

*“Why be Jewish”*  
Rabbi Rachael Jackson  
5778 RH Erev; September 20, 2017

A few weeks ago I was sitting in Jongo Java, and for those of you who aren't from here in town, it is a coffee shop on Main street and it has some of the best coffee—so I hear, I don't drink coffee myself; I had a chai. So I was having a chai with someone and we were deep in conversation when they said to me, 'Society no longer needs religion'. “Huh, you know I'm a rabbi right?” I felt compelled to respond that we do. And I want to tell you why I feel that we need religion still.

But first, I want to give you a little bit of understanding of biological evolution. This is not biology 101, so don't worry; but it is a little bit of a “how did we get here”. Let's go on a journey to the forest many millions years ago when primates were first starting to develop. Imagine swinging through the trees at night. On the one hand, fast escaping predators who lurked on the dense floor below. On the other hand, chasing your prey. As omnivores, primates would also have to forage for tasty fruits and leaves hidden behind the foliage of poisonous flora<sup>1</sup>. So evolution had to make a choice: would the primates' eyes be like that of predator or of prey to insure the greatest survival? And for anyone that doesn't know what I'm talking about, predator's eyes are front and prey eyes are on the sides. Feel free to take a look at any species that you wish when you leave here

The simple answer is predator. But the more complex answer is both. You didn't think you get off so easy did you? As we are far descendants of those early primates, we cannot imagine life without depth perception—one of the primary advantages of front-facing eyes. Nor can we imagine life without a society. We humans are incapable of living truly independently. As we continued to evolve, we grew less dependent on our eyesight and more dependent on each other. When we walked upright and lessened our need for swinging from branches, this reliance on one another grew even more pronounced. We literally need someone to watch our backs. And unlike children who think their parents have eyes in the backs of their heads, we do not. So we need someone else back there.

Physical evolution gave us walking upright and society. And society gave us moral uprightness. Moral uprightness led to the creation of religions.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20141013-why-do-your-eyes-face-forwards>

One might argue that now that society has imbedded morality, we don't need religion to guide us in that way. You could guess that I disagree. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religion provides us with far more than moral uprightness—although it certainly tries to do that too.

Rather than talk abstract 'religion', and it is possible that other religions might also make similar claims, I can really only speak in depth about Judaism and I want to give you three aspects of Judaism. First, Judaism tries to provide us with beauty. Second, it answers questions and but more than that, it makes us asks even more questions. Third, Judaism creates connections. There are many values and perspectives but again, you probably want to go home sometime tonight, so I am going to leave it as these three.

In a day and age of functionality and productivity, where is the need or place for beauty and more importantly, how does Judaism fill that need?

At a time of technological perfection, of automated function, of highly reproducible results, we are in a desperate need for beauty. And no one knows what that looks like. There is a reason the quote "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" rings so true. What is gaudy to one person is just right to another. What is drab and gray to one is comforting to another. What is soothing to your ears might be nails on a chalkboard to somebody else. And so on and so on for all of our senses.

Because beauty is not necessarily about reaching our five senses, it is about reaching that place inside unnamed. It allows us to be in tune with our humanness and our individuality.

Because beauty is not relegated to only one facet of our life, it stands to reason that we can find it all over. In music, in food (so much food, *so much food*; I mean think about as I'm putting a parenthetical aside to my own drash. We could be like the animals: how many of us have pets? Or have had pets at one time in our lives? Ad you buy that giant bag of dog food and you scoop it out and give them two cups at night and in the morning two more cups, and then forty pounds later you buy the next bag. There's a reason we don't do that; it would be so much healthier if just did that—doctors might even go out of business if we did. But here is beauty in the food. Some people love brussel sprouts, and many of us really don't. But they exist. Some people love stained glass, and others sort of cringe at the brightness that they create. Some people love going to the theater and for others it's so loud. There are so many ways we can find beauty in our community. And people who have similar tastes tend to commune.

There might be a group who finds beauty in the natural untouched world and they hike together. Or another group loves architecture and what we can do with concrete and rebar, it's amazing, so they go on tours together. There are museums throughout the world and you could spend weeks at one museum and not see it all. And this is why there are religious groups in abundance.

In Judaism, we find our beauty in our melodies, our scripture, our liturgy, our discussions, and more. You can even look here on the bimah. Think about our ritual objects. Our *tallitot*—they could just be plain. A candlestick, our shofars. a chanukkiah, a havdallah set, a challah cover, etc. Why are they beautiful and not just functional? Why can you go to Ben Yehuda street in Jerusalem and find the Kippah man selling thousands of different kippot? Because ritual objects match the person that they are with and we each find something beautiful in whatever is beautiful to us.

