

PURIM 1998

Purim is the holiday of Good and Evil. We are supposed to get so drunk, just on the good side of the line between the two. On the surface, Purim is not a celebration of the relativity of good and evil, but rather the sharp contrast between the two. Children dress up as the beautiful Esther or the pious Mordicai, on the one hand, or the wicked Haman on the other. We study the foiled efforts of one of the first, but hardly the last individual, who intended to slaughter Jews in mass numbers.

To many religious people, Jews, Christians and others, this contrast between good and evil is the fundamental theme of religion. This is manifested in the attitude that there exists a rigid, overarching, and clear hierarchy of being -- with the essential goodness or evil of a particular being often determining where on this hierarchical chain that being belongs. Our vocation, our controlling purpose in life, according to this perspective, is to place ourselves in as high a place on this rigid hierarchy as possible.

The whole point of Purim — that is, other than being an excuse to have a good time — is to teach people the relativity of good and evil. So it should not surprise you that I will not be espousing the rigid-hierarchical perspective. In fact, after I discuss it a bit, I will contrast this perspective with another approach to religion, and Judaism in particular. It is my thesis that this second approach, if it became popularly associated with Judaism, would bring so many educated, secular people back to the religion. But before I begin, let me clarify that I am not associating any one form of Judaism with either of these approaches. You will find these two approaches, while mutually exclusive, have both attracted reformed, conservative and Orthodox adherents.

Those who give central importance to the belief in a clear chain of beings from the smallest, most inconsequential microscopic form to the supreme being in the heavens associate themselves with different religions. To me, however, their faiths may be grouped together under the term “Hierarchism.” These individuals share not only a particular approach to metaphysics, but a general bias toward hierarchical thinking. A compatible belief is that the validity of views about morality, cosmology and other fundamental religious topics can themselves be placed in a rigid hierarchy. To the Hierarchist Jew, for example, Jewish interpretations of religious questions are simply superior, no iff’s, and’s or but’s, to other monotheistic interpretations. The latter are in turn superior to polytheistic interpretations, and so on.

We all know the critical concepts of the hierarchical chain, according to traditional religious belief. God. Human beings. Animals. Plants. The individuals in these categories are not simply different from those in other categories, but each set of individuals clearly represent a superior or inferior status when compared to the other sets. Angels also belong on this chain, and Judaism places them below the human beings because they are not endowed with free will.

Human beings are themselves divided into numerous categories, and these categories are also rigid, unambiguous, and overarching. This is where good and evil comes into the equation -- in differentiating among types of people, and in separating the human from the divine. At the pinnacle of the human continuum are the heroes, who in a religious tradition are known as holy

people. In Judaism, they are commonly called tsaddiks. Tsaddiks are people who always give much more of themselves than is required. One of the greatest exemplars of the tsaddik, to whom we will return later in some depth, is the Rabbi Hillel. Hillel gave us the portrait of a poor, virtuous scholar, whose incredible love of people reflected his love for their creator. The tsaddik lives for the sake of heaven, both on earth and above.

Below the holy people are the upstanding members of the home community. For the Christian, it is those who claim they accept Jesus as the lord and savior, and whose behavior does not radically contradict this. For the Jew, it is the community of believers, who observe the Jewish rituals. Who bristle deeply at intermarriage. Whose very appearance indicates that they are People of the Book.

Below these people are the herd. Call them the heathen, the goyem, the Godless, hoi polloi, they are the common people who are outside of the home community. They may be treated by members of a Hierarchist community with some basic sense of dignity, but it is difficult to say that they are respected as equals. If a Hierarchist's child becomes such a heathen and leaves the fold, it is viewed as a tragedy. For the Hierarchist views these people as a tremendous source of corruption in the modern world. The violence on TV and the movies is blamed on these practitioners of secular values. The life of free love and skin. The ethic of nihilism.

Finally, at the bottom. We have human evil. This is the evil referenced in Purim. The would-be Jew slayer Haman. And that epitome of evil, Adolph Hitler, and all who followed him.

