

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

www.gatherthepeople.org

WHY BOTHER WITH JUDAISM?

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

What is Judaism—and why bother with it?

We want to start with the second question first: Why bother with Judaism? Because if one doesn't care to have much more than a residual Jewish identity, seemingly it's not important to answer the first question, "What is Judaism?"

But to imagine that residual Jewish identity can be maintained from one generation to the next, that our grandchildren will still be Jewish without God, Torah, and Israel, is a delusion that flies in the face of Jewish demographic history—modern, medieval, and ancient.

- By God, we understand that there is an intelligence beyond ours that is masterminding the universe and the consequences for respecting or ignoring its scheme;
- By Torah, we understand that there is a path that has been illuminated for us to live our lives aligned with that masterminding; and
- By Israel, we understand that our destiny—both our hope and our despair—is tied to the Jewish people.

When Jews have forgotten God, Torah, and Israel, they have ceased to be Jews within a generation or two.

Is it important to remain a Jew if you don't practice Judaism and take part in the life of a Jewish congregational community more than a couple of times a year—for the social contact with other Jews, for the bagels and lox or the music or the humor, or for the Jewish history?

These certainly can't be compelling reasons to remain Jewish. Consider them one by one: It can't be contact with other Jews, because our geographic dispersion has distributed us across the country—in every big-city neighborhood, suburban region, and rural outback we can meet and befriend other Jews. It can't be a kosher-style deli or Yiddish humor, because those have become staples of mainstream American life and culture. It can't be Jewish music, whatever the variety, because it too has been expropriated by the dominant culture. And it can't be Jewish history, because non-Jews teaching and studying Jewish religion and history have become a cliché.

And why maintain any Jewish identity at all if it's true that, in our time, we should promote universal val-

ues? And Judaism is essentially reactionary and parochial, even racist if we promote in-marriage, say some "progressive" thinkers.

There is a rub here, however, because, although our universal, pluralistic perspective may lead us to criticize or even summarily abandon Judaism, even while we are largely ignorant of its wisdom and the spiritual rewards of its practice, the same perspective has us take great pains to honor the cultures and societies of other ethnic groups and peoples, even those that mirror our own in many respects.

Have you heard this true story?

An 18-year old student was traveling by train from Philadelphia to Harrisburg. The young man sported a beard, wore a long dark coat and a large wide-brimmed black hat. After placing his bags over his seat, he sat down next to a well-groomed businessman who looked at him scornfully. For the first 20 minutes of the trip, the secular gentleman kept eyeing the student as if he wanted to tell him something.

Then he could no longer contain himself.

With passion in his voice the man began to shout, "You know I'm sick and tired of Jews who think they are still in the Middle Ages! You are a disgrace! I'm Jewish, too. I even speak Yiddish. But do I wear a black coat? Do I let my beard grow? Must I wear an oversized hat? No! Why do you wear those clothes? Why do you wear that beard? Why do you need that hat? It's time you woke up and joined the modern world—the world of America!"

The startled student looked at his accuser quizzically. In a perfect Pennsylvanian accent, he began to speak.

"Jewish?" he queried. "Excuse me, sir, I'm Amish, and I'm on my way back home from a visit with relatives in Philadelphia. I am sorry if I offended you with my style of dress, but this is part of our heritage and culture. Our families in Europe passed it to our families here in Lancaster. I am sorry if I have offended you."

The businessman's face turned ashen. "I'm awfully sorry," he whimpered, "I truly did not mean what I said. In fact, I think it is wonderful that you maintain your heritage, culture, and tradition with such enthusiasm. It shows courage, fortitude, and commitment. Please for-

give me. I was truly insensitive.”

Suddenly a wide smile broke across the young man’s face. In perfect Yiddish he asked the reeling businessman one simple question.

“For the gentile it’s wonderful but for the Jew it’s a disgrace?”

Of course, the point is that American Jews seem committed to every group and people but their own. Yet we all have enough Jewish identity to be here at this moment: for most of us the irreducible minimums of that identity include:

- Some kind of belief in the possibility of goodness increasing in the world through our actions; and
- Some sense of vulnerability, that our security and safety, or their absence, are tied to the fate of the Jewish people.

But beyond these minimums of Jewish identity, why bother with Judaism?

If our children and we are to know who and what and where we are, we must know who, what, and where we came from. The short course is that we descended through a particular tradition, and there is no way to separate out God, Torah, and Israel from what we are as Jews.

Without knowledge of that tradition it’s much more difficult to know where we are going, and the larger purpose of our lives may be reduced to acquiring physique, position, possessions, prestige, and power. We may then get caught up in life styles that value what we have or can get rather than what we are or can give—all to our ultimate disappointment and despair.

It is, we believe, at its heart, a part of the explanation for the mid-life crisis, sexual dysfunction, breakdown of relationships, compulsive and obsessive behavior, and political alienation found among so many Jews in our time.

And finally, it is Judaism that has enabled our people and us to reach this time and place, literally, and to have hope that the future can be something better for our children.

On the other hand, many of us at times have thought that religion is fanatical, irrelevant, obscure, oppressive, and irrational. So maybe you’re thinking, Judaism has nothing to do with me, and nothing to do with how I got here, and in my heart of hearts I don’t have much hope for the future anyway?

Then we imagine that you, especially, should find the answer to the question, “Why bother with Judaism?”

We also imagine that you may be thinking, “I’m Jewish but not religious; I already have a perfectly adequate modern religion—*science*.”

