

You know, when driving, you should continually check your rear and side view mirrors to see what is behind and next to you. And, when switching lanes, it's a good idea to take a quick glance backwards, just to be sure that there's nothing in your blind spot. But here's the great truth no has to tell you (or better not) about driving – no matter how much time you spend looking back, it is probably a good idea (most of the time!) to keep your eyes focused on what lies ahead.

You know, that advice is a pretty good way to think about living a thoughtful Jewish life. It is important to see where we've been. After all, without knowing our story, it is hard to orient ourselves for where we are. Looking sideways at other faiths and communities is also wise ... as best we can avoiding any unhealthy collisions. More than that, we may find that when it comes to faith “objects may be closer than they appear” – our differences not nearly as great as what we share. Our primary attention, however, ought to be on what lies ahead – on the future. As the book of Proverbs said so succinctly some 2500 years ago: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”¹

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke to you about the gift of our heritage and a faith in God that makes ethical demands of us. In the morning I will make the case that our lives can have an enduring meaning, and that by making sacred connections we create a life worth living. Connected to the Jewish people, and its search for unifying moral principles, finding our individual purpose, what should be the way forward for us as a Jewish community? What should be the principles that guide our vision as progressive, open and pluralistic Reform Jews?

Just staking a claim for our selves as religious moderates is no easy task, for deep division marks the public discourse of our age – in politics (certainly), but also with religion. Consensus, compromise and acceptance of uncertainty are often seen as liabilities. Of course, most people of faith are not extremists, but it is the assertions and actions of fanatics that too often define how outsiders see religious people today.

¹ Proverbs 29:19

Muslim radicals claim to be the voice of Islam – denying the rights of women, using violence to rid the lands where Muslims are the majority of those of other faiths. In Europe Jews are so intimidated by Muslim hooligans that in France and Germany rabbis say it is best to not wear a *kippah* in public. In the West, crude, anti-Islamic films and cartoons are produced, ostensibly in the name of the “freedom of religion”, but knowingly spreading hate, needlessly provoking and taunting those of faith. When young Americans were asked what the perception they have of “pro-family” and “pro-marriage” Christian churches, the vast majority found them unduly focused on attacking gays and lesbians, and far too politically divisive.² In Israel, a young 8-year old girl was spit on and called a “whore” last December because the long skirt and high-neck blouse she was wearing was considered immodest by some in her neighborhood in Beit Shemesh. Just this week a woman who refused to move to the back of a bus in the same town was cursed and spit at. Anti-immigrant and anti-Arab violence is on the increase in Israel, too. The Chief Rabbi of Tzefat issued a ruling two years ago that renting an apartment to non-Jews is against Jewish law. A few weeks ago vandals set fire to the entrance of a monastery in Latrun and spray-painted slogans against the Christian religion. Defenders of Israel rightfully point out that Palestinian acceptance of violence is more widespread, but Jews engaged in acts of intimidation and hate should give us no pride. And any acceptance or whitewashing of such behavior by Jews is a desecration of all we should hold sacred.

If we look at images of the most so-called “religious” around the world we can be forgiven for thinking the whole enterprise of religion is bankrupt. No wonder there are so many – particularly young people – who are fed up with the inflexible, unquestioning, judgmental attitudes they associate with faith, and who are turn away from it. Thus, Richard Dawkins writes in his bestseller *The God Delusion*, religious belief “discourages questioning by its very nature.” In *The End*

² <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>

of *Faith*, his own new atheist manifesto, Sam Harris writes that religion represents “a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.”

And what of us? How really committed are we to the synagogue not as a cultural or a community center, but as a place for confronting what God wants of us? Oh sure, we show up once or twice a year. What draws us? Nostalgia? Guilt? Inertia? But how many – even on this sacred day – have given up on the religious enterprise?

Now, more than ever, as people retreat to the comfortable certainty of the extremes - the voice of Reform Judaism is needed. We embrace diversity, yet affirm that God seeks compassion for the powerless and speaks out against tyranny. We are open to questioning and eager to hear the voices of others. We do not fear uncertainty as a liability, but see it as a human strength. We acknowledge the need for Jewish State, but not at the cost of modern, Western values. In a world where religious faith is seen as strident, self-absorbed and judgmental, and the alternative is a secularism that is cynical, “live for the moment” and self-indulgent – Reform Judaism offers a worthy alternative. Being open-minded, however, should not imply a reticence to assert our claim. We may be a voice for tolerance and open-mindedness, but not with the price of losing our spine.

