

Judaism's Greatest Hits

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I begin with a question. Performing artists issue retrospective albums with their greatest hits assembled on one convenient recording; imagine now a collection of Judaism's greatest hits. What are the most significant and influential ideas emanating from the Jewish religious tradition during the span of three millennia that Judaism has existed and during which it has evolved, developed, and undergone various transformations? I will limit myself to two answers, the first of which is a no-brainer.

The first prayer a Jewish child learns at home or in Religious School is the Sh'ma. Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. Recited twice daily as part of the liturgy, the Sh'ma is also the last prayer said by a faithful Jew when he or she is on the verge of death; we live and we die affirming the oneness, singularity and uniqueness of God. Furthermore, the oneness of God carries with it two important corollaries – the unity of humans, all of whom were fashioned by the same Creator, and the existence of a single, integrated system of laws governing the operation of the vast and intricate physical world in which we live and of which we're a part. In other words, the world and all it contains constitute a universe. Monotheism is widely acknowledged by scholars as the great contribution of the ancient Hebrews to humanity's religious development.

The Sh'ma is found in the Torah, while the other idea I would include as a "greatest hit" comes from N'vi'im, the second section of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets of ancient Israel, addressing their contemporaries, who believed that God could be bought off by the offering of sacrifices in the Temple, asserted the primacy of morality as a religious imperative. Micah, Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah all preached that God was offended by the ritual piety of those who were lacking in compassion and who treated their fellows unjustly, that God would turn away in disgust from their prayers and offerings. For the rabbis at a later stage in our history, the concept of mitzvah, commandment, is primary, and mitzvot include both moral duties and ritual ones. However, I believe that even in rabbinic Judaism with its detailed elaboration of ritual and ceremonial obligations, the moral and ethical aspects of our faith retain their

primacy. Many rituals teach a moral lesson – Shabbat instructs us in humility and teaches us that we are stewards of the earth and its resources, accountable to the One who created them. Kashrut trains us to discipline our appetites and teaches us reverence for life. And the purpose of the entire system of mitzvot, we are told by the rabbis, is to refine human nature and transform us into holy men and women, who, in our interactions with others and with the world, mirror God’s love.

Last evening I stressed the importance of Jewish peoplehood and acknowledged that one could be a member in good standing of the Jewish people without religious belief or commitment. Nonetheless, I believe that our “greatest hits” and countless other religious concepts I could have cited are what impart content to Jewish peoplehood. What gave us the capacity to endure over the centuries, scattered as we were throughout the world without a unifying political framework, sometimes barely tolerated and at other times harshly persecuted, was our sense of calling and mission. By mission, of course, I don’t mean a calling to proselytize and convert others to our belief and our way of life but rather a summons to witness to the presence in the world and in the domain of human affairs of God, Who is one and Who demands of humans that they act with justice and compassion.

There are numerous ways of defining God and countless images that the Scriptural writers and rabbinic sages employed to convey the reality of their religious experience and the nature of the divine-human relationship. God is shepherd, warrior, king, teacher, judge, etc. We readily grasp the imagery, but there is always a danger of taking literally figures of speech that are the attempts of the finite mind to comprehend and depict the infinite. We experience God through our sense of wonder, when we contemplate the vastness and intricacy, the beauty and order, and sometimes the terrible force and destructiveness of the natural world round about us. My favorite Psalm in the Shabbat morning prayers is the one which states, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork.” God is experienced, as well, through contemplating the wisdom and the life-enhancing qualities of Torah, the teachings that our ancestors regarded as rooted in divine revelation. The same Psalm goes on to proclaim, “The teaching of Adonai is perfect, restoring the soul: the testimony of Adonai is sure, making wise the simple.”

Additionally, I believe, we experience God, when we sense the connectedness of all creatures, of all objects and beings within creation to each other and to their Creator. If God is indeed one, then all that originated from the creative will and force of the One is connected. Many years ago I took a lively interest in the history and doctrine of Jewish mysticism, not because of what I regard as its magical and superstitious elements (red string, amulets) , but because of its quest to grasp and experience the unity underlying Creation in all its diversity and variation, its multiplicity of physical features, life-forms, and phenomena. Rabbi Larry Kushner, perhaps our pre-eminent Jewish writer on spirituality today, has titled one of his books, “Invisible Lines of Connection”. The term “invisible” is apt, because ordinarily we don’t pause to think about our connections other than in the most limited and superficial fashion. Prayer enables us to contemplate in the abstract the connectedness of all being, but, even so, without the perspective of omniscience, the overwhelming preponderance of actual connections will remain hidden from us. It is the rare moment of spiritual experience that allows us to glimpse a connection of which we had been hitherto unaware.

