

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CURRENT STATE OF JUDAISM

By C. Peter R. Gossels

As I recently attained 85 years of age, I thought I would try to summarize my thoughts about the practice and principles of Judaism in a coherent and understandable way:

I. My Credentials:

Charlotte Lewy Gossels, my single mother, managed to help my brother, Werner, age six, and me, age nine, escape to France from Berlin. Within four years, my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, my aunt and most of my family were murdered by the Nazis, simply because we were born to Jewish parents. After the German army had overrun France in 1940, my brother and I managed to escape to “Unoccupied France” with the help of OSE, a Jewish welfare organization that we support to this day. Thanks to the American Friends Service Committee (The Quakers), we were selected to come to the United States in 1941, where we were placed with different Jewish families.

Unlike many other Jews, who escaped the Holocaust, I continued my Jewish education, because I was determined to help revitalize the ancient practices of Judaism that Hitler had sought to destroy. And as I learned more about our Jewish history and heritage, I noted that much of our liturgy was composed by poets and rabbis who lived in ancient and medieval times when Jews were oppressed, as we were in Nazi Germany.

Yet we, who live in paradise, continue to recite notions and prayers that do not reflect who we are: We address God as a king when most of us would not like to live in a kingdom; we sometimes describe God as “Adonai Tsevaot” as if God were a military leader; we talk of our longing for a messiah, an imaginary person invented when Jews sought freedom from Roman oppression; yet most of us do not wish to supplant our flawed national government with a messiah in the image of King David. And we have come to realize that women, like men, were created in the image of God, as the Torah tells us in Genesis 1:27, although they were virtually absent from our liturgy.

Nancy and I married in 1958, had three children (Lisa, Amy and Daniel) and joined Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley where our children received their Jewish education. I served as President of that Congregation for two years. Nancy served as Vice President of the Congregation for two terms. We both served as co-chairs of its Ritual Committee and as a member of its Board for many years.

Meanwhile, we contribute generously to Jewish organizations, synagogues and causes. As an elected public official (30 years as Wayland's Moderator), I tried to serve as an example of what Jews contribute to our country.

With the encouragement of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, and the contributions of many fellow congregants, Nancy, Joan Kaye and I wrote and edited the first egalitarian Jewish siddur published by Congregation Beth El in 1980, which promoted the matriarchs, translated the Hebrew liturgy into contemporary English, emended the feudal epitaphs that surround God's name, removed references to God as one of many and replaced the traditional invocation with "Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills creation." Our siddur, *Vetaher Libenu*, was so newsworthy that its publication was noted in media across the world, including the Wall Street Journal. We sold more than ten thousand copies to Jews and Christians before the CCAR published "Gates of Prayer, A Gender Sensitive Prayerbook" in 1992, and copied much of the work we had done. After much more study and conversation with a new set of editors, including Harry Abadi, Gary Bean and Michael Mirman, Nancy and I wrote and edited an egalitarian machzor for Rosh Hashanah in 1997 entitled *Chadesh Yamenu* and a siddur for weekday mornings entitled *Kanfey Ha-Shachar* in 2003. We also participated in the creation of *Vehaer Eineinu* in 2005 after we had joined Temple Shir Tikva and have continued to serve on its Ritual Committee ever since, with Nancy having served as Chair for two terms.

2. The Human Problems that Judaism Tries to Address:

Life is not easy: As children we may live in poverty with adults who do not love or appreciate us; as adults we may be unable to find productive work or find ourselves afflicted by misfortune or disease that does not yield to a cure. We may be bullied, subject to discrimination or live in an area where our lives are in danger from violence or war. And then there is suffering, pain and the fear of death. As a result, many of us turn to God in the hope that God may improve or save our lives.

Judaism has offered solace to such people for millenia by telling us that God answers our prayers and rewards us for obeying the mitzvot set forth in the Torah, as those mitzvot were explained, revised and amended by the men who composed the oral law set forth in the Talmud some 1500 years ago as well as by sages and rabbis who have published their own commentaries since that time.

The development of that "oral law", so called, was inevitable, of course, because Jews no longer accepted many of the laws attributed to God in the Torah, including its approval of slavery and the slaughter of Canaanites. And how many of us accept the

Torah's prohibition against interfaith marriage? (Think Pinchas.) We ignore these mitzvot based on the "oral law" or simply based on our judgment.

I do not mean to criticize or demean those of my fellow Jews who believe that God answers our prayers and rewards us for obeying the mitzvot set forth in the Torah. But why do most of us continue to recite prayers filled with childish notions that most of us don't believe in, notions that can't possibly be true? Do we really believe, as the legendary Rabbi Kaloniyamos ben Meshullam ben Kaonymus of Mainz, Germany may have believed some nine hundred years ago that God considers the conduct of every living thing soul and determines ... who shall live and who shall die on Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment?

We recite Psalm 27, which assures us that God "is the stronghold of our life; whom shall I fear, whom shall I dread?" Yet God did not provide a stronghold for the six million Jews from the Nazi Holocaust and Prime Minister Netanyahu keeps reminding the United States government that Iran represents an existential danger to Israel and its inhabitants. Had the United States and its Allies failed to destroy Hitler and the Nazis, we might all have been incinerated.

