

Yom Kippur
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WHY IT'S IMPORTANT NOT TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS

You might be used to coming to services on Yom Kippur and hearing various rabbis tell you about all the problems in the world and what YOU are NOT doing to make things better.

This isn't one of those sermons.

It's not one of those sermons because I honestly cannot claim to have all of the answers.

Maybe this surprises you, even disappoints you. Isn't this what religious leaders are supposed to do? What kind of rabbi am I, anyway?

It's tough to be a religious leader in the world today. My husband, David, doesn't even like to tell people that he is a rabbi. Most people know David as a Bible scholar, and he thinks of himself primarily as an academic. But he is also a rabbi, ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary years ago.

So when he meets strangers who ask him what he does for a living, David has a good one-liner response. He tells them, "I play piano in a house of ill-repute." That usually ends the conversation, although one time, a gentleman asked him, "which one?"

I can understand David's reluctance to reveal that he is a rabbi. Sometimes I feel the same thing. Sometimes I have a difficult time telling strangers what I do for a living because doing so leads people to make all kinds of assumptions about the way I think of God, about my values, and my politics.

Even worse, sometimes people assume that because I am a rabbi, I must have all the answers.

This isn't only MY problem. It can also be difficult for us –all of us –to tell others that we go to synagogue – that we are "religious." How many times have you heard statements like these? "Religion only serves to divide people and bring out the worst in them." "Religion is the cause of so much evil in our world today." "If it weren't for religion, we wouldn't have wars."

These statements are pretty common. Maybe, at times, we've even thought these things ourselves. After all, it's hard to look at the headlines and hold religion blameless for the evil that people do in its name.

Sunnis and Shiites attack each other covering their mosques with blood. Suicide bombers blow people to pieces, confident that their act of murder will secure them a prime place in the afterlife. According to the NY Times¹, U.S. military officials predict an increase of violence in Iraq during Islam's holy month of Ramadan. Al Qaeda's new chief in the region recently called on fellow Sunnis to "work hard in this holy month to capture some Christian dogs." Elsewhere, West Bank Settlers destroy Palestinian olive orchards, confident that it was God who gave every inch of the West Bank to them, and them alone.

Yes, religion has been used as an excuse for terrible things over the years, and over the centuries.

In 1994, the extremist Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein --a physician, of all things -- killed 29 Muslims who were praying in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The very next year, another Orthodox extremist, Yigal Amir, murdered Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, acting out of a religious imperative. In his mind, Rabin's attempts to establish peace with the Palestinians marked him as a "pursuer" determined to destroy Israel -- and Jewish law permits us to kill our "pursuers." And Muslim clerics regularly issue death sentences under the heading of a "fatwa" -- a religious ruling. The clerics issue these death sentences against those who dare to disagree with their teachings.

After abortion became legal in the United States, small groups of Christian extremists committed bombings and murders at clinics providing abortions -- killings motivated by their religious conviction that human life begins at conception. In the last half of the 20th century, acts of violence sparked by clashes between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and elsewhere injured and killed tens of thousands of people.² Christianity has a long record spanning at least 1500 years of killing people who would not accept their faith, or who accepted the "wrong" version of their faith.

This is only a partial list. There's plenty of blood on all our hands; plenty of blame to go around.

But there is something that all of this violence has in common. The people who did these things believed that they had all of the answers.

A recent article in a satirical publication called The Onion points out this common element at the heart of religious violence. The article, entitled "War-Torn Middle East

¹ September 29, 2006

² CNN Special, Northern Ireland

Seeks Solace in Religion”³ is meant to be funny, but you will easily recognize the truth underlying the humor. The article says, in part:

...In a time of seemingly unending conflict between Israelis and Arabs, a growing number of Middle Easterners are fervently embracing the unshakeable wisdom of Judaism and Islam....

West Bank settler Ari Chayat, whose neighborhood has been ravaged by violence, says: “The world is so brutal and unfair. “Many days, my uncompromising belief in a vengeful creator is all that gets me out of bed in the morning.”...

Lebanese militant Jawad Hamid, who recently lost his best friend to an Israeli helicopter attack while the two men were on their way to pick up a Katyusha rocket, said his faith in Allah was the only way he could cope with the tragedy. “Every time I want to give up hope, I just open the Koran to my favorite passage, Surah 2: 194: ‘whoever acts aggressively against you, inflict injury on him’,” Hamid said. “Whenever I read those words, I am immediately filled with inspiration and a renewed sense of purpose.”

*...
Hezbollah commander Mahdi al-Zaidi said “I looked deep within my faith, consulted the Koran, and by the mercy of Allah, I gained the resolve to oversee a massive air strike against the enemy.”*

Now, is it really fair to blame religion for all the violence that we human beings inflict on each other? Of course not. With very little effort we could generate a long list of terrible human actions in which religion plays little or no part, including Darfur -- the first genocide of the 21st century.

As my husband David told a friend who blamed religion for all the evil in the world, “Ed, you’re an optimist. You believe that if we didn’t have religion, we wouldn’t have wars. I don’t share that optimism. If we didn’t have religion, we would still find an excuse to kill each other.”

David’s response is a good one, but as a religious leader, I’m not content to leave it at that. I want to know how one institution, religion, can motivate people to destroy and murder, and, at the same time, inspire people to great acts of courage and sacrifice in relieving the suffering of others.

I think the trouble with religion begins when we start to believe that we know all of the answers.

Our Torah reading this morning describes a community coming together to enter into a covenant—a religious community composed of diverse people:

³ August 23, 2006

*You stand this day, all of you, before your Eternal God:
The heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every one in Israel, men, women and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water.*⁴

Many different people comprise a religious community. Yet we are not all the same. And our differences are crucial. As one of my teachers, Rabbi Michael Marmor pointed out, when it comes to religion, some of us are choppers of wood, and some of us are drawers of water.

Choppers of wood are fundamentalists. They see the truth as something cut and dried, neatly stacked. Religious truth doesn't change with time. What was, is, and ever will be. Furthermore, they believe that God revealed one truth, to one people, and that consequently, they have all the answers.

The drawers of water are the non-fundamentalists. They see religion as fluid and changing, not as something cut-and-dried. Non-fundamentalists see our religious tradition as a record of human searching. The search is a continual one, and the answers may change over time. Our searching keeps us humble. Our searching enables us to see the true complexity of our world. We know that we don't have all the answers.

If we think we have all the answers, we don't have to search. If we believe that we alone possess the truth, then we cannot see beyond the boundaries of race and religion and recognize the human struggle common to us all.

Five years ago, in the terrible aftermath of September 11, 2001, Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, a modern Orthodox rabbi, made a brilliant observation. He said that in the days following the bloody attack on the United States, many people came to him looking for answers. They asked: "How could people commit such atrocities in the name of God?" "Why did so many good people have to die?" "What kind of God allows this to happen?"

Rabbi Hirschfield said that his job as a rabbi was NOT to provide answers to questions that are really unanswerable. Instead, his job as a rabbi was to help people live with the questions.⁵

And our job, as drawers of water, as human beings bound together in this holy Jewish community, is to help each other live with the questions.

If we have each other, if we are not alone in our searching, then we can live lives of meaning and purpose -- without knowing all the answers.

⁴ Deuteronomy 29: 9-10

⁵ "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero," PBS Frontline

I close with a well-known parable attributed to Rabbi Hayyim of Zans:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly, he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this forest for several days."

Said the other to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray.

And now let us look for a way out together."

My friends, your rabbi does not know all of the answers. But this I promise you: we will find our way together.

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