

When Religion Died: A Fable

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I've never been a religion pusher. People are sometimes surprised by this. After all, I am a rabbi and people assume that pushing religion is my job. They figure: drug dealers push drugs; dentists push electric toothbrushes; shouldn't rabbis push religion?

I remember, early in my rabbinate, a couple came to see me about getting married. The woman was Catholic and the man was Jewish. The bride-to-be had a rich experience growing up in her church community and was passionate about her faith; the groom-to-be could care less about being Jewish. They agreed to see a priest and a rabbi about how they might raise their kids. It was pretty clear that they were also using the visits to explore the possibilities of one of us officiating at their wedding. After 30 minutes of my asking a lot of questions, I suggested that they should get married by a priest and raise their children as good Catholics. For the first time in the meeting, the future groom got very animated. Well maybe the more accurate word is, "agitated". "Two weeks ago, we got a great pitch from a priest about Catholicism," he said. "This meeting was my turn. You are supposed to be pushing Judaism! Rabbi, do your job!" I don't actually think he said those last three words, but that is what he was implying.

I responded calmly: "I think that families are stronger when they are part of a faith community and incorporate the practices and festivals of that faith community into their home. Your fiancé has experienced that through her church and wants to provide that for your children. You seem uninterested in exploring how you might do that with Judaism. I think you will have a happier home life if you allow your fiancé to take the lead and then, the two of you, can build a beautiful, Catholic home together."

Suffice it to say, I did not get that wedding gig! Not that I was angling for it, mind you. Upon reflection, I think that I spoke a bit more truth than the Jewish partner could handle at that moment. And while I probably would give myself a high score on "integrity" during that encounter, I would give myself a C- on effective counseling.

I share the story because it is a metaphor for how we think about religion today and, more personally, how each one of us determines the role that religion might play in our lives.

There are numerous reasons why religion is suffering serious decline in America today. This is not the place for me to get into the details but I plan to offer a 3-part adult education series on “Religion in America” in January when I will look at the causes of religious decline in depth and offer some ideas for renewal. I hope that this sermon might entice you to attend.

Looking at the big picture consider these two data points: A University of Chicago study of American religion found that in 1998, 62% of Americans said: “religion is very important to me”. Now, only 39% of Americans will say that. Similarly, in 1998, 17% of Americans said: “I never attend religious services”. Now, 31% say that.

So, why does this matter? The state of our world is not good and the state of our country is not any better. Even as we suffer the consequences of global warming, we cannot muster the political will to cut the use of fossil fuels in a meaningful way. Democratic norms are being undermined around the world, most notably for us, in both the United States and in Israel, and we see the rising appeal and election of authoritarian leaders. Unregulated social media, now has the power to amplify hate speech, promote harmful conspiracy theories and confuse the public about what is fact and what is fiction.

No wonder that we are seeing an alarming rise of despair and hopelessness in our society. The Center for Disease Control reports that 2 out of 5 teenagers feel persistently sad or hopeless. 20% of high school students now indicate that they have considered committing suicide. Almost 40% of U.S. adults report that they suffer from depression and/or, from anxiety. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, has named this “a national epidemic of isolation and loneliness”. Dr. Murthy is right when he says that this a public health crisis impacting both individuals and our society at large.

I am quite certain that every person sitting here this evening can tell a story about how they or a loved one are being affected by this society-wide epidemic. And you would have to be living off the grid or on a desert island not to see the social and political consequences of our national loss of civility and common decency.

The legendary American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, coined a saying that if the only tool you have is a hammer, you come to see every problem as a nail. As such, we could almost predict how different sectors of society might propose ways to fix our social malady. Mental health professionals would say that we need more therapists. Pharmaceutical companies would

market more Prozac. If you owned PetSmart, you would propose that every family get a dog. (Side note: The Schwarz family will say a polite, “no thank you” on the dog.)

My take on this problem is a bit different. To lay it out, I want to share a fable.

