

PURIM 2007

Over the millennia, there have been a number of attempts to capture the essence of my religion in but a few sentences. The most celebrated attempt to do this was Hillel's, when he said that "what is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. All the rest is commentary. Now go study." An even briefer attempt, but almost as celebrated, was made by Akiva, who thought the Levitical phrase, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," was the Torah's fundamental statement. It's no coincidence that those two legendary rabbis are essentially saying the same thing.

I've also been on the lookout for more contemporary efforts to capture the essence of the faith. For me, the best of the bunch was supplied by Einstein, when he said "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence – these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my lucky stars I belong to it."

Great stuff. But when I began writing my second novel, which is really just an effort to lay bare the essence of Judaism in 300 pages, rather than three sentences, I found myself fixating on two passages of the Torah. So, with the help of those two passages, I'll give you my own glib attempt at capturing the core of Judaism:

Judaism is a form of ethical monotheism held together by a community that lives as much in the past and the future as in the present. Its fundamental goals are to become a 'people of priests' and a 'light unto thy nations.'

Take any of the above statements you want, I think we can all agree that the religion they describe is a source of considerable pride for anyone who associates him or herself with the Jewish community. No matter when you live or where, members of this community don't simply conceive of themselves as men or women, Americans or Greeks ... they conceive of themselves largely, if not primarily, as *Jews*.

When I was kid, growing up in the 60s and 70s in the mean streets of Bethesda, Maryland, I had a lot of Jewish friends. In my neighborhood, there were three types of families, each of which were almost equally represented: the families with no Jewish parents, the families with two Jewish parents, and the Unitarians. Whether Jewish or merely "half Jewish," as the Unitarians sometimes called themselves, all of us took pride in our Jewish ancestry. We knew that there was incredible beauty in any faith that represented such a small fraction of the human race, and yet was able to produce such a high number of our greatest scientists, political theorists, and spiritual guides. For those of us who explicitly identified ourselves as Jews, we also knew that no matter how tempting it was to stray from tradition, we had to resist complete assimilation. To maintain our identities, we must somehow keep our Judaism alive.

Thankfully, the generation or two of Americans who preceded us provided no shortage of Jewish heroes. These people weren't merely brilliant, they were *cool*. And in

a very real sense, they captured what it meant to us to be Jewish.

I mentioned one before, Albert Einstein. Einstein was more than a scientific genius. He was, in his own way, a philosopher. So he didn't just theorize about physics, he also wrote about God and about social justice. In fact, it's because of his left-leaning political ideas, as much as his scientific theories, that I sign my name Daniel *A.* Spiro. People may think the A stands for "Ass _____," but they're wrong.

Another hero to my generation of Jews was Bob Dylan. Few surpassed that Minnesota Hebrew in poetically expressing our need for justice and peace. Like Einstein, he wasn't merely a Prophet to the Jewish community. Dylan reached anyone and everyone who hated the Vietnam War and sought equality for African-Americans. And yes, he was an exemplar of what it means to be a people of priests, because even though he didn't pontificate about metaphysics or theology, he clearly was an outspoken free thinker who spoke with eloquence about the fundamental issues of his day. If you don't think "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall," is about religion, you don't understand the meaning of that word.

To us Jewish Baby Boomers, gifted, rebellious role models seemed to abound on every corner. There was Allen Ginsburg, whose words laid bare the shallowness of the modern, materialistic world. There was Lenny Bruce, the outrageous comedian who pioneered how foul language can be placed in service of truth and human dignity. We mustn't forget Woody Allen -- nebbish on the outside, social critic on the inside. Or Betty Friedan, who helped us understand the absurdity of female servility.

Individuals all. They questioned authority. They made a difference. And here's the rub: no matter where their gifts lay -- science, poetry, comedy, or music -- they never forgot that a Jew doesn't simply produce for an amoral marketplace. A Jew works tirelessly in support of a moral vision. In other words, a Jew shines "a light unto the nations," pointing us in a direction where someday we *all* can live in harmony -- as free, intellectual, and unique human beings.

It's no wonder why, with heroes like that, so many of us took pride in our heritage when we were adolescents. We conceived of ourselves as a people not merely of priests, but of *rebellious* priests. Even the famous Jews of antiquity were known for their rebellious nature. Moses was raised among royalty, but he refused to prosper as an Egyptian so long as the Hebrew people were enslaved. Akiva knew the penalty for studying the Torah in public, but he -- long before Thoreau or Rosa Parks -- believed in civil disobedience. So he broke the rules, and suffered the consequences: the Romans sliced and diced his skin like pieces of meat, until finally, while reciting the Schema, he died.