Thus, rather than grouping people together in the same lifeboat, Hierarchism separates them into rigid categories -- the great, the good, the mediocre and therefore unclean, and finally the evil. But regardless of which category one speaks of, the members will take a backseat in the Hierarchist pantheon to the one and only God. To the Hierarchist, God is known as the Supreme Being. Or maybe I should say, to the Hierarchist, God is known. Sitting at the head of the table in the hierarchy of life as one being among many, the Hierarchist God is imbued with attributes that His followers believe are clearly set forth in His holy scriptures. We know His exact words and some of His ultimate characteristics. This allows us to love Him as intimately and in much the same way as we love our closest family members.

In my cynical view, this God of Hierarchical Judaism -- and Hierarchical Christianity, its closely-related cousin -- is strictly a human creation. We as a species created this conventional religious God because we wanted a pinnacle to the hierarchy of being, to the hierarchy of morality. We wanted, in other words, to ground our hierarchical view of life in one single dominating concept. We wanted a source of moral commandments for others as well as ourselves. Enter the Hierarchist God. We aspired to the ultimate heroism, the ultimate holiness, the complete absence of evil, the platonic form of pure goodness. Enter God. We wanted a star to follow, an ideal to which to aspire. Enter God. We admit during our more cerebral moments that we cannot understand that which resides in the heavens -- or, to use a famous Jewish image, we can see God's back, but not his face. But we nonetheless allow ourselves to describe His human, all-too-human characteristics -- His jealousy, His mercy, His justice, His love. Why do

Hierarchists view Him in such human terms? Because they want to be able to relate to Him intimately as the ultimate human ideal. Otherwise He cannot serve His purpose at the top, and at the foundation, of the hierarchy with which so many religious people are obsessed.

In short, Hierarchists posit the existence of a rigid, overarching and clear hierarchy of being. They aspire to find themselves as close as possible to the pinnacle of that hierarchy. They personify that pinnacle as a God. While Hierarchists claim to be created in His image, a cynic might say that He is created in the image of our own human ideal. This is religion, as most of us understand it. For it is the coherent framework propounded by many of the most self-consciously and openly religious category of human beings. Whether Jews, Christians, or Muslims, they share this basic Hierarchist attitude.

Now I would concede that religion is inevitably caught up with hierarchy to a degree. There is inevitably an emphasis on the need to follow a path to virtue, and avoid the paths to vice. But it is one thing to view good and evil as shades of gray, as difficult concepts to identify in particular situations, and as paths that do not lead inevitably to an ultimate destination. And it is something else to place all of life within a rigidly hierarchical, overarching structure. Organized religion often tends to the latter. But this perspective is not consistent with the demands of the modern mind. And it surely is not consistent with the demands of the modern Jew. This could explain why Jews are so turned off by Judaism. According to a recent Gallup poll, 53 percent of America's Jews regard religion as "not very important," while only 30 percent say that it is "very important." The analogous figures for the general American public are 14 percent and 55 percent. Jews, by the way, are on average significantly more educated than non-Jews. You decide if there is a connection.

It is sad to comment on the lack of interest in religion among people generally, and educated people in particular, because religion should not turn people off. It should not be seen as a source of irrelevance. Only particular religious beliefs or attitudes should turn people off, or be seen as a source of irrelevance. Anyone who asks if there is something more to life than their IBM stock, their brief due on Tuesday, or their ticket to the opening night of a new Broadway comedy is practicing religion. We must not let our sense of organized religion interfere with our religiosity any more than children should let problems in school interfere with their education.

But I am not here to bash organized religion. Quite the contrary. For the great religions of the world, Eastern or Western, give us all adequate launching points to truth and virtue if we wish to use them. They ground us in the wisdom of the past, so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We need them desperately. We just also need to understand that we must periodically alter some of their fundamental tenets, somewhat substantially, to reflect modern knowledge.

We can take Judaism's obsession with a rigid hierarchy, its near deification of certain Rabbis, and its anthropomorphizing about God, and declare that it is either irrelevant or plain old dumb. But we could also ask whether we are not merely viewing the teachings of Judaism on a superficial level. Rather than looking at the Old Testament, in other words, as a story about a mythological and fictional God, why not view it, and the Talmud it spawned, as a profound story about the human condition. I am sorry, my Christian friends — the real genius of Judaism

is not that it gave the world “God” before it became antiquated by a greater ethic. Judaism’s genius is in its profound and timeless analysis of the human condition generally, and what it means, in particular, to be a responsible human being, or a mensch. And those principals of individual and societal morality have, to my knowledge, hardly been antiquated, either by the birth of Christ or by the dictates and events of modern times.

