

MORASHAH  
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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

## “Na’aseh VeNishmah: How to Have Best of Both Worlds”

This week we read of Jethro, the Midianite priest, coming to our aid. This is an example par excellence of interfaith cooperation. His advice to Moses was ecumenical dialogue at its best. He freely expressed his admiration for our people. And, of course, there was no attempt made at conversion – from either side.

How nice it would have been were this the standard set for all such interfaith encounters that followed in our history.

It wasn't.

For ages, interfaith dialogue meant: they talked, we listened. For centuries, there was much give and take: If we didn't give our souls, they'd take our bodies. From time immemorial, we were given a choice: the cross or the sword.

Today things are different. We no longer have this problem of being forced to reject our way of life in order to embrace some other way. Today we are not forced into an 'either/or' situation. Today, in our free society, we do have a choice. It is a unique choice; a product of our American democracy: “the best of both worlds”. Some propose “Be Jewish and believe in Jesus”! They echo the motto and mantra of The School for the Cosmopolitan Girl: “You Can Have it All”!

Of course this premise is preposterous.

Still, it's a tempting proposal for many a modern day Jew; a resolution to a problem that many modern-day Jews still face. On the one hand, Jews no longer want to feel left out or made to feel isolated and alienated. On the other hand, Jews want to remain true to their identity.

How much of a problem and conflict can this really be if one's identity is defined primarily, if not exclusively, in ethnic and or cultural terms?

Consider the following: “It's 9 AM Christmas morning and I am standing in a queue, in a rather grandiose building. I am among the many worshipers at the Church of Mary Immaculate. And I am about to receive Communion.”

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These lines were written by Dan Goldberg in a JTA article “Confessions of a Jewish Christmas” that went to press on January 4 of this year. He continues: “I’m a Jew, a traditional Jew who only weeks prior had a candelabra flickering in my window for the eight nights of Hanukkah. I’m not reneging on my religion, severing ties to my ancient heritage. I’m reciprocating a favor to an old mate. When my twin girls were named in a synagogue, he came to the Services. He’s an Irish Catholic and during our ceremony he was asked to hold the Torah.

“So when he asked me on Christmas morning to take him to church, I figured I would be prepared to do what he had done for me.”

“He’s not religious per se, but in my shul he played his part. Now, in his church I was being asked to play mine.”

After observing, with no sense of irony, that the wafer he received at Communion was not dissimilar to Passover matzoh, Goldberg concludes (mercifully) “Upon reflection, Christmas was a wonderful day. Not only did my friend live to celebrate with his family and mine, I got a sneak peek inside a religion that frankly isn’t so far removed from mine. The prayers, the penance, the rites and rituals, are virtually the same.”

Professing a “Woody Allen” theology makes it not at all “funny”, indeed sensible and reasonable to expect to have your Host and eat your matzah, too. Yes, with that sensibility of your heritage, you can still retain your identity... just as long as you never eat your corned beef on white!

Now, if Mr. Goldberg’s need to go to Church came merely from a desire to be neighborly, how much more pressure do the Goldbergs in our midst feel from true believers who proclaim – not disingenuously – “Be a Jew and believe in Jesus, too!”?

Here’s my proposal.

Rather than raining down hellfire and brimstone upon these “true believers”, why not fight fire with fire? By that I mean why not commit to re-kindling the core of our identity which is.... Faith. Religion. Torah . Mitzvot. And, in dialogue with those within and without our camps, stay focused on that core?

We are too quick to castigate Jews for Jesus. We call them anti-Semites and dismiss them as freaks and fanatics. True or not, it’s not effective. Why, then, do we persist? Because it’s the easier alternative, which is to commit to our core. Perhaps that’s why many among us have avoided and evaded the key component of our identity as Jews which is: Faith. Religion. Torah. Mitzvot. Why evade and avoid? Because we come to realize something daunting: that to effectively preach that, you’ve got to practice!

“But,” many are tempted to say “what about our ethics and ethnicity, our folk customs and history, our culture” (not to mention our cuisine)?