Jewish adolescents come to appreciate their tradition as iconoclastic. We're told that our ancestors refused to worship a human being as part of a holy Trinity, even when ordered to do so by a European ruler. We're told that while our ancestors may have been

rigorous in their commitment to ritual, they didn't feel chained to any dogma. These Jews of centuries past, we're led to understand, were open-minded, questioning intellectuals. In other words, they were priests, whether or not ordained. Be it true or a myth, this story became part of our collective identities. It's no wonder that so many of us loved school and excelled so well at American academies – we were taught that book learning was our birthright, and we were free to come up with whatever conclusions we chose, as long as they were grounded in logic and a defensible morality.

In my own case, the pride in being part of this tradition never waned. As a teenager, I nevertheless refused to embrace the idea of divinity, but at least my mind remained open on the topic. During a trip to Israel when I was twenty, I “allowed God into my life,” as people like to say these days, and then returned to find a university Hillel in which I could join a vibrant Jewish community. In our weekly services, each of us took turns as serving in the role of rabbi. Our views about theology were all over the map, but that hardly mattered; what mattered was that we were willing to gain inspiration from our ancient myths, and that the values within our community, more often than not, were compatible.

Like so many other young Jewish adults of my generation, Judaism impelled me to work for peace, social justice and the respect for civil liberties. It also inspired me to find a conception of God that survived the challenges of modernity. So what happened next to me and my cohort? For the most part, we got married and had children. We kept our sense of Jewish identity, but finding communities of fellow travelers wasn't as easy as it used to be. I can't tell you how many Jews have told me that they once felt at peace at a college Hillel or a summer camp for Jewish youth, only to discover when they're 28 or 33 that there's no synagogue around that they'd possibly want to join.

What is it about being 30ish and Jewish? You walk into a temple and the prayers don't resonate. In fact, they seem quite perfunctory when recited by the older crowd who meets you at the door. After the prayers are over and it's time for the Oneg Shabbat, friends walk up to friends, and guests stand around, wondering which nostril to pick. Then they leave, but not without picking up some literature about the Temple. Nowhere in the literature is there a price tag, but everyone knows it involves four figures. And if you happen to make enough money – and that's what Jews seem to do these days – it's not going to be in the low four figures. So tell me, why would they want to return?

Ah, but you know the answer: they want their kids to have the same sense of Jewish identity that they have. So they *must* join a temple, at least by the time that sonny boy enters the early grades. And then, when they join, the kid will go to temple once or twice a week, and the parents will go to temple once or twice a *year* -- all because they adore so much the idea of maintaining that sense of Jewish identity.

There's a basic problem with all this, and it isn't hard to see. When we were teenagers, it wasn't enough for our sense of identity that we see ourselves as Jewish. We needed to see ourselves as *authentically* Jewish. Believe me, there's a difference. I'd

love to say that all American Jews were gifted poets and social activists, but then I'd be forgetting all of the rapacious landlords or tobacco manufacturers who have also been members of the Tribe. We knew, even as teenagers, that to be Jewish in more than name only requires resisting assimilation in a fundamental way. We and everyone else must be able to *recognize* our Judaism aside from merely which religious school we attend, or which holidays we happen to celebrate. Otherwise, we can hardly consider ourselves priests, let alone lights unto thy nations.

It is the search for Jewish authenticity that leads so many of us to open the trap door. For most of us, you see, the easiest way to manifest our Jewish sense of identity is through our careers. We have surely done well enough in school that many doors will open to us – lucrative doors, socially-constructive doors, or both. You can become a successful attorney or physician, and in those capacities work tirelessly for justice or to cure a deadly disease. Or you can run a business in a way that demonstrates your scruples and your commitment to serving a legitimate social need. The possibilities of an authentic Jewish vocation are endless to those who become obsessed with their careers. Notice I said authentic Jewish *vocation*; I didn't say authentic Jewish *life*. That doesn't come quite so easily.

What's happened is that we have assimilated without even knowing it -- and I mean *completely* assimilated. The old Protestant work ethic that Max Weber talked about is all about devoting yourself hook, line and sinker to your work. Surely, doing so will have some societal benefits – ask any widget manufacturer, he'll tell you all the ways his product helps out. But that doesn't make him a priest or even a light to the nations. If anything, Workaholism leads to darkness. Instead of guiding us out of the caves and toward the enlightenment of the sun, Workaholism leads us down a hole occupied primarily by our egos. There, in that hole, you'll find Judaism's antithesis.