My friends, too much is at stake – too much for the future of our people and too much for the well-being of our world to cede faith to the fanatics and abandon moral values to secularist zealots. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” There is a better way forward. And its time we start heading in that direction. It is time to aggressively assert the middle, to be (if it is possible to claim this) “radical moderates”.

The Torah we read Yom Kippur morning urges us to “choose life.” But what is a living Judaism? How can we – connected to our People, seeking a God who demands justice and compassion, searching for our own personal sense of meaning – how can we find the proper way to “choose life”?

Someone recently told me that they grew up Orthodox, but decided to become Reform because it was “less Jewish.” *Oy gevalt!* Less Jewish? If that is what we are, we are doomed.

It is time we stopped seeing Reform as “less”, but as “more”.

First, Reform is actually more demanding, because you do not have the luxury of your rabbi telling you how to live. Your clergy can offer guidance, support and help you as you learn (and we want to!), but we are not – as in the Orthodox world – פוסקי הלכה “deciders of the law.” That responsibility is yours.

Second, we Reform Jews do have principles that we regard as inviolable. We are inherently inclusive, encouraging the widest and broadest welcome to anyone willing to commit to the Jewish enterprise. Reform Judaism regards the involvement of non-Jews in our lives not as an inherent sign of assimilation, but an energizing opportunity to explain who we are, why we are and to make the case for Jewish continuity. We do not view the inclusion of gays and lesbians as a threat to the family, but (in stark contrast) fight for same-sex marriage as a means of strengthening and nurturing family life. In the face of those who define the role of women primarily as homemakers, we affirm the right of women to choose how *they* want to build a better world – in their home, as volunteers or in the workplace (or all three for that matter!).

A vibrant Reform Judaism is far from an easy way to be Jewish. It makes demands on you and me – and says that we can offer the world something important. But to do so we have to be knowledgeable, engaged and responsible Jews.

Knowing, not just feeling

You've probably heard about the man who was in the middle of an argument and was asked, “Are you comfortable being ignorant and apathetic?” Deeply hurt, the man angrily responded, “I don't know and I don't care!”

Learning has always had a place of honor in the pantheon of Jewish virtues. So important is learning, in fact, that in our daily prayers it is considered equal to

all other *mitzvot* – greater, in fact, than honoring parents, visiting the sick, praying or any other loving act. It can be debated whether or not the rabbis of old really believed the knowledgeable Jew was more important than the one who acts, but the point they were making is that only with a foundation of Jewish understanding do we find the motivation and rationale to be engaged in other righteous deeds.

Feeling Jewish is a good thing. But it's too shallow to sustain us in a difficult, challenging world. To be relevant to people, to know where we are heading, we have to do more than feel Jewish – we have to “know Jewish.” Reform asserts choice, but not in a vacuum. If our choices are to be Jewish choices – seriously considered and thoughtfully made – we must know how Jews in the past understood what it is they felt was ethical, and why. We must learn.

Every day we face hard choices. What should be our response to healthcare legislation? Is a social action event appropriate on Shabbat? Is it right to pray with Orthodox Jews who refuse to count women in a *minyan*? Which is more conducive to Jewish survival in Israel – building settlements in occupied lands or fighting against that process? Can I forgive a father or mother who abused me? These are not easy questions – nor are the myriad of others we face every day. But instead of just responding from our *kishkes* (our subjective feelings), we are heirs of a heritage that honors learning, reflection, legal precedent and passionate debate. Judaism is far more than what we do inside these walls. It is a way of life. And only when we reflect how others in the past – facing similar situations – responded, can we properly and appropriately find our way to give good answers for our time.

A relevant Judaism, with something to say to the needs of our time, has to be loving and open to everyone. But it will be the knowledgeable Jews, the ones continually willing to learn, who will be the ones who will define where we are going. So ... get in the drivers seat ... and start learning.