“I decided that Dostoevsky was right: beauty will save the world. Beauty, which I understand to be another word for *love*, offered the only hope I could imagine for the endless anxieties and labyrinthine questions we carried. I need love in person, love powerful and alive. I need beauty to overwhelm all the ugly.”<sup>2</sup>

*Soferet*, Julie Seltzer, one of only a handful of women in the world who writes torah scrolls, details why we still need human torah scribes, rather than automated ones.

Even with the correct parchment, the correct quill, and the correct spacing of sacred letters—a robot can do that, perfectly, magically, and in one fourth the time and with more perfection than a human could ever create. But a robot will not have *kavannah*, intention, or awe<sup>3</sup> as it writes a Torah scroll. It cannot use anything beyond the senses with which it was programmed. It knows nothing of beauty or awe.

Awe comes from somewhere unexplainable. Neil DeGrasse Tyson, modern day astrophysicist and communicator extraordinaire, can explain to you how the cosmos is imagined to have started, 13.7 billion years ago down to the micro millisecond, down to this tiny time frame we cannot conceptualize of. He can detail every variable of Einstein's most famous equation: energy equals mass times the speed of light squared, or as you might know it,  $E = MC^2$ . But 'awe' inspires us to care. Astrobiologists can seek for life or water on other solar system bodies, like the planet Mars or Jupiter's moon Europa.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/do-you-actually-want-be-our-pastor>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bkcgj3SKyp4>

But they cannot tell us why we have the urge to know. Why does it matter that Saturn's moon has gushing rivers of methane<sup>4</sup>; it's nice to know but why do we care?

Science gives us an incredible array of questions to ask and answer. It challenges us to expand our way of thinking and our own horizons. And I believe that Judaism does the same. The difference is which questions they seek to answer, like a Venn diagram and how they overlap. Science asks "how does it work" [there are so many shows about that] and Judaism asks "how do we work"; science asks "when did it happen" and Judaism asks "when did it affect me". Science asks "where is it" and Judaism says, "who am I"? Judaism asks "why" with no expectation of a correct answer. In our world, it is crucial that as we search for meaning, we "look at human questions, and try to see how both science and religion can contribute to the conversation<sup>5</sup>".

Think also about questions within the framework of Judaism. You might recall the Passover seder. We are told to have the youngest child able ask the questions. "*Mah nishtana halialah hazeh*". And we encourage them to stay up later and pay attention, we even provide the children with hors d'oeuvres, also known as the seder plate, by the way. Feel free to come back in six months when we'll discuss how the seder plate was an hors d'oeuvres plate. And here too I kind of ask, 'what child is waiting for the parsley dipped in salt water?! That is not my experience. You put an Oreo on the seder plate and that will keep their attention. We have the youngest recite the questions so that the value of questioning is instilled during the formative years. Anyone who did not experience this can attest first hand at how difficult a value this is to learn later in life.

However, in Judaism, we don't stop at simply asking questions. We record all the answers. In the Talmud, a thick multi-volume tome written down about 1500 years ago, a question, often of minutia, is asked and all opinions are recorded. Most famously is the pair of rabbis who disagreed about nearly everything, over three hundred topics. Hillel and Shammai debated everything under the sun, and they encourage us to do the same.

In this climate of bifurcated conversations, we can learn something from the dialogue in the Talmud. How great would our civil discourse be if we asked questions to simply understand the person sitting across from us, rather than trying to convince or sway them.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/the-mysterious-lakes-on-saturns-moon-titan>

<sup>5</sup> <http://sinaiansynapses.org/why-its-needed/>

We can use this same concept in our personal relationships too. Remember a time when you fought with your best friend or your spouse, and then you took a step back and you said, ‘this relationship means more to me than whatever we are fighting about’. That is precisely what Judaism teaches us. To engage in questions, to have this debate, to really go at it with somebody else; and at the end of the day, take a step back value relationships and kindness over correctness.

So if I haven’t convinced you yet, through the debates of the Talmud, or the beauty of rituals and associated objects, there are still other points of connections to Judaism. Let’s in our minds step outside the sanctuary for a moment and into the gym.

How many people in here go to the gym regularly? (You define what that means) I’m not your doctor, you don’t need to fib. That’s quite a few. Think about what goes into your bag. You have your shoes and as any walker or runner will tell you, your shoes are *really important*—they are the most important piece of equipment you could own as they are your foundation. You might have a towel, or two. You might have a swimming suit or yoga pants. You might have a water bottle or headphones. You’ll likely have a lock to keep your personal belongings safe. And if you go to the gym ‘religiously’ you’re likely to have a routine for packing and unpacking your bag.

