

The columnist David Brooks recently wrote that in the year 1500, it was almost impossible for a person **not** to believe in God, whereas today in the 21st century the opposite seems to be the case. Even when a person professes to believe, the avowal of faith may be totally irrelevant to his or her day to day life and world view. A purely secular view of the universe, of the place of humankind within it, and of the workings of the human psyche is not only possible but is the predominant outlook within the ranks of educated men and women in the Western world. The triumph of secularity is attributable not only to the rise of science and its role in explaining the universe but also to the ideology of individualism which weakens our ties to community and to inherited tradition.

One of last year's major Jewish events was the release of the findings of the Pew study of the American Jewish community in October of 2013. The data released seem to support the notion of the ascendance of secularism in the modern Western world. American Jews have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish community and an immense pride in their Jewish identity. They also differ in their opinions of what actions and beliefs are essential to their definition of Jewishness. Some mention support of Israel, while others highlight remembrance of the Holocaust, observance of the holidays and other rituals, or belief in various tenets of Jewish faith. The most shocking statistic in the data, however, and the one most often cited in reports was that 22% of the survey respondents referred to themselves as Jews of no religion. Even more troubling was that when one looked only at millennials, those born in the 1980's and 1990's, the category "Jews of no religion" increased to 32%. As compared to those who profess a religious affiliation – Reform, Conservative or Orthodox – Jews of no religion have a much lower rate of membership and participation in Jewish organizations and they are far less committed to imparting a Jewish education to their children. There was also a high degree of switching from one Jewish denomination to another, mostly in the direction of the less traditional groupings, although Orthodoxy now seems to be much more successful in retaining its young people than was the case in previous generations.

But let us not despair. Prevailing trends notwithstanding, there is a place for religion in the modern world. Human beings need and want meaning in life, they seek to

transcend the material world in which they live, they want to express their sense of living in the presence of a mystery (which science will never be able to unravel completely) , and they seek a connection with eternity. A recent column in the *Forward* weekly observed that many an avowed secularist may be a spiritual seeker in disguise.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman, contemporary American Jewry's outstanding authority on the transformation of the synagogue, characterizes religion as the conviction that life has meaning and purpose, that it is possible for us to attain a sense of wholeness, that there is a morality incumbent on us that is more than arbitrary preference, and that we are bound by a sense of obligation to each other, to future generations, to the universe and to the creative force that fashioned and sustains it. These convictions, moreover, are rooted in a transcendent realm of being. Rabbi Hoffman identifies the component elements of religion as ethics, ritual (which connects us to God and to each other), social justice, and community. These elements need not be mutually exclusive; because we care about prayer doesn't imply that we must neglect feeding the hungry or mentoring the at-risk child and vice versa.

I have for a long time now believed that emphasizing the religious heritage of Judaism is essential to the meaningful survival of Jews in the Diaspora. Hearing Rabbi Hoffman (a privilege that I, along with several members of the Springfield Jewish community had this past April) and reading his words only reinforces my belief. Four generations subsequent to the era of the great migration, we are not going to find the path to Jewish continuity through ethnicity or nostalgia.

The challenge for those of us in all faith traditions who affirm the need for spiritual community is to build and maintain religious institutions and to fashion a theology and a regimen of religious practice that respect pluralism and diversity, that uphold humanistic values, and that accept the findings of science. America has been blessed to enjoy both freedom of religion and freedom from religion. And it is a blessing! The separation of church and state has allowed religion in America to flourish. Contrast our situation to Europe where some countries still maintain state churches but where religion is much weakened. Consider also Israel where the position of rabbis as state functionaries and the enforcement of ultra-Orthodox norms relating to personal status have engendered only contempt for religion among the secular-minded. Separation

of church and state has freed religious institutions from governmental interference and, because they lack the artificial prop of governmental support, has encouraged them to be creative and to respond to the spiritual needs of their congregants. Religious faith and practice that are maintained by coercion can never be a genuine worship. Parenthetically, another noteworthy aspect of the American religious scene is that people often end up affiliating with and participating in a denomination other than the one into which they were born. American Judaism has been strengthened and vitalized by the presence and participation of Jew by choice, and all American denominations have members who were not born or raised in them. A chosen commitment is more often than not deeper than a hereditary affiliation.

As polarized and divided as Americans are on issues of politics, the blogger Andrew Sullivan believes that the gulf between fundamentalists and modernists with regard to questions of religious belief is far deeper. Fundamentalism as a label is not a totally accurate or satisfactory characterization because it may denote something different within each faith tradition. But it is a temptation that exists within each and it cuts across religious lines. Modernism is disorienting, inherited traditions have been challenged, and we have been left on our own to find meaning in our lives. Doubt is unavoidable, even for one who professes faith. The fundamentalist in reaction seeks a certainty that may simply be unattainable by modern men and women and often idealizes a past age of faith that may never have existed quite as he or she imagines it to have been. Religious texts are read literally rather than as metaphor and understood as science or history books, which they were never intended to be. When science contradicts such a literal reading, its findings are rejected and resentment is expressed toward those who do accept and teach them. At worst, the fundamentalist seeks to impose his own beliefs and practices on others and refuses to honor their right to choose their own spiritual path.