Workaholism is nothing less than a religion! As such, it competes with all the great religions, Judaism included. Deep down, we all know that our sense of identity lies in the balance, and we don't want to give up our Judaism, but sometimes, the urge to become a Workaholic is irresistible. Workaholism offers rewards for effort, and I'm talking about tangible, measurable rewards. With Judaism, the rewards are sporadic and subtle, and they often go unrecognized, even by ourselves.

What's more, Workaholism plays trump cards. The religion, you see, isn't just about toiling away for our own careers; it also involves doing whatever is necessary to advance the futures of our children. French enrichment, soccer games, piano or ballet recitals, SAT classes, magnet schools ... you name it. Everything is geared to opening the same doors for the kids that we wanted to open for ourselves.

Here's how cynical all this has made me. The other day, I read in a local paper about a 13 year old kid from the most affluent middle school in Bethesda who held a fundraiser for Darfur. My first thought, believe it or not, was that she was doing it because it would look *really* good on her application to a prestigious high school or

college.

You can certainly sympathize with anyone who has chosen Workaholism over Judaism. Simply to be seen as competent in our day jobs, we must work extremely hard every weekday for the *vast* majority of our waking hours. Then, when we get home, we're so exhausted that the only thing left to do is turn on our new Hi-Def TV or access the ever-present Internet and veg out in style. Evening conversation becomes a luxury item in such a world. Prayer and adult learning seem even more far-fetched. And the result is that if you want to identify the active, engaged people at a modern synagogue, you need look no further than those who have recently stopped wearing diapers or are soon about to wear the adult variety. Seriously, modern liberal Judaism seems to be the province of school kids and retirees. For the most part, the rest of us practice a different religion. We all know what's going on but most are afraid to admit the deeper truth: as I said before, it's not just that the religions are different; it's that they're antithetical.

Unfortunately, modern liberal Jews have plenty of ammunition to fight that realization. We can convince ourselves that to be Jewish is to be *an individual* – unique, expressive, creative, and courageous. We can remind ourselves that there are many ways to demonstrate those qualities and other virtues through our glorious careers. So why, then, do we have to go to temple to become authentically Jewish? Why do we have to join together in groups of any kind? Isn't that turning Judaism into a social club, rather than into a vehicle for self expression?

Well yeah, and that's the point. Judaism, if you recall, is a form of ethical monotheism held together by a community. If it serves as a vehicle for self expression, that's great. But that should be merely an indirect benefit, not a fundamental goal. Assimilated Americans look for religions that, above all else, serve their own self-centered needs. Judaism, by contrast, focuses as far from the individual ego as possible. Whether you pray to the Biblical God, the Spinozist God, the pantheistic universe, or the New Ageist wellspring of love, ethical monotheism is traditionally centered on an object of worship. You seek to honor your God through your prayers, your learning and your actions. You take care of yourself, as you must nurture God's entire world, but you do so with humility and not as an obsession.

When I was starting my career as a professional and had finally eked out a belief in God, I could no longer deny that traditional Judaism is, at its core, God centered. I even embraced that idea. But that still didn't convince me to see myself fundamentally as part of a community. Growing up in America, it was difficult to be anything other than an individualist. Through prayer, that changed somewhat, and my singularity became more of a duality. Still, that wasn't much of a stretch from my old self-centered orientation. That explains why each of us could be a hermit indefinitely and still be religious. But I'm not sure we could be a hermit and still be *Jewish*, at least not in any authentic sense of that term.

To be honest, it took more than 40 years before I defined my Judaism largely on

the basis of participating in a community. But once I made that change, I realized I couldn't go back. Individualism is a luxury that is often crucial to maintaining a winning, Workaholic ethos. Judaism, however, demands community. That's why our prayers are almost always written in the first person plural. We come to God not as isolated souls but together, as a people. Some take that as an impetus to live separately from Gentiles. I don't see it that way. To me, it is a call merely to participate in a vibrant, authentic circle of Jews – to serve as priests to one another, and as a light both to our own people and to all the others.

I came to this realization when there was a crisis in my congregation. I realized then how bankrupt it was to be spending time and money worrying about people living in other parts of the country or the world if my own community was at risk. That would make no more sense than to be working as a marriage counselor while allowing your own marriage to fall apart. I came to appreciate that while social service mustn't end with your own community, it must at least begin there. Otherwise, what have we become but lonely, atomized individuals. Followers of Workaholism perhaps, but not Judaism.