What I would like to argue today is that the inner spirit of Judaism, traditional Judaism as well as modern Judaism, is not Hierarchist. Rather, I see Judaism at its most compelling as simply a form of Humanism. By Humanism, I am not defining the term narrowly to include only forms of atheism. Obviously, Judaism is far from that. But to be a Humanist in the sense that people use the term outside of the realm of theology does not require that one be an atheist. It simply requires that one take a particular attitude toward humanity.

Judaism, properly understood, is a form of Humanism because it fundamentally involves two attributes that are at the core of what we all understand to be Humanistic. First, Judaism entails an ethic that promotes, above all, the love for, and advancement of, humankind. Second, Judaism entails an obsession with learning about the nature of what it means to be a human being — both as we are and as we can become.

To those who view Judaism as simply an affirmation of monotheism and the centrality of God, I offer the words of some of our greatest scholars. Many here will recall the words of Rabbi Hillel, who lived during the century before Jesus and whose teachings came to dominate Orthodox Judaism permanently. When asked by a skeptic to teach the whole Torah while the latter stands on one foot, Hillel answered “What is hateful to you, don’t do to your fellowman; that is the whole Torah, and the rest ... is just a commentary.” Or, consider the words of the famous first century Rabbi, Akiva, who taught that the essence of the whole Torah is similarly humanistic: “Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.” Or move to a more recent time and consider the words of one of the greatest Jewish theologians of the 20th century, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel, despite his apparent obsession with God, exemplified the Jewish humanist. In speaking of that prototypical Jew, the Biblical prophet, Heschel taught that to the prophet, “no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man. ... To us [human] injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people, to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.... Indeed, God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than as contemplating eternal ideas.” Heschel, like so many other Jewish Humanists, did not just philosophize about humanism, he practiced it. Ask Martin Luther King or his living colleagues about the contribution of Heschel personally and the Jewish people generally to the integrationist movement in this country.

The Jewish strain of humanism is characterized by a commitment, a passionate commitment, to the betterment of all human beings, rich and poor, Jew and gentile, man and woman. The commitment takes the form of fulfilling one’s duty. In Judaism, for example, it is not considered a privilege for a begger to receive alms, but a right. The Jew, as a humanist, needs to transform the society for the better almost as much as a fish needs to swim. Now unlike the fish, the Jew has a choice. He or she can forswear his humanism and survive as an individual. Still, once the Jewish community loses its commitment to tikkun, to social transformation, Judaism will surely die as a people. Because the Jews will have lost their core

claim to self respect.

Jewish teachings do not focus primarily on how we as individuals can achieve Nirvana or some otherworldly state. Indeed, the bulk of Jewish teachings do not focus on how we, as individuals, can become great people. The emphasis is not on greatness so much as goodness. We learn to become good husbands and wives. Good fathers and mothers. Good neighbors, as Rabbi Akiva said. And, most importantly, good sons and daughters. The latter is particularly fundamental because the Jew must be a pious person and piety consists of much more than the love of God. Piety refers to an attitude where one is properly respectful of human history and those who have shaped it, and properly respectful of those to whom we are in debt. When we give thanks to our parents and give thanks to God, when we honor God as a parent, we are simply reflecting our own unique form of Humanism.

Jewish Humanism is not merely about wanting to help humankind. It is about studying people and values so that we can best learn how to become responsible humanitarians. Good acts are paramount in Judaism, but Torah study is nearly as important -- and both are more important than prayer. One ruling of the Rabbis was that “the charity of supporting poor boys in the study of Torah or of giving to the needy sick is more important than the maintenance of a synagogue.” Maimonides explained that “it is permitted to sell a synagogue [used only for prayer] in order to erect a [house of adult learning] since one has to ascend in the scale of holiness [and the study of Torah is considered spiritually to be higher than that of prayer.]” Now what does the Jew find when s/he consults the Torah. Merely a book about values -- good acts that are rewarded and bad acts that are punished -- and about laws. Fully 120 of these commandments are related to the way we are to earn our living, save our money and spend it. In Judaism, the issues of our economic and other moral obligations to our fellow human beings assume central significance.

