**The Faith of a Heretic**

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What beliefs sustain you? What commitments guide you on your life journeys? What is so important that you would makes sacrifices for them?

As you reflect on these questions today, I have a confession to make.  Over the past few years, I became a heretic. Heresy, which comes from a Greek word which meant “choice," came to mean a freely chosen opinion at variance with an established doctrine. I’d like to talk with you about the faith of a heretic.

A few years ago, a friend wrote an essay for the New York Times titled "Saying a prayer I don’t believe. “

… despite my theological ambivalence, I am turning somersaults to say *Kaddish [for my father].…*

Why does Jay do this? He identifies with an observant community and finds this connection meaningful. Is this simply “religious behaviourism”? Or is this what Peter Berger identified as a “signal of transcendence” — something that links him to the transcendent—to a people and a covenant that extends beyond time and place?

Muslims and Christians have had serious conflicts over issues of faith. The Western Church split from Eastern Christianity over doctrine. The Reformation was about differences that Protesting Christians had with the Roman Church. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia lies partially in the schism between Shi’ite and Sunn’i Islam.

Biblical faith is primarily loyalty to the God of Abraham who brought us out of Egypt. Rabbinic faith is also relational, “belief in” a singular God. Jews did not originally have “belief that” — propositional faith — but we developed creeds when challenged from the outside world— early Christianity, philosophical Islam, or modern secularism.

I’ll be examining theological poem-prayers, such as *Yigdal* and *Adon Olam*, in my autumn course. During Musaf, we’ll recite a piyyut-poem whose refrain is: “וְכֹל מַאֲמִינִים  — We all believe that God is” … faithful, just, knowing, and more.  But what if you don’t believe this?

The sociologist Peter Berger argued that in a radically pluralist world, believers are faced with a heretical imperative: the necessity of choosing their own religious path. We may choose a fundamentalist orthodoxy, reject religious life altogether, or seek a path that tries to hold intellectual flexibility and spiritual fidelity in a dynamic tension.

I have often found it helpful to see Judaism as involving 3 Bs: believing, behaving and belonging. Ideas, actions and connections. Theology. Mitzvah, Community. These Bs form a strong and sustainable three fold-cord. But in a world where there is no singular truth, we may only hold on to partial strands.

Over recent years, I have been attacked as a heretic for violating each of the Bs. The criticisms made me think about what I think is significant and sustainable for Jewish life. I will try to share with you this year as your rabbi.

**B- Belonging.** A few years ago, I argued that the Israeli government could do more to accept and resettle African migrants as asylum seekers and refugees. I was attacked for hypocrisy—I pretended to support Israel, but really was aligned with BDS supporters and Muslim extremists.

My advocacy for Israel in Parliament and with other faith leaders was irrelevant. What mattered was that I had the temerity to criticize an Israeli policy. I was pleasantly surprised when the former Canadian Ambassador to Israel, Deborah Lyons, praised my efforts on behalf of a Canadian proposal for shared international responsibility for resettlement. I was disappointed when the Prime Minister of Israel agreed to the proposal and then backed away from it.

This past year, I have participated in 17 of the 35 demonstrations defending the judicial system of Israel against the proposals of the Netanyahu government to assert unlimited authority over all policy and administrative decisions of the dominant coalition. While I stand with many friends, I am at odds with others — and with many Jewish organizations.

I uphold a Zionism that balances a deep devotion to the Land of Israel with a belief that all people are created in the image of God, a Zionism that recognizes Judea and Samaria as historic Biblical territory, while also affirming that people take priority over place. I believe that Zionism must aspire to a better and more inclusive Israeli society.

The shrillness and the tenor of many e-mails that circulate through cyber-space reveal a high level of anxiety within our community. We are justifiably concerned for the safety and security of Israel and of Jewish life.

Unfortunately, antisemitism is real. We must “face it and fight it” — in Europe, America and Canada. I hope many of you will join Cantor Green and me at the conference next month at the Shaw Centre.

IDF actions in Syria reflect a serious push-back against Iranian influence and Hizbollah activity. Tzahal incursions into the West Bank and Gaza are essential to respond to or subvert terrorist attacks.

I have defended Zionism against those who criticize it as settler colonialism and I have been excoriated because I believe that it is a legitimate expression of historic and traditional Jewish beliefs and values. On the other hand, nationalist voices within our own community have targeted me for being publicly critical of Israel, as if I were giving aid and comfort to those would attack Israel.

Disagreement need not lead to dismissal. When we hear disturbing criticism, we should seek ways to discuss the issues. לְכוּ־נָ֛א וְנִוָּֽכְחָ֖ה יֹאמַ֣ר ה Come let us argue it out. The President of Israel, Yitzhak Herzog, wants to engage critics in conversations, not marginalize them. He calls for listening to one another and seeking to understand the concerns being expressed.

**B- Believing.** The Western Wall complex has four sections: a male area, a female area, a neutral plaza and the egalitarian Azarat Yisrael area. To demonstrate support for Women of the Wall, I have davened in the neutral plaza of the Kotel as women gather in the female section.

Wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*, standing in an area not restricted by gender, I attempt to pray. Children, teens and adults shriek, blow whistles, and harass me, accusing me of being “Reformi”— which is now a worse accusation than being of another religious tradition — identifying me as a *kofer* — a heretic who denies the truth of Torah - and stating that people like me were the cause of Nazism.

Although, we now have a regular prayer space for mixed and egalitarian prayer near Robinson’s Arch, the Masorti Family Kotel is occasionally invaded by Haredim who seek to disrupt our prayers. My beliefs about gender and prayer make me a heretic.

I base my beliefs on traditional texts, but also modify traditional theology. Conservative Judaism teaches that the Torah is a divine-human partnership. Touched by human hands and hearts, the Torah is not immaculate. I believe that Jewish law and practice is the best pathway to God, but recognize and respect other spiritual paths.

Lack of religious certainty should encourage spiritual humility. Although we share traditional prayers and a general commitment to Jewish law with more observant Jews, we operate with a different belief system. That is what makes me—and possible many of you—a heretic.

**B. Behaving**. For over two decades I sat as a member of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards which identifies and articulates the general framework of halakhah for Conservative Judaism. I’m a traditional Conservative Jew, with an openness that enables my secular Israeli relatives to feel at ease.

But I have been put into the camp of the heretics. I am often asked to submit documentation regarding the Jewish identity of someone who want to make aliyah or to marry in Israel.  In one case, my testimony  was rejected by the Orthodox Beit Din of Toronto because my congregation uses a microphone on Shabbat has mixed seating.

The Jerusalem Pride parade takes place every summer. Josette — whom you will meet when she joins me in mid-October — and I have often joined this event which passes the Fuchsberg Centre for Conservative Judaism. Some people carry signs or wear T-shirts that say, “Created in the image of God” or “Love your neighbour as yourself.” By Tel Aviv or Canadian standards, the parade is pretty tame. Still, I faced protesters who accused me of subverting the sanctity of Torah and contributing to the demise of the Jewish people. Now some of those people are in the coalition governing Israel.

Conservative rabbis seek to encourage more conscious Jewish observance and a willingness to sacrifice for God and mitzvot. We know that it is challenging to take time away from work on Shabbat or yom tov. We realize that maintaining a kosher diet is limiting. But we believe that these and other mitzvot — over many years— have the capacity to add character and holiness to our lives.

What then is my heresy?  We accept the idea of historical development and know that, over time, halakhah has often found ways to adapt to new technology, changed circumstances, and different ways of conceptualizing the universe.

So I have the faith of a heretic. The three Bs—belief, belonging and behaviour—are pathways to a substantive and sustainable spiritual life. But I deny that there is only one way to believe, belong or behave.

The prophet  Isaiah tells us,

הַבִּ֙יטוּ֙ אֶל־צ֣וּר חֻצַּבְתֶּ֔ם וְאֶל־מַקֶּ֥בֶת בּ֖וֹר נֻקַּרְתֶּֽם׃

הַבִּ֙יטוּ֙ אֶל־אַבְרָהָ֣ם אֲבִיכֶ֔ם וְאֶל־שָׂרָ֖ה תְּחוֹלֶלְכֶ֑ם,

כִּי־אֶחָ֣ד קְרָאתִ֔יו וַאֲבָרְכֵ֖הוּ וְאַרְבֵּֽהוּ׃

Look to the rock from which you were cut, and to the quarry from which you were hewn; Look to Avraham your father, and to Sarah who gave you birth. (51.1-2)

What characterized Avraham and Sarah? A willingness to risk everything for their principles and beliefs.

The Torah describes Avraham as Ivri, from the root which means across. This might mean that Avraham came from across the river Euphrates. But a midrash says that Avraham was willing to stand across from the beliefs of his time. What do you truly believe in? What beliefs sustain you? What would you stand against?

According to a rabbinic tradition, when Avram and Sarai left Haran, they took with them more than movable property. They brought their “peeps.” Those who had become part of Avram and Sarah’s community also came to Canaan. Who accompanies you on your life journey? Who is your community? Can you articulate your values and commitments to yourself, to your family, to your friends and colleagues at work?

We form our lives with the three Bs. But we constantly interact with others who may not share our belief, behaviour, or sense of belonging—or may disagree with them. Here too, we can learn from Avraham and Sarah. Avraham argues with God, seeking to save the lives of the residents of Sodom. Their pattern of life was antithetical to the values of ẖesed and mishpat that characterized Avraham and Sarah, yet he was concerned for them.

Can we do this? Can I still have a relationship with those who consider me a heretic? Every Friday, near my apartment in Jerusalem, a group of people gather with a sign that says “Democracy? Let’s talk.” Can we do this?

Jews of no religion have increased from less than 5 percent 30 years ago to over 35 percent today. Jew-ish lite, they are neither active nor contributors. They may have some pride in their heritage, but are not engaged in our community. They rarely convert out, but don’t have the glue to enable their children to connect. Whatever their beliefs, we want them to be part of our community.

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, known as Rav Shagar, has opened up new avenues of thought within Orthodox Judaism. He celebrates living in a world where there are multiple narratives and a lack of a single, defining and all-encompassing truth. Freedom gives us responsibility