With a nod and a tribute to George Orwell... the year is 2084. Every social malady that I mentioned earlier about America, has gotten far worse. An anthropologist from another planet lands in the United States. Let's call this non-binary alien, Olam haBah, the Hebrew phrase for “the next, and better world”. Olam haBah tours this great country of ours, reads all the books and studies that have been produced documenting the sorry state of our country as well as many suggestions made by academics and policy experts for turning this country around. After six months of study, Olam haBah writes a prescription to heal our broken society. I'm about to share what Olam haBah wrote but, before I do, use your imagination to consider how the message reached every human being living in this country in a form that would be read, understood and taken very seriously.

Here is Olam haBa's Epistle to the American People: “Seek out other people in your community who share your desire to live a more joyful and fulfilling life for you and your family. Gather together and agree on some common values that you share. Agree to meet once a week. Create space where people can tell each other about their families, their cultural/ethnic backgrounds, their occupations and their hobbies. Find some wisdom literature that the group might read and discuss each week. Start and end each meeting with some singing of songs that everyone knows or can learn. If a member of the group gets sick or has a setback of any kind, other members of the group should visit them and bring food as a token of their love and support. If a member of the group is celebrating a birth, a marriage, a graduation, a significant accomplishment, have a party to celebrate together. Once a month, identify a need in the larger community and have the group volunteer their time to address the need. Honor and respect every individual in the group, even when you may not agree with them. Practice compassion, kindness and hospitality with one another. Consider your group sacred, as its very existence will make your life more meaningful and begin to repair the deep brokenness that has infected your society.” Signed: Olam ha-Ba.

Now in this Orwellian-inspired fable, of which I have only written this one paragraph, my premise will be that by 2084, all religions will have been shut down and declared illegal, not unlike what happened in the former Soviet Union. Part of what started an even more serious downward spiral in this country than what we are currently experiencing is when (hold on to your hat), Elon Musk won the Presidency in 2028. Within the first year of his Administration, Musk suspended all future elections and declared himself President for life. Many experts had

been predicting the threats to American democracy for years; now, it had happened. With the end of elections, America, long a beacon of democracy, had become a totalitarian state. Among Musk's draconian measures was the banning of religion because too many faith leaders were criticizing him from their pulpits and, besides, Musk thought that religion was a silly waste of time. Elon Musk's rule lasted for 38 years, until his death at age 90 in the year 2066.

But, don't worry. My book will have a happy ending because Olam haBa's message will capture the imagination of a human race that had bottomed out. There is nowhere to go but up. Olam haBa's visit in 2084 made a big impact. Based on his universally read message, first one group formed. And then another. And then another. The third group called themselves a "sacred circle," playing off on one of the words that appeared in Olam haBa's epistle to the American people, and the name stuck. Soon there were dozens, hundreds and then thousands of sacred circles forming all around America.

In each circle, people got to know their neighbors in a real and deep way. Children came to these circles with their parents. It was the only place where you could connect to other people. Most Americans long ago gave up the use of cell phones since they realized that all frequencies were controlled by Elon Musk's empire and were used to surveil and brainwash the population. The weekly sacred circles became life-affirming gatherings, in which formerly hopeless people, began to dream of a better tomorrow. And people learned to be kind. And people learned to be generous. And people learned to be compassionate. And the more people gave of themselves, the more generosity they received in return, as if the very act of giving had a magical quality of growing exponentially when practiced. Soon, people who were transformed by their engagement in their respective sacred circles, started to connect with other sacred circles. The civility and respect that was practiced in each circle, started to characterize the interactions happening in the larger society. People saw that there was a different and better way to live in America. The seeds for a renewal of American democracy and social civility had been sown.

Elders said that the sacred circles were reminiscent of how some faith communities functioned in the early 21st century, before they were closed down by the Musk empire.

That is as far as I've gotten with my fable. If you are interested in collaborating with me to finish it, get in touch. I think we have a good shot at getting the movie rights sold to Hollywood.