It is common among my fellow progressives to lament the fact that the fastest growing religions today are almost invariably fundamentalist. But when you think about the importance of community, this shouldn't surprise you in the slightest. People who drop their kids off at school and then return on their own volition just a couple of times each year are hardly part of a living community. How could their religion possibly compete with that of the fundamentalists? Say what you want about Evangelical Christian churches or Ultra-Orthodox shuls – they create the feel of an extended family. In an increasingly Workaholic world, you need that feel if you're expecting your religion to offer sustenance.

Keep in mind also that there's more at stake here than merely selfish goals. Have you asked yourself how President Bush, mired as he was in the Iraq debacle, could possibly have won the election of 2004? There are many reasons, but if I had to identify one, it would be the sense of community among his followers compared to those of Kerry. Every Sunday, Christian conservatives turned off their TVs and computers and put away their precious work. Off they went to their churches, where, from the pulpit, they heard about the evils of abortion or gay marriage. And what were their progressive counterparts hearing from their churches, mosques or synagogues? Whatever it was hardly matters. The congregants showed up so infrequently and when they did, it was typically as isolated individuals. Frankly, they might as well have gone shopping at a mall.

Thrusting yourself into a religious community is much like a worker joining a union back in the day when unions were *unions*. The worker immediately expanded both his own power and that of his co-workers. Mere membership in the organization took on spiritual significance when the worker realized that this power created responsibilities as well as rights, and could be brought to bear for the general good.

As a member of a vibrant Jewish community, prayer doesn't seem so mechanical. No longer are you a lonely atom mechanically mouthing words in the first person plural while surrounded by a bunch of strangers. Now, you can be part of a wave of love that you yourself are helping to generate. When you speak to God about "us" and "we," you can actually speak those words from the heart.

In addition, joining a vibrant Jewish community can help you expand your dialogue with other Jews. It's true that even a hermit could read Buber and Heschel in a cave and maybe even write brilliant prose about the fruits of those encounters. But in a community, you have so many contemporary voices to learn from, and so many such voices to teach. You can, in short, enter into a circle of priests and a circle of scholars.

Most importantly, by entering a Jewish community you can participate in a powerful, joint effort to be a light unto thy nations. Alone, each of us can do comparatively little to change the world. I know it's difficult for Workaholics to believe that, but for nearly all of us – even us Washingtonians, perish the thought – that remains true. But everything changes if we throw ourselves, heart and soul, into a religious group. We can go to marches, side by side with dozens of others from our congregation. We can participate in sizeable letter writing campaigns to Congressional representatives. We can work at soup kitchens along with fellow congregants. You name it, we can do it – and bring numbers of others along with us.

Does that always happen at every progressive church, mosque or synagogue? Of course not. But if you care about that kind of thing happening, you can make it happen. There's always plenty of opportunity for an individual to transform a progressive religious community. If you feel like that doesn't apply to your own community, I'd say it's not especially progressive.

Before I conclude, I'd like to step back for a moment and point out what by now should be obvious. What I'm talking about may be tailored primarily to Judaism, but a Catholic could give virtually the same talk ... or a Methodist ... or a Unitarian. Whatever tradition you associate yourself with, if you're an American adult of working age, I'd bet you're an easy prey for Workaholism. You're a likely candidate for dropping off the kids to pray communally, while you and your spouse do anything but. You're likely to be cleaving to a self-identity that includes a religious orientation, even though in practice, you may not be honoring the religion's ideals in an authentic way.

Returning to authenticity – or *teshuvah*, as we Jews like to call it – isn't something that happens overnight. In fact, I'm getting the impression from my own life that *teshuvah* takes an entire lifetime of work. And even when you're old and grey, I'm guessing you never quite feel that you've become an authentic practitioner of your faith, at least not measured by its ideals. Thankfully, though, while the road is a long one, it isn't without some clear guideposts. Here's one I've identified and plan never to forget:

Bite the bullet, and join a community. And once you join, make yourself an

active participant.

Your children will take more seriously their own participation in your faith, you will gain immeasurably through prayer and dialogue, and your planet will benefit as much as if you organized a new Local. Finally, remember that through community and unification lies holiness. If you don't believe me, just think a bit about the alternative. It's getting uglier and more dangerous every decade.