

Rediscovering the Revolutionary Nature of Jewish Practice

David Siff

FRANZ ROSENZWEIG compared the relationship between Judaism and Christianity to that of a fire and its rays. Judaism, according to Rosenzweig, is the hot core of religious fervor and disciplined ritual, embodying a passionate and timeless spirituality. The rays of light, beaming off, symbolize Christianity, the work of that spirituality impacting history.

What does it mean to pray for the sick, but not to fight for a public health policy?

Although it is not a helpful depiction of Jewish-Christian relations, it does express a basic tension within Jewish religious life. Jewish practice needs the fire, the core of tradition holding it together, keeping it authentically Jewish, drawing on the fuel of a 3,000-year-old heritage. It also must be transformative, calling on us to change ourselves and sending us out to improve the world. Without the core of tradition and dedicated communal practice, our community members do amazing work in the world, but dissipate through assimilation. Without being an "or lagoyim," without being a leader on issues of universal relevance, Judaism becomes solipsistic, existing only to burn fuel.

The Jewish community needs the fire of tradition if it is to survive as a community, but it also needs to send rays of light into the world if it is to be relevant today. This dual identity might be described as Jews standing on the path from Sinai to the Messiah. Sinai gave us a game plan for *tikkun olam b'malchut Shadai*, for transforming ourselves into workers for God and for transforming the world into the kingdom of God. Such a world would physically resemble our own, but operate under the rules of cooperation rather than competition, generosity and concern rather than self-interest. In this world, we would see the presence of God in every person and every thing and live in constant awe and consideration. We would strive not for wealth, strength, or intelligence, but for spiritual accomplishments, to acquire *middot*, virtues, and to do mitzvot, good deeds. If Judaism is to be compelling, if we are to fulfill the mission of Jewish law, we

must rediscover the revolutionary nature of Jewish practice.

Kashrut is not just a code of dietary practices, but a paradigm that can influence how we lead our entire lives. According to Moses ben Nahman of Gerona (Nahmanides), who lived from 1194-1270, kashrut was given to make us *rachamim*, compassionate human beings. One of the rules of kashrut is to minimize pain, as much as possible, while slaughtering an animal. Although it is has become possible to observe kashrut simply by checking labels, this misses the point. Kashrut teaches us to practice consideration for all beings at every moment.

Prayer is a call beckoning us to refashion ourselves and remake the world. What does it mean to pray for forgiveness, but yet to be judgmental? What does it mean to pray for the sick, but not to fight for a public health policy? What does it mean to thank God for choosing us, without hearing the imperative of personal and global transformation that chosenness places on us? Prayer calls us to conduct a radical and revolutionary evaluation of our own character.

Study, too, must be revolutionary if it is truly to be Talmud Torah, sacred study — that is, self-examination in the service of self-improvement and global transformation. The bulk of the Book of Job is not its theodicy, but its moral indignation in the face of injustice: "They steal the orphan from the breast, take pledges from the poor... who press out oil within rich men's walls, tread wine into vats, though thirsty themselves." (Job 24:9-11) Torah calls us to be moral critics of a world we take for granted and depend upon and even to question the way we lead our own lives.

The way to make Judaism relevant is not to throw away study and prayer while continuing to discuss contemporary issues or to discard kashrut and eat organic and local produce. There is a power in tradition that cannot be easily replaced. Tradition helps us relate to God, to our ancestors, and to the Jewish community. Tradition keeps the fire going; it keeps us going. The mistake is in separating the practice and purpose, as if one could exist without the other. Only by having both, filling

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the form of the mitzvah with its revolutionary content, do we unite the fire and the rays.

We must build a community held together by a core of traditional communal practice, and impelled by that practice to act in the world as agents for a compassionate world order, if Judaism is to be both engaging and self-sustaining. A Judaism that sees only its mission of transforming the world but does not maintain a communal ritual life will, in the end, vanish like smoke. Judaism might be able to survive as a self-contained community, practicing *chesed*, lovingkindness, within its boundaries without having any impact on the greater world, but it would have failed at its mission.

The traditional and liberal sectors of the

Jewish community need to see that they are, in fact, both pursuing the same values; only their methods are different. Traditionalists try to nurture sacred community by creating pockets of compassion isolated from a world lacking in values. Progressives try to live in that world and transform it through Jewish values. While they seem at odds ideologically, they do have something in common. They are both trying to serve the holy — the one as its guardian, the other as its messenger. It is in the mutual appreciation of the guardian and the messenger that reconciliation can occur.

We must stand on the path leading from Sinai to Messiah and relearn how to practice tradition in a way that transforms ourselves and the world around us.