Now let me ask you, what do you put in your Jewish gym bag? Perhaps some Jewish foods, like lox or matzah balls or latkes. Perhaps you put in your bag service attendance (with or without the headphones to drown out the rabbi ☺). Perhaps you keep a book, or scroll, of Jewish values with you. Perhaps you sweat guilt.

And where your water bottle would be, you keep your Kiddush cup which represents all the soul-quenching rituals in your life. Instead of shoes, you have tradition and you have community—always there holding you up, walking with you along your way, consistently reliable. And if you access Judaism regularly, you’re likely to know how to call upon it at all times.

Now let me ask you, how many people in here go to Judaism religiously? This time pretend I’m doctor, feel free to fib a little ☺.

Connection to tradition or food or community is what makes Judaism necessary and relevant. As we can see, there are various ways of engaging in Judaism, and the bottom line is to engage [I could say that like Picard ‘engage’ but I cannot do his accent well].

We find beauty, find questions, find connections through our similarity of being Jewish. Tying all of this together is a poem by Andrew Lustig from 2011, which I amended just slightly:

I am the collective pride and excitement that is felt when we find out that that new actor, that great athlete, his chief of staff... is Jewish

I am the collective guilt and shame that is felt when we find out that that serial killer, that Ponzi schemer, that wife beater... is Jewish

I am the Jewish star tattooed on the chest of the teenager who chooses to rebel against his parents' and grandparents' warnings of a lonely goyim cemetery by embracing that same Judaism and making permanent his Jewish identity

I am all the words in Yiddish I've heard all my life that I... still don't understand.

I am my melody of Adon Olam. The words may be the same, but I am my melody of Adon Olam.

I am not *getting* Bat Mitzvahed. I *am* Bat Mitzvah.

I am your family who's seen Chortkov and Auschwitz, who's seen '49, '67, and '73 and whose tired of trying to make peace with those people who just want to blow up buses and destroy her people.

I am the 19 year old who's seen Budrus, Don't Mess With the Zohan, and Waltz with Bashir and who thinks -- who knows -- peace is possible.

I am the complicated reason you take the cheese off of the burger you eat at the Saturday morning brunch.

I am constantly struggling to understand my Jewish identity outside of religion.

I am the Torah and not Old Testament

I am a kippah and not a Skull Cap

I am a Jew

5,000 years old... not 69

I am never asked if I have horns or a pot of gold, if I rule the world or why I personally killed Jesus. I am asked where my black hat is, if I really get 8 presents on my Christmas, why my sideburns aren't super long, and if I've really never tried bacon.

I am asked what a Gefilte Fish is. I say, "I don't know. Nobody knows. I don't like it. Nobody does. But we eat it because it's what we do. Nobody knows"

I am asked if my dad's a lawyer. I say "no... my mom is... my dad's a doctor."

I am asked if my family was in the Holocaust as if it were a movie. "Yeah, they were. But they were also on Schindler's List."

I am on JDate and not Match.com because, frankly, it's just easier that way.

I am that feeling of obligation to buy the Dead Sea salt at the mall kiosk because you know the woman selling it is Israeli.

I am an IDF sweatshirt and the Chai around your neck. I am a \$100 Challah cover I will never use and a 5 Shekel piece of red string you will wear until it withers away. I am your Hebrew name. I am your Israeli cousins. I am your Torah portion. I am

your Bat Mitzvah dress and the cute Israeli soldier on your Israeli trip. [Or any trip, they are always cute. Always.]

I am 18 when I discover that Israel is not actually a garden of Eden, of milk and honey where Jews of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and styles of worship come together -- eternally happy and appreciative -- to do a constant Hora in the streets of the promised land.

I am still confident it will be.

I am the way your stomach forgets to be hungry and your lungs forget to breathe when the Rabbi commands the final Tekiah Gadolah and an entire congregation -- a congregation that is not any one synagogue but an entire people -- listens to what on January 1st is a ball dropping in Times Square, but today -- any day in late September or early October for the 5778<sup>th</sup> time is a ram's horn will be blown into for what seems like an eternity. Like the 8 days the oil burned, and how David defeated Goliath, and how Moses parted the seas -- it would have been enough, dayenu -- how we won the war (your choice which one), and how we survived, Nes Gadol Haya: a great miracle happened<sup>6</sup>—

A great miracle will continue to happen. As we approach this year and say Shana Tova, a year of goodness. Not a happy year. Happiness comes and goes; it's important. But goodness? Goodness lasts. Goodness we have the ability to do something about. And so we say Shana Tovah -- I am Jewish.

---

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lustig Poem in the original: <http://www.lacrossesyagogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/I-Am-Jewish-transcription-ok2.pdf>