Another aspect of Jewish Humanism is its levelling nature. In sharp contrast to Hierarchy, Judaism teaches that regardless of our gender, race, or IQ, we are essentially of equal value, simply representatives of a species. Judaism assures us that we all are made in God's image. But perhaps more telling is its teaching that we are also mere creatures. As we have read in the Ethics of the Fathers, all people are created by semen and destined to be picking up daisies and playing with bugs. Yes, there is a belief in the afterlife in Judaism, but there is an equally strong belief that we know not what it entails. So it remains to be seen that the virtuous human being and the morally sick human being are destined for altogether different places in any hereafter. Rather than fragmenting us into warring camps, what Jewish Humanism promotes is the value of community, where all work and live together under a set of common rules and moral precepts. Even prayer is communal — many of the greatest prayers may be offered only within a group of 10 adults -- and the holidays are celebrated collectively. If anything, Judaism is one of the humbling faiths that allows intellectual individuality, but within a framework that destroys the ability of the individual to become larger in importance than the group itself. And yet, because it allows individuality, true Judaism recognizes that there exist different paths to virtue all of which are acceptable and worthy of respect.

Toleration — a concept that some would say is so antithetical to organized religion — is

yet another essential attribute of Jewish Humanism. This notion is driven home by a unique aspect of Judaism — the teaching that what is permissible, and thus worthy of respect, is not necessarily the ideal. Take, as a simple example, the issue of dietary practices. A number of Jewish authorities have stated that vegetarianism should be our religious goal, pure and simple. Yet we all associate Judaism with the kosher laws, and few would contend that one who eats meat while keeping strict kosher is not practicing the religion. A more expansive example of the Jewish tolerance of diversity is the battle of Hillel and Shammai — the two rabbis whose ideological debates dominated the religion during the century before Jesus and shaped what would become the Talmud. According to Orthodox tradition, both men’s teachings represent “the words of the living God” even though their teachings were so blatantly contradictory. Hillel, the supreme humanitarian, taught the need to affirm inclusiveness to Gentiles, mercy, humility, tolerance, compassion for the poor, love of the human body, and above all the need to make peace even if this entails bending the truth. Shammai, by contrast, talked of bringing wrongdoers to justice, of speaking the truth even if it wounded the listener, of the need to renounce physical pleasure and wordliness in order to reach spiritual heights, and of the value of separating sinners and unbelievers from the community. Talmudic Judaism is largely about the study of these two competing world views — the compassionate versus the rigorous. Though the former has generally dominated the latter perspective and represents the law, the values and culture of the Jewish people are shaped by a confrontation of the two. Every student of Judaism is allowed to debate both, respect both, and decide for him or herself which approach is most elevated. This exercise is frankly timeless in developing a reflective, self-conscious Humanist — and I don’t mean someone who is tolerant of competing approaches to Judaism but intolerant of non-Jewish approaches. By studying the ideological wars within the Jewish people in a climate that tolerates such diversity, the student cannot help but understand that non-Jewish perspectives may similarly be defensible and worthy of respect. Indeed, students who approach these ideological debates with a sufficiently open mind come to approach all moral and philosophical issues with humility, realizing that while absolute truths may exist, they, as mere human creatures, can never know for certain the extent to which their own beliefs are true or mistaken.

No discussion of Jewish Humanism would be complete without talking about the Jewish relationship to God. This conception is characterized by the same tolerance that Jewish Humanism brings to different conceptions of morality, and that can be sharply contrasted with the rigid theology of the Hierarchists. Jewish Humanists are so tolerant about different views of God because they are aware of how ignorant we are regarding fundamental theological issues. Consequently, like their ancestor Jacob, Jewish Humanists wrestle with the question of God for their entire lives. One ancient rabbi even taught that the Jew should wake up every morning questioning God’s very existence. After all, if we cannot be sure about the proper conception of morality toward one another, how can we possibly be certain about such matters as the essence of God.

