

The Jewish World View
How Judaism Works Series

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A Hasid comes to his Rebbe to ask to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The man stands uneasily, anxiously shifting from foot to foot. "What can I do for you, my son?" the Rebbe asks.

"Well," the man begins hesitantly, "I am requesting the honor of sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah."

"This is a very high honor," the Rebbe answers. "Sounding the community shofar we reserve only for the most sensitive of souls. What makes you think, a young man like you, that you are spiritually prepared to awaken repentance in the hearts of God's people?"

"Rebbe," the young man answered, "I suffer for God's sake. I fast all day every day except Shabbat and not a morsel of food crosses my lips from sun up to sundown. During the winter I roll in the snow, nearly burning my skin. I beat myself with the straps of a leather whip in order to remind myself of my sins, drawing blood. I am very pious." The Rebbe looked at the man and said, "My horse does all of those things. What makes you think you are more pious than my horse?"

The young man had the right idea: we ought to repent and thereby improve our souls. But his method, according to the understanding of the older and more experienced rebbe, would not get him to where he wanted to go.

But where did he get **the idea** of repentance, or sounding the shofar, or afflicting his soul: or even the existence of a soul to begin with? Clearly the young man got his ideas about life from his Judaism. **Religion formulates for us the answers to the fundamental questions in living, most particularly: what do our lives mean and how do we treat others?**

I think most people just think of Judaism, or, for that matter, any religion as simply a series of rituals that don't mean much. They are opportunities to celebrate important occasions, or get family together, or have a great meal. But they don't see much on a deeper level.

In actuality we literally could not manage our lives without answers to religion's most fundamental questions.

This Sunday night for the holiday of Simchat Torah we end the reading of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, and immediately begin again with Genesis, the first book. Within the reading, the Torah broaches two absolutely basic life issues in this one evening: the issue of death, which brings up the question of why we are here to begin with; and the question of why the world works the way it does, the order of the world.

Certainly there's insufficient time in just one sermon to explain fully how Genesis has structured our day to day lives: from the 7 day week, to the concept of Sabbath or time off work to dedicate to God, to the pairing of and relationship between man and woman, and so much more.

But a single example: what role do we human's take in God's creation? In next week's parashah we read:

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (NIV)

We find here that the entire human family possesses the same role: to be stewards of God's creation. But even more fundamental: that fact results from the conclusion that all of us, without regard to race or religion, are the image of God. Given our role in creation, The Torah teaches us that **our purpose is to rule over all the rest of God's world.** The question of how we do that is absolutely critical to every decision and action we take. But here we see stated the fundamental proposition for all the world to read: all humans are equal, we are

all God's image on earth, and we share the role of sovereignty over God's creation. This statement underlies our entire world view.

Here we can bore down to religion's true function. **Humans are born into a world that demands interpretation.** We tell ourselves, through our groupings, our stories and our texts, what to do in order to live best in this world. We give ourselves messages of the universe's underlying meaning, purpose and structure. Reform Judaism's configuration states that all human beings are fundamentally equal, and we must treat them as such. Orthodox Jews read these texts differently. Some Christians read them as we do; others do not. Some Muslims will read them as we do; the Wahabbis obviously do not. But we must begin with the fact that we use the Torah, and as you will soon see, the rest of the Bible also, to explain our world and our place in that world to ourselves.

Let's return to the Hasid who requests the honor of sounding the shofar. Both the Rebbe and the shofar sounding young Jewish man speak of a soul. Neither can see it, but they know it exists. Why? It's a very complicated question. Some would say that we have experiences that tell us that we do not simply die with the body's death, that part of us goes on. Some believe they have physical, verifiable experiences that prove that. Count me personally in that group. But the soul is indisputably invisible. We infer its existence. Judaism passes that inference from generation to generation.

Others might say that the soul feels guilty when we act against God's norms of behavior. That's the way we Jews compose our understanding of our relationship to the world: when the body does something that's ethically wrong, the soul suffers. If you construct your home badly you may **feel stupid** about your ineptitude; but you **feel guilty** towards those who depended on you to do it right and who may suffer as a result. So where does the guilt come from? Judaism's answer: that's the soul. Sin registers the errors we make between people. Not only that, but the damage to the soul lasts longer than just a few moments, and in order to repair the soul we must go through a process. That process we have given a name: repentance. Or in Hebrew, a better word: Teshuvah: meaning return to our original state without guilt and our original relationship with God.

Getting the idea? All religion posits structures: like the soul, or the authority of the Bible, to enable us to structure our world. If we don't somehow do that, we would die.

The Torah, in the opening of the third Bible book's 19th chapter, tells us that because we are created in God's image we should be God-like. That God-like state we call Holy. How do you be holy? Well, clearly the body doesn't know when it's being holy. So it must be the soul that recognizes the distinction between holy and not holy. That's part of the reason we know there's a soul. What might we do to bring the soul and body together to the point where they act in a holy manner? Leviticus explains:

Do not oppress your neighbor.

Revere your mother and your father.

Do not stand idly by while your neighbor is endangered and bleeding.

Do not lie or steal.

Observe Shabbat.

And then it sums up all of these points and more with: Love your neighbor as yourself. That's the general rule. All the rest can be derived from there. But we have individual rules so that we all agree on proper behavior to preserve the soul without damage, which we call by the description: holy.

Sometimes well-intentioned people get off track. Sometimes the behaviors we agreed to as a group, to treat everyone as God's image, to repair the soul, have actually headed in the wrong direction. In biblical times, God sent people we call prophets to redirect the people. One of the best was a guy named Isaiah. He talked a lot about how his people had gotten off track, but in the 58th chapter of his book, he speaks about offering sacrifices on an altar to God, and fasting to afflict the body, as correctives for the soul. Here's what Isaiah preached contrary to the direction of his people. They are arriving at false assumptions:

For day after day they seek me out;

they **seem** eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God...

3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,

'and you have not seen it?...

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do **as you please**
and exploit all your workers.

4 Your fasting **ends in quarreling and strife,**
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

The people desired to repair the soul, but they treated the soul like the horse in the Hasid story: fasting, sackcloth and ashes. Isaiah’s people did nothing that would actually help the soul. Rituals help us preserve the norms that avoid sin, so that we can avoid damaging the soul. Rituals by themselves do nothing. The people thought God wanted the rituals rather than the actual holiness, the way we treat other people. So Isaiah explains in considerable detail what they are doing wrong: they are acting as if humble ritual actions could repair the soul. But Isaiah states clearly, and we Reform Jews agree, that true piety and soul repair depends on that Genesis quotation: running the world fairly, because we humans are in control. When we act pietistically, as though caring about holiness but

ignoring the harm we cause to others, then we are actually rejecting God and serving our own selfish interests rather than taking our sovereignty and equality seriously. When we do that, the soul suffers and we will be punished, according to God's messenger, the prophet Isaiah.

All religion, and specifically Judaism, teaches us how the world is structured, explains our role in that structure, and teaches us our responsibilities and rewards.

Psalm 8 implores God:

What is man that You have been mindful of him,
Mortal man that You have taken note of him,
That You have made him little less than divine,
And adorned him with glory and majesty.
You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet...

There we have the human dilemma: Stretched between heaven and earth, we are part angel and part devil, doing our best to fulfill the image of God in the world.

Over the next few months, I hope to explain in this series of sermons how Jews have set out to do just that: be God's people, and in Isaiah's wonderful phrase, "A light to the nations."