

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING
Monday morning, September 14, 2015

A sermon by
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For many years, each summer I would spend at least two weeks, sometimes more, at one or another of the very successful summer camps operated by American Reform Judaism. These camps were located in all parts of the United States, and they drew pre-teens and teenagers from their particular areas.

Teaching Judaism in a camp setting was significantly different from teaching in a city synagogue setting. Both the students and teachers were more relaxed, and certainly less distracted by the pressures of daily living at home.

This is something that I enjoyed very much, and even miss now that it has been a number of years since I participated.

One of the most interesting experiences occurred each night, after the evening program. We gathered as an entire camp for a friendship circle. It was usually held in an open field or on a lawn. All the camp and staff joined hands in a large circle. The lights were out, and the stars shone brightly. There were no city lights to interfere.

At these times, we felt very close to nature and to the vastness of the universe. I always thought of the words of the Psalmist: "*Ma gadlu maasecha*. How great are the works of Your hands, God."

This reaction certainly was the feeling of our ancestors when they beheld the wonders of creation. Their response was in poetry and song. Many of the most striking passages from the Hebrew Bible were written in contemplation of the beauties of the world around us.

I. HOW THE WORLD CAME TO BE

All ancient peoples, not only Jews, wondered how the universe functioned. They wanted to know about cause and effect. They wanted to know how to avoid unpleasant phenomena. They invented gods and goddesses who were in charge of the various weather patterns.

They sought to appease the gods. They developed rather involved and complex incantations and prayers, which were designed to forestall as many unpleasant things as possible.

They developed the idea of punishment and reward. When bad things happened, people must have sinned and were being punished. When things went well, the result was clearly a reward for good behavior.

This was not a Jewish phenomenon. This was not a Greek or Roman contribution to the world. All peoples, everywhere, subscribed to this manner of thinking.

I would like to coin a phrase. “The Theology of Absence.” When we do not understand something, we ascribe the phenomenon to a god, or to God.

The beginning verses of Genesis are a very clever way of explaining the universe in which people lived. In the absence of other information, they invented the story of creation.

The concepts described are really quite beautiful and sophisticated. The idea of a Seven Day Creation period is extraordinary. Sitting around a campfire, or musing in a schoolroom, they came up with an order of creation that is not too very far from the concepts of modern science.

The evolutionary ideas of Darwin and others should be considered further refinements on the biblical narratives. The same can be said for the Big Bang theory. What is different is the span of time, and the prominence of a First Cause – God.

As with all biblical material, much of it was written over many ages by many different hands. It was clearly not a document which was dictated by God, or anyone else. It is a brilliantly edited document, with many highs and lows and many differing points of view.

II. BIBOLOTRY

We Jews have honored and respected the Bible, the Torah, throughout our history. In our service this morning, we take the Torah from the Ark and we march it through the congregation to your veneration. It stands at the center of our Jewish religion.

BUT our tradition has not stopped with the Bible. While the Bible is the beginning, it is not the stopping point. There are hundreds of books of Jewish literature commenting on the biblical text. To a very large extent, this compendium of books explaining the Bible are part of a process of updating the Bible, to make it relevant to contemporary lives.

The Rabbis, our ancestors, believed in the process of Continuous Revelation. They believed that every generation brought new insights and understandings to the Word of God. Beginning with the Mishnah, and continuing with the Talmud, and hundreds of biblical commentaries, and further reponsa literature, answering questions of real people, we have not gotten stuck.

But other religious groups have not enjoyed the ongoing process of interpretation. Let me explain what I mean.

When Martin Luther, at the beginning of the 16th century, began to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, he cast off what is known as the Magisterium. The Magisterium is the authentic teaching of the Church. It could, to

a large extent, be considered parallel to the ongoing process of rabbinic interpretation.

Without the Magisterium, the Protestant Church was left without an authority. “Who or what is our new authority?” the newly formed religion asked. The response was that each person, individually, has the right to read the Scripture in his or her own way.

This certainly became a very democratic approach. No man or woman was placed in a greater authority than any other. But, it also led to a rigidity of interpretation, as people began to follow one teacher or another.

It also led to a literalist understanding of individual biblical verses, unmodified by scholarship or nuance.

The Bible became holy in an unchangeable way. And this is where evangelical Protestantism is today. Alternate approaches were rejected. This helps to understand Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk, who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-gender couples. God spoke to her, she believes, to tell her that the State should not condone homo-sexuality. Finding the appropriate proof texts would be, for us, quite difficult.

When science progressed, bringing new understanding of the world and how it came to be, there was a sense of loss. What are we to do without individual understandings of Scriptural verses.

Fundamentalist Protestants are sorely challenged by the findings of science. It calls into questions ancient biblical understandings of the universe. Evolution, widely accepted by scientists and non-scientists alike, poses many problems for those who believe the world was created in seven days.

Evolution calls into questions the creation of Adam, and of Eve, formed from a rib of Adam's body.

III. JEWS AND SCIENCE

Several years ago, I was invited to join a trip to Israel, which was organized for rabbis who had been to Israel dozens of times. The focus of the trip was to take us to places where we had never been, off the tourist route. We were also to meet with Israelis who were not on the regular roster of politicians and religious leaders.

In many ways, it was an eye-opener for me. One image stands out. There is a band of glass buildings surrounding Jerusalem. A kind of Silicon Valley or Route 128, Boston in Israel. This was the home of much of the high tech industry which places Israel in the forefront of technology today.

As we entered one building, we saw groups of bearded Chasidic Jews working at computers. Clearly, they were technologically sophisticated. But in the hallway, there was

posted the following sign in Hebrew: "Please do not daven here. Please use the synagogue on the first floor."

It seemed to be an anomaly. Orthodox Jews, working in the most sophisticated scientific areas, still wanting to daven. But this has been the Jewish way. We have never been alienated by science. Moses Maimonides, in the 12th century, was a physician as well as a Jewish philosopher. He was sought after for the Talmudic knowledge, and by his understanding of science. It was chic in those days for royalty and the princes of the Church to have Jewish doctors.

I will not bore you by reciting the names of the Jews who have won Nobel Prizes in science. Nor will I remind you of Albert Einstein, or Chaim Weizman, or Jonas Salk or Albert Sabin.

Science was regarded with respect. It was an honored occupation for nice Jewish boys and girls.

CONCLUSION

Our newspapers are filled with attack based on narrow and antiquated readings of the Bible. Even Pope Francis has been told that priests should stick to religion and not science.

So, what are we Jews to believe? First, let me say that I object to Rosh Hashanah greeting cards that take the poetic images from our High Holy Days services, and turn them into images that look like a Chasidic jewelry dealer from 47th Street.

We no longer need campfire musings to tell us about how the world came to be. We no longer need to believe that 5,000-year-old speculations on the part of our ancestors should satisfy our need for knowledge and understanding in the 21st century.

We need to hear the teachings of modern science. The Hebrew Bible can no longer serve as the only guide for religion in this new world. Rational people cannot condemn and then reject the findings of science on world climate change by using a stray verse from the Torah.

Our understandings of human relations have moved far beyond the widespread biblical endorsement of slavery. New understandings about human relationships cannot be undercut by a stark verse, taken in isolation. The Bible cannot be used to reinforce every prejudice that came to us through traditions.

Judaism has survived through the ages by its ability to adapt to new worlds and new times. Change is not our enemy. Ossification is.

Our Jewish tradition has always taught that we must take the words of the Torah, understand them in their context, and then take them and make them live for our time.

This is our challenge. May we all succeed in bringing it to fruition in this new year.