Engagement, not just connection

You know, everyone talks about the differences between Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews. Those are far from the only kinds of us out

there. There is the “Cardiac Jew.” That’s the one who says, “I don’t show up, give or really know much, but I am Jewish *in my heart*.” Deep, deep in the heart! Then there’s the “Gastronomic Jew”, who says, “My Jewish identity is wrapped up in eating. I like anything with a ‘k’ – *kishke, knaidlach, kugel, kreplach, kasha* ... crab. OK, so kosher I’m not!” And then there is the H₂O Jew. Don’t know about that one? That’s the person who says: “Holidays? Two only.”

If you recall what I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah I am actually a lot more positive about Jews than all that, but I do think we can aim higher than just feeling connected. The kind of engagement I dream about is embodied in a story I recently heard about someone I deeply admire who is in his mid-90s. On a visit to the neurologist, he was asked some questions to determine the extent of his memory retention. “Tell me,” the doctor said, “what’s the date?” “I’m not sure,” he answered, “I didn’t read the *Times* yet today.” “OK, what month is it.” “Um ... I’m not sure.” “Well, can you tell me what season it is?” “Look,” the man said, “I can’t answer all these questions, but I’m really concerned about Israel.”

That’s the kind of Jews we should be – concerned about Israel, involved in the welfare of our fellow Jews, committed to excellence in Jewish life, *ferbrent* (passionate) about building just societies. I’ve made the case that a relevant Judaism is one based in knowledge. But learning that is not activated by our involvement and engagement does not have its eyes on the road ahead, only on where we’ve been. I am thrilled to have people who feel connected to Jewish life, but if you really want to make a difference, find some way to be more fully engaged. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Responsibility, not just meaning

The search for personal meaning is the watchword of our age. There is nothing wrong – and a lot right – about such a quest. Indeed, tomorrow I will speak about how important it is to develop a meaningful life. The search for personal meaning, however, is not enough. There is a smallness to us as human beings, and to the synagogue, if our sole focus is on being “meaningful.”

On Yom Kippur we confess so many sins. על חטא שחטאנו, over and over again. What a cornucopia of iniquity! Even if someone really tried, who would have the time to engage in all these things? Why, then, list every seeming offense under the sun? Surely it's enough to focus on our own failings and disappointments? After all, we have plenty of individual transgressions without piling on the list of everyone sitting around us? Yet in this is a powerful lesson at the heart of this day (in particular) and Judaism (in general) that, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "Few may be guilty, but all are responsible."

Being responsible means not just knowing what is right, not simply engaged in wanting to make a difference. It means taking personal responsibility for doing what you can, what you know you must. To be a Jew is to not only see the road ahead, but keep yourself – and those for whom you are responsible – heading in the right direction.

Most people who travel go see the great monuments of those lands. Going to India? The Taj Mahal. Egypt? The pyramids. Off to Rome? You have to visit the Coliseum. What is the great monument of Judaism? There is none, because our great edifice is offering the world a road map of morality. We taught (and teach) the world that all are equal, each person is free and every one is responsible for the choices they make. As we read in Isaiah tomorrow morning, "This is the fast I have chosen – to loose the chains of injustice ... to share your food with the hungry ... when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood."³ We are, our Talmud teaches, the "compassionate children of compassionate parents."⁴ On the road of life, there are no chauffeurs. It is not someone else's job. It's yours. Few are guilty, but each of us is responsible.

Rabbi Michael Marmor, one of Reform Judaism's finest teachers, will be here in a couple of weeks as our Scholar-in-Residence. In a recent reflection he summarized what a Reform Judaism worth paying attention to ought to be

³ Isaiah 58:6-7

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Beitzah* 32 b

about. "It stands for one thing and the other – high seriousness and consistent self-deprecation; self-control and self-fulfillment; frequent 'yes' and the occasional 'no'; concern for the people, and an unerring sense that we are in this together, all peoples. It is a serious, complicated, flawed, messy, sincere Judaism, and I hope to God it can prevail."

On Yom Kippur we are reminded that we do not have to be perfect. We just have to turn in the right direction. It is good to glance back. It is wise to see where others are going. But let's keep our eyes on the vision of a world our prophets, rabbis and dreamers believed could be achieved. Let us respond with more than passion, but out of a deep grounding in Jewish learning. Let us be connected to our People's task, but even more, being actively engaged in making this world better. And may God help from retreating into a self-indulgent search for meaning; rather, take personal responsibility to get this crazy, desperate world headed in the right direction.

Buckle up. We have a long and winding road ahead.