3. We Need a More Mature Form of Judaism.

A Judaism that recognizes who we are today: Most of us are Western Jews, who have lived freely for centuries in democratic countries like the United States, England, France and Israel. We should admit that we know much less about God than our forebears thought they did and our liturgy should reflect that, instead of continuing to repeat the notions our forebears may have believed in.

So let's see if we can find some basic principles that modern Jews can agree on:

We think of ourselves as a special people, who received the Torah some 3300 years ago. Although we venerate the Torah, which was probably composed about 2200 years ago, we respect the teachings of the men who composed the Talmud and later works as authoritative, although not necessarily binding on us, who live in a world of electricity, computers and nuclear weapons.

Among these teachings is that the disasters that have afflicted our people since the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE (think of the Romans, the Crusaders and Hitler) have come about because we have failed to obey God's commandments as they have been interpreted by some rabbis. Most of us do not believe that, because there is simply no evidence to persuade us that God would inflict such collective punishment on

the people to whom God gave the Torah. And most of us can find no evidence to support the argument that the Assyrians, the Romans and the Nazis slaughtered millions of Jews, because the Jewish people did not obey God's commandments or the commandments of the oral law.

Conversely, how can we explain the incredible life force that has allowed our people to survive those disasters and to prosper for three thousand years, whenever we had an opportunity to do so. Although we can count no more than fifteen million Jews among the 7.3 billion peoples of the world, Jews have excelled in every field of endeavor: Nobel prize winners (22%), outstanding scientists, physicians, bankers, lawyers, artists, writers, musicians, theologians, far greater than any other people of modern times.

Jews have also been elected to public office in this country, at least, in far greater numbers than their population. The Jewish population of the United States is approximately 2.2%, but Jews account for 4.4% of the members of the US House of Representatives and ten percent of the Senate.

And how do we account for the fact that the philanthropic contributions of Jews informed by the Jewish principle of Tzedaka to the arts, education, health care and the welfare of other people (think of Julius Rosenwald, among thousands of others, celebrated or unknown) who have sustained thousands of organizations that have enriched the lives of our fellow citizens.

And how can we forget that Jewish people recreated and continue to sustain the Jewish state of Israel, in a region dominated by very hostile Islamic regimes. The builders and supporters of Israel were not especially observant Jews; they were mostly socialists and secular Jews, who were imbued with that special life force that most Jews seem to have.

Many rabbis fail to recognize those remarkable achievements, because it is difficult for them to find the source for the extraordinary life force of Jews in the Torah, the pronouncements of the sages or God's providence. So they ignore the character and achievements of the Jewish people in this world and focus on our fear of death by telling us to fear God and to do God's commandments (without necessarily telling us which commandments) in the hope that we may dwell in God's house forever, the rabbis' concept of heaven.

Death is, of course, the condition that most people fear and the hope that we may somehow survive death and live in a better world has been the major inducement (in addition to military conquest) for people to be or become Christians and followers of

Islam. No wonder that our rabbis borrowed the notion of the immortal soul from the Greeks some two thousand years ago, hoping that we would not become Christians and buy into their promise of heaven.

Without belaboring the foregoing arguments, I suggest that we should not fear that God will punish us for failing to obey God's commandment, nor should we expect that we will succeed at our labors by obeying those commandments. We are a strong, resilient, talented and generous people, who have demonstrated our ability to excel in the real world whenever possible.

So what has contributed to our success?

1. We agree that God created the universe.
2. Like Jacob (Israel), we struggle with God.
3. Unlike many other people, we reserve a day each week for rest and introspection; a sabbath that much of the world has now adopted.
4. We have reserved ten days each year to reflect on our conduct and to try to atone for the wrongs we may have done to others.
5. We have created holidays like Pesach, which bring families together to reflect on our common history.
6. We no longer support a national temple, a hereditary priesthood or monarchy.
7. We create and support our own synagogues, schools, seminaries and philanthropic federations.
8. We enrich our lives by practicing tzedakah and tikkun olam, by reaching out to help others beyond ourselves and to make the world a better place.
9. We often try to fight injustice when we find it.
10. We employ rabbis, cantors and educational professionals more learned than we, who reflect our perception of Judaism; and
11. We have not accepted a Jewish creed or catechism, other than the Shema.

12. Many of us believe, as do Rabbis Harold and Lawrence Kushner, that we need not believe in God; we need only to do what God wants us to do; and that doing so is its own reward.

13. We enjoy a rich trove of writings that inform us of what Jews have thought and argued about for millenia.

14. We feel empowered to interpret our holy books and traditions, without the need for intervention by rabbis or others claiming special relations with God.

15. We devote time and effort to read the thoughts of others so that we may better understand the universe and our fellow human beings.

16. We may be more conscious than many others of the fragility of life; therefore, we try to be more productive given the limited days of our lives.

17. We draw comfort from our ancient traditions and practices and the fact that we have survived as a people, longer than the peoples who have oppressed us.

18. We have come to believe that Jews are family and try to support each other whenever we can.

These are some of the practices and principles that have also helped us to attract more and more people, who were not born as Jews, to join us.

These, I believe, are the practices and principles that have helped us to survive oppression and thrive in times like these.

May it ever be so.