The word “religion” comes from the Latin, *religare*, “to connect”. For decades, I have defined “spirituality” as a two-dimensional form of connection. Horizontally, we connect to one another. Think “community”. Vertically, we connect to something far larger than ourselves, to some transcendent power in the universe that connects us across many generations. Some people like to call that vertical connection, “God”.

Religion, when it works, does both of these things powerfully—horizontal and vertical connection. It functions like the “sacred circles” of my fable, helping us learn that we need a platform to come together, that is larger than our nuclear family but smaller than the nation. It is within sacred communities that we learn how to live with each other cooperatively and commit ourselves to some larger, altruistic purpose. And it is also in those sacred communities that we utter words and engage in practices that were invoked by our parents, grandparents and the generations that preceded them. As we re-engage with those practices, and the words of the prayer book cross our lips, all the generations that came before us are with us, in spirit.

It is easy to bad mouth religion. Religions more than deserve the bad reputation that they have acquired. The brand is badly soiled, if not poisoned for many. And yet, when faith communities do the things that characterized the sacred circles of my fable, they can be magical places. I think Adat Shalom is such a magical place. It has been so for my family and, I dare say, for many of you who are sitting here this evening. If that statement is true for you, I would invite you to stand up. *(SS note: About 90% of the 750 people in attendance stood in response to this invitation. I suggested that everyone look around the room to take in the significance of the response before I continued.)*

Let me now state the obvious. Even as I describe Adat Shalom as a magical place, it doesn't work by magic. All of the benefits of sacred circles that I described in my Olam haBa fable, don't happen because you walk into a synagogue building two or three times a year, or send a check to be on the membership list.

I recently heard a comedy sketch by Leanne Morgan, who just had a special on Netflix. Morgan is a middle-aged woman from Tennessee with a deep, southern drawl, which I will not try to imitate here. One of her sketches is about Weight Watchers. She says: “I have joined Weight Watchers nine times in 20 years! I have lost 7 pounds. I know the program works. I've seen the good results in others that joined. I just don't follow the program. I only go to Weight Watchers for the laughs.”

For a sacred community to offer you a life of greater meaning, a sense of purpose, an experience of transformation, you have to follow the program! It requires showing up, giving of your time, reaching out to others in the community, internalizing the aspirational mission of the community and working to embody it in your own lives.

Adat Shalom is not perfect. When we institutionalize religion, a lot can go wrong. In addition, Adat Shalom is a community in transition. But, let's remember: Rabbi Fred was different than me. Rabbi Rachel was different than Rabbi Fred. And the person we hire to be Adat Shalom's next rabbi will be different than all three of us. Still, Adat Shalom's essence has not changed. We have been a spiritual home for seekers and skeptics, believers and non-believers of all ages and backgrounds since 1988.

When I talk to former members of Adat Shalom who have moved away for professional or personal reasons, they tell me that they cannot find synagogues in their areas that have the soul of Adat Shalom. They don't say this to flatter me. I have worked in a professional capacity with dozens of congregations of all denominations all across the country and I know how special this place is. I never cease to be amazed at the intelligence, the commitment, the goodness of the people that Adat Shalom has attracted for 35 years. Whoever holds this rabbinic post a year from now, don't forget, Adat Shalom is not our new rabbi. It is you. It is all of us. Our new rabbi will not arrive on a white horse and she or he will not have a magic wand. The quality of this sacred community will always reflect how much time, energy and soul each of you invest in it and how much time and energy we all invest, collectively. After all, we are one big "sacred circle"

All of us are concerned about the future of our country and our world. We are all affected by the epidemic of isolation and loneliness that has been identified by experts. We are all victims of the political and social dysfunction of our society. This evening, I want to suggest that the antidote to our social and spiritual malady is right here, right now. But it will take some work on our part.

My fable imagines that in this country's darkest moment, there can be a re-birth of life-giving, sacred circles. It is the birth of Olam haBa, a new and better world. It echoes a line in our High Holyday liturgy: *hayom harat olam*, "on this day, the world is re-imagined, re-invented and re-born".

May it be so for each of you and your families and for our Adat Shalom sacred community in the year to come.