In his Commentary to the Mishnah, Maimonides set forth 13 attributes of God that have helped solidify the anthropomorphic view of the deity held by Jewish Hierarchists. Maimonides’ God was the omniscient deity we all know well, who rewards those who obey the law and punishes those who don’t. Yet, in his philosophic masterpiece, Guide to the Perplexed,

that same Maimonides presented a very different picture. There he posited what has been called “negative theology.” In this doctrine, nothing positive can be known about the deity as he is different in all respects from any worldly being. All true statements about the deity must be about what God is not, and not about what He is. This doctrine applies even to the question of whether God exists. As stated before, to be a Jewish Humanist is to spend one’s life wrestling with the concept of God. But, following that greatest of Jewish philosophers, Maimonides, it may not be essential for the Jew to constantly come to the conclusion that the God with which s/he wrestles truly lives.

Most Jewish Humanists do not question God’s existence. Like Spinoza, they may merely redefine what is meant by the deity. The Humanist God need not be viewed as a being that possesses all human ideals at His essence. Indeed, Jewish Humanism need not view God as a being at all. In other words, the God that is affirmed is not necessarily one being among many. Rather, as suggested by some Kabbalistic writers, God is often viewed as the ground of being itself. The vital source of all that exists, which lies inside, but is not separate from, the earthly forms we observe. Or the inner light that creates and sustains these living forms — which are themselves mere manifestations of His essence.

Jewish Humanism, as I am envisioning this concept, preaches an approach to God that reflects our own views of how we relate to people. Perhaps the foundation of this relationship has been set forth by Martin Buber, a 20th century theologian and philosopher who should fit anyone’s definition of a Jewish Humanist. Buber taught that a person should properly experience other objects of consciousness, be they people or God, as a “Thou” not an “It.” Individuals entering the relationship: approach the object with their entire spirit; encounter the object directly, honestly and candidly; and treat the object not as a means to our own ends but as an end in itself. In approaching God, then, the Jewish Humanist seeks to strip the anthropomorphisms to a bone and relate to God as much as possible as He truly is. In communicating with such a deity, in addressing Him with feelings of love and gratitude, in asking our deepest selves for inspiration so that we may honor Him, it is perhaps inevitable that we treat God as a being, rather than as the ground of being itself. But insofar as we are expressing our love and gratitude toward Him, it is not necessary that we posit human-like attributes to His essence. This would not be respectful to Him as a Thou, and as we have seen earlier, respect for the dignity of others is the very essence of Jewish Humanism.

Why have so many Jews rejected the traditional, Hierarchist conception of God? The answer, I believe is directly related to their Humanism. Many theologians have stated that the Holocaust is the most transformative event in Jewish history since the Exodus. But what did the Holocaust teach about God? It might be possible for the Humanist to note the premature or horrible deaths of one or two people, and still view this as consistent with a divine plan. Maybe even three people, three hundred, three thousand, or thirty thousand. But Humanists are people who are profoundly moved by human tragedy — or, for that matter, tragedies to all intelligent life. And every Jewish Humanist today has witnessed the premature deaths of millions upon millions in a great tragic crescendo. How such events as the Holocaust can be harmonized with the belief in an omni-benevolent deity who wills everything that exists is likely beyond the cerebral capacities of all Humanists, Jewish or otherwise.

My favorite interpretation of Judaism, in short, is not so much about hierarchy and the combat between good and evil, but about Humanism. It is inclusive and peace making at its core. And it is not like many other types of Humanism, which go under the name of secular. It is grounded in an attempt to place humans in a deeper context of the natural world we observe and beyond. Yes, the belief in God — not the anthropomorphized God but one that can be affirmed by philosophers — gives Jews a source of humility. But He does more. He gives a vocation, or an inspiring purpose, for our Humanism. We honor the source of life itself above all, and we permit ourselves to do this primarily through our interaction with one another.

So, as we contemplate the evil Haman tonight — and get drunker and drunker — we are joyous. Yes, it is supposed to be a night to get to the line of evil. But this is a faith that affirms the human condition as it truly exists. So we drink joyously and remember that the evil inside us and the good inside us come from the same divine source. And that this source, this life, is good. For despite all the tragedies in the world, despite all that makes us sigh, we keep going to bed at night subconsciously hoping that when the morning comes, we will be waiting once again to fulfill our vocation.