Connectedness to the Jewish people was my theme last night. This morning I encourage you to repair and restore your connection to God, divinity, the sacred nature of existence (however you conceive it) and to re-experience through disciplined and regular spiritual practice the connectedness of all Creation (our individual “selves” included).

That sense of connectedness is something we very much need. We cherish our individuality, our sense of being a separate “self”, and are endowed with an instinct for self-gratification and self-preservation. And yet consider how utterly finite and insignificant the individual is (even a person of exceptional achievement, who leaves a substantial imprint on subsequent history) when viewed in the perspective of infinite time and space. Many of the *piyutim*, the liturgical hymns recited on the Days of Awe, contrast the glory and majesty of God to the frailty and limitations of man and highlight the hollowness of human pretensions. Prose passages in the prayer book as well reiterate this theme: *Mah anu,, meh chayenu*, “what are we, what our lives, what our power, what our goodness?”

A few weeks ago, households in our Jewish community received a postcard from the Jewish Federation featuring the smiling countenance of one of our Temple Israel

members, who was quoted as follows, “I give to the Jewish Federation, because I want to teach my children that there is something larger than them.” Permit me to paraphrase those words and apply them to an additional dimension of Jewish living. “We pray, we attend synagogue, we participate in Jewish rituals because we need to feel that there is something larger than our individual and finite selves to which we’re connected.” That larger something refers in the first place to the worldwide fellowship of the Jewish people extending back over the generations, which found in the texts and rituals of Judaism a path to holiness and to a sense of purpose and meaning. More inclusively, the larger something to which we link ourselves through prayer and ritual is the totality of creation, an interconnected whole grounded in the oneness of God and of which we are an inseparable part.

The question might legitimately be raised, “does it work?”, do traditional prayer and ritual truly impart to us a sense of connection with something larger than ourselves? The honest answer is that there are no guarantees. Prayer and ritual worked for our ancestors and continue to provide many of our fellow Jews today with an uplifting and inspiring religious experience. But for others the traditional forms no longer work. I am, in liturgical terms, a traditionalist; I find meaning and inspiration in the words of the *siddur* and *machzor*, in the traditional *nusach* (the musical chants and motifs associated with Shabbat and the holidays) and in employing Hebrew as the language of prayer. I like the idea of continuity with the past. However, I will readily concede that new forms of Jewish prayer and ritual may be needed alongside the old to provide contemporary Jews with their sense of connection to the sacred and transcendent.

That meaningful prayer is not something which happens automatically or without forethought by our religious leaders is evidenced by a series of articles recently written by Chancellor Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary on the JTS website. Chancellor Eisen identifies several elements he believes are crucial to meaningful prayer including a sense of closeness and intimacy among the worshipers in the congregation, allowing times within the service for silence, and appropriately uplifting and well-performed liturgical music. I’m sure we could all add our own suggestions to this list of prerequisites.

I learned this summer from one of the counselors of the Jewish Society for Service group who stayed in our building this past summer, a rabbinical student slated to graduate in two years, that many of his fellow students preferred meditation to attendance at traditional prayer services. This was part of a larger conversation about how different today's rabbinical students are from those of my generation. My reaction, as I have thought about this, is that meditation does have its place, that it was certainly part of the spiritual discipline practiced by Jewish mystics in the past, and that there are today resources for engaging in Jewish meditation, but that it can never be a replacement for prayer, especially for prayer within the congregational setting which is Judaism's preferred mode of worship. In congregational prayer, our interaction with the text (handed down to us by earlier generations) and with fellow worshipers connects us from the outset with something larger and helps us shed the sense of possessing a separate self that is the measure of all value, a self that can occupy so large a place in our thoughts and feelings that no room is left for the presence of the divine.

The connections, that weave the totality of existence as well as the entirety of humankind into a unified whole, lead us to the second of Judaism's greatest hits, the primacy of morality. How well I remember the eminent Protestant ecumenicist and friend of the Jewish people Franklin Littell, who spoke from this pulpit and proclaimed that spirituality without prophetic morality was idolatry! If we are connected by links visible and invisible to all of humankind, if we are all children of the one God, and if we share the aspiration expressed in the holiday prayer book that all humanity will become *agudah echat*, one band united in doing God's will, then abusing, exploiting, willfully and gratuitously harming our fellow persons, and callously turning away from their suffering constitute a violation and a denial of Judaism's basic credo.

This is the time of year for taking stock of ourselves, for asking ourselves hard questions. Do we feel ourselves truly connected to the Jewish people, to humankind, to the *olam*, the world whose birthday we celebrate today, and to the source of all Being? Do we afford ourselves opportunities in our daily life to experience and reinforce that sense of connection? And most importantly, do we in our behaviors and actions heed the moral and ethical imperatives that follow from these lines of connection?

May we, one and all, be blessed with a happy and a healthy New Year!