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The answer: If one's Judaism is synonymous with all of the above and is fulfilled by all of the above, we have nothing in our arsenal to counter their claim that today the Jews can have the best of both worlds. For, if the core of Judaism is ethics, I ask you, what could be immoral or unethical about “Love thy Enemy”– “Turn the Other Cheek” or working for “peace on earth and goodwill towards man”? If ethics is the essence of Judaism then it would make sense, after all, for Mr. Goldberg to hang a Christmas tree alongside his Menorah in his home.

And if the core of Judaism is culture or cuisine, why can't one, again, claim the best of both worlds? I can just hear many a modern declare “I believe in Jesus and that's why I only eat fish on Friday. But rest assured, it's Gefilte !” (Please understand that, for the speaker and many of his Jewish friends, this assertion may be humorous but not preposterous. And that, my friends, is not funny!)

To be sure, ethics and ethnicity, folk customs and history, culture – and even cuisine – are important ingredients that constitute our identity.

But none of the above can claim to be the core.

Faith. Religion. Torah. Mitzvot. We can no longer avoid or evade identifying and articulating these terms as the crucial and ultimate ones that define us as Jews.

When a Jew, perforce, confronts his Judaism as a religion, it is only then and there that Jesus as an option can be effectively rebuffed, refuted, rejected. It is only on religious grounds, there where our beliefs in God, the One, and the Nature of Man and his purpose in this world; the role of Law; the concepts of Redemption and Salvation, Repentance and Revelation, etc. , differ so fundamentally as to exclude any possibility of having it both ways.

It was a Torah that God gave us on Sinai, not a culture. We gathered at its base, diverse in our dress and diet but united by our Faith. From Sinai on, we observed ritual not for its spiritual warm and fuzzy feelings, but out of Covenantal Obligation; we performed rites not just for tradition's sake, but for Mitzvah's sake.

And now, given the proper definition of mitzvah, how can anyone ever again confuse or conflate doing something for mitzvah's sake with doing something – you should pardon the expression - for "chrissakes"?

Paul proclaimed “the purpose of observing the laws ended with Jesus since he made both Jews and Gentiles one with God”.

Standing at Sinai, hearing the Ten Commandments, the Jew begs to differ. Its universal appeal notwithstanding, the Jew regards these “Utterances”, these ‘*Aseret Hadibrot*’, that were engraved onto the Two Tablets, davka as Commandments, i.e.,

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directives – mitzvot – that are particular and exclusive in application and interpretation to and for the Jewish people and their faith.

(Here is one very rare example of where the popular English use for the word "*dibrot*" – “commandments” – does a better job of representing Sinai than does its literal translation of "Utterances").

Let us be clear. We welcome, wholeheartedly, social interaction and political cooperation between differing faiths. The Bible proudly records today of how Jethro, the Midianite priest, came to the Jews. The classic commentators all applaud his arrival and appreciate the positive factors that may have motivated his coming. Be it "*yetziat mitzrayim*" or "*milhemet Amalek*", our tradition notes and credits his expression of solidarity with our national liberation and his stand against naked aggression.

But the Torah also makes a point of recording his departure and the timing of his "exodus" as well. Just before the Torah is given, and lo and behold.....another Exodus...Jethro leaves!

"*Barukh ata bevoekha; barukh ata betzeitkha*". He came. That was his choice. He left. That was his prerogative. We stayed – that was our privilege. And so it remains – as our responsibility.

Being the only people to respond to the call at Sinai in a singular, exceptional, exclusive and particular way, we hold in our hands the best of both. Centuries after Sinai, we are left with both Privilege and Responsibility. Conditions in our modern world make it, now more than ever, necessary to focus on the fundamentals – call it the fire – of our faith. That is now our responsibility. Conditions in our modern world now also, more than ever provide us with the opportunity to do it. That is now our privilege.

Let us reach out to the many – too-many – “Goldbergs” in our midst and proselytize to the Jews beyond our pews. Let us tell them "you CAN have the 'best of both worlds' ". But only via drawing near the flame of our faith – the "*Aysh*" which is Torah, the source of our light and warmth. And only via immersing ourselves in "*mei mitzvot*"- the living waters of our Law.

Yes indeed, we can have the best of both worlds after all. We've said it before and we'll say it again: *Lem'an Aysh Torateinu ; lema'n mayim hayim shelanu..... "Na'aseh Venishma" !*

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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