Fundamentalism will always have an appeal, but I hope that it is a temptation that we, in our pursuit of the spiritual, can resist. In a diverse and pluralistic society and in a globalized world, we can not afford religious intolerance and its baneful effects. Science has its limits, but we need to respect it as a methodology and as a means of understanding our world. This need not be threatening to people of faith, because it does not preclude the search for meaning and transcendence or the expression of awe and wonder.

Rabbi Hoffman in his book *ReThinking Synagogues* has attempted to describe the type of Jewish congregations that our existing institutions need to become in order to keep our religious heritage alive and promote Jewish continuity. Permit me to summarize his thoughts. We need to revitalize synagogues, he believes, by envisioning them not as marketplaces, where consumers (congregants) choose to participate in the programs that appeal to them, but as holy communities offering experiences of the sacred. We need, moreover, to do something that synagogues in the past have not been good at; we need to be serious about our theology. Allow me to put my own gloss on that: I don't think the rabbi is asking us to affirm literally the traditional imagery and language of the Torah and prayer book or to reference God in every conversation we have, nor is he asking us to work out a creed, a systematic statement of what we believe. What I think he means is that we must ground our congregational life in a belief in the reality of the spiritual, the sanctity of life, the possibility of transcendence and meaning, and the obligation to heed the precepts of morality and justice in our lives. Rabbi Hoffman's Judaism emphasizes what another writer on the transformation of the synagogue refers to as "the spirituality of welcome." Are we a welcoming community? Most synagogues will claim that they are, but that is not necessarily how the outsider who visits will experience them. Do we recognize that each of our members has a story to tell, passions to share, gifts with which he or she has been endowed and which he or she can contribute to the community's well-being? God's Presence, Rabbi Hoffman believes, can be reflected in the way that members of and participants in the synagogue treat each other.

Our synagogues are places of prayer, by which I refer not so much to the liturgy of the Siddur as to the opportunity we have through our worship to express a sense of yearning and of gratitude. They are places where we can practice *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds, in the way we care for each other and in the work we do within the broader community. And they are places of learning, where the riches of our religious texts and of our culture can be transmitted.

One often hears people say that they are spiritual but that they feel no need for institutional religion. In Judaism, however, spirituality has a communal dimension. We relate to God not only as individuals but as a people who seek to build communities of meaning and to give concrete expression to the ideals of justice and compassion in their

collective life. Institutions can potentially promote rather than hinder the deepening of our spiritual lives.

Our generation Xers and millennials, those born after the baby boomer era ended in the mid 1960s, will be a hard sell. Their culture and their experience do not encourage life-long and over-arching, all-embracing commitments such as synagogue membership and participation. Our situation in Springfield is exacerbated by our demographic realities. We are declining in numbers, we are older, we have far fewer children in our educational program than we did twenty or thirty years ago, and there is little at present to attract a large influx of Jews to our community (although I've learned never to say "never"; who knows what may transpire five or ten years from now that might boost our Jewish population?) But this is not just a Springfield problem. Congregations all over the country are shrinking, merging with each other, and seeking ways to retain old members and attract new ones. Our own denomination, Conservative Judaism, in particular has lost significant ground over the last decades. I believe that the Jewish religious tradition has something vital, relevant, and sorely needed to offer to modern men and women and that those Jewish denominations that are open to the outside world, that respect pluralism and diversity, that accept the findings of science and of critical- historical scholarship, and that understand that doubt and uncertainty are inescapable features of our modern intellectual landscape will have an especially important and necessary role to play.

I don't know for sure how we will accomplish the revitalization of Judaism and of the synagogue. Our creative thinkers – our Larry Hoffmans and Ron Wolfsons, our Sid Schwarzs and Naomi Levys and so many others– can offer us guidance, and advice as well as examples of synagogues that are vibrant and flourishing. Moreover, just as Hasidism taught that each Jew, no matter how seemingly alienated and estranged from Judaism he may be, has within some little spark of Jewishness, I believe that the tradition itself is a flame that may flicker and diminish but will never be extinguished.

The New Year is a time of renewal, of rededication to the ideals and values we profess but do not always fulfill, and of hope that we might overcome and atone for our past shortcomings and enjoy blessing in the year ahead. May we as individuals be re-energized by our worship and infused with renewed dedication to our spiritual quest and to all that makes life worth living. May our synagogue and its peers, *kehillot hakodesh*,

our holy congregations throughout the world, be renewed and transformed, capable of serving as vibrant spiritual communities for the generation to come.