Our experience is that those who are *religiously* devoted to science, no less than any other spiritual devotees, regard it as omnipotent and omniscient—all-powerful and all-knowing. They subscribe to what essentially is a *religious* myth, that science knows everything or that everything (worth knowing) can be known

by science. But, of course, science—in which we have been educated and have practiced—is a *method*, not a religion. As valuable and useful as its contributions have been, it doesn’t offer us a moral history and moral vision by which to live. Science does virtually nothing to increase kindness and justice in the world. In fact, the 20th century has driven home that lesson on an unparalleled scale of human suffering, which flowed from the widespread misuse of scientific discoveries and their technological offspring.

To not know Judaism is to remain ignorant of “the force” to which anti-Semites and Jew-haters respond—specifically, the historic struggle of the Jewish people to co-create the world in the image of God—and to be ignorant of the knowledge of how we are to respond to that anti-Semitic hatred and hostility.

Anti-Semitism is not eliminated by the passage of time or state policy, any more than ethnic hatred or religion were in the Soviet Union—they are only suppressed.

There is no coherent and committed response to anti-Semitism independent of God, Torah, and Israel, because they are the sources of the extraordinary power, wisdom, and unity needed to deflect and defeat attacks on any one or more of us.

What is important about the recent upswing in anti-Semitism around the world?

It’s not that hate crimes were committed against individuals and Jewish congregations—that’s old news. It is that whole communities, including non-Jews, have come together around a Torah vision to uphold and affirm the sanctity of life. The byword of those events is *chai*—“life”; that it is to be actively chosen and sustained in accord with what the Torah holds out as a vision of goodness triumphant in the world

And as always demonstrated everywhere when Jews are threatened, it is the organized Jewish community founded on God, Torah, and Israel—not the secular and disaffected Jews—that takes the lead in bringing Jews together with wisdom, unity, and power.

If we don’t know what Judaism is, then we and our children will not be able to do that effectively when the time comes. We should make no mistake—there is no historical exception—that we can abandon that which makes us Jewish, believing we can live peacefully and unmolested among our fellow Americans, even gradually assimilating. Because no matter our commitments or accomplishments as Americans, we’re still seen and talked about privately as “those Jews.”

While it’s true that institutional anti-Semitism has declined markedly in the last three or four decades, personal in-your-face acts of ethnic hatred toward Jews have remained at high levels—and they’re an indication of what lies not very far below the surface of American social and political life.

If we and our children are to have a *moral* vision and path for spirituality, family, community, and productivity, where but from Judaism are we to find it? Is there another wisdom tradition that, when placed side

by side with Judaism, better fits our values and presents to us a more compelling moral vision and path?

In the 60s and 70s there was a movement for “radical therapy” with the motto, “change, not adjustment.” Many Jews today are caught up in a movement for adjustment rather than change, not unlike the ghost-dancing of American Indians that were facing the decline of their civilization and culture. To make adjustments that allow us to feel good without changing the spirit-poisoning conditions of life may give us a temporary modicum of peace and contentment, but it leaves for our children and their children an inheritance of more intractable pressures and problems.

Why are we reluctant to know Judaism, never mind adopt it as the focus of our lives?

There are of course as many reasons as there are individuals. We have discovered that Jews who are disaffected, distanced, or completely alienated from Judaism, almost always have a couple of things in common:

First, although they may be college graduates, even have a master's or doctorate, their religious education—if they had any at all—ended around the age of 12 or 13. Few of us could imagine living our professional lives or sex lives or political lives on the basis of what we knew at 12 or 13, but we act as if it makes sense to live our spiritual lives according to what we knew at that age.

Second, most of us can recall punishing religious experiences, usually associated with some authority figure—parent, teacher, rabbi, etc.—who by our lights was oppressive, insensitive, or irrational. So, naturally enough, we concluded that those characteristics were the hallmarks of religion. It is common for people *not* to discriminate between the strengths and weaknesses of rabbi, congregation, religion, and God—if they have a bad experience with one, they generalize it to one or more of the others—not unlike a child who, after encountering an unkind *teacher*, then declares, “I hate *school*.”

Implicitly the lesson we learn as youngsters, which

we typically carry throughout our lives, is that religion is fixed, it comes from above, and it violates both our heart and our head.

We started with a question: “What is Judaism?”—the belief system and practice most American Jews are rejecting—which is the least we ought to be able to answer if we have decided to reject it. Before trying to answer that question, we want to say something about how one can come to know the answer.

- It's not possible to know Judaism based on what we're taught up to the age of 12 or 13.
- It's not possible to know Judaism based on the “hearsay” broadcast by the mass media or our disillusioned family members and friends.
- It's not even possible to know Judaism based on what our parents, teachers, and rabbis tell us.
- It's not possible to know Judaism even by advanced studies or *smikha*, ordination.

All of these are necessary but none of them are sufficient. None of these methods of learning, not even all of them combined, can bridge and bring together the three critical components of Judaism: God, Torah, and Israel.

Our active personal engagement with God, Torah, and Israel is required to enter into the vortex of that confluence, to know the majesty and power of a wisdom tradition that has sustained our people when all our ancient national cohorts are dead and buried, to know that Judaism. Practically, it means that we must suspend our credulity to learn and practice Jewish worship to effect ourselves, our community, and our people; we must read the Torah on all its levels; we must both give of ourselves to, and take sustenance from, a Jewish congregational community; and we must live out the Torah's vision for our lives in the larger world.

We see that we have run out of space, so we can't talk about our first question, “What is Judaism?” But maybe you'll drop by for Torah study and we'll have an opportunity to do that.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)