be.

We don't know what this mission will bring. It calls, but it does not promise. Well, not always. Maybe Abraham had a sense, in stepping in, that it would all be to his benefit in the long run. *Lech...lecha!* But for Rebecca? Just: **Eilech**. Just one word in Hebrew, which it takes three to convey in English: "I will go." Stepping in, to history, to destiny, to identity, to purpose. Without the outcome being clear. But resonating, so obviously coming... from the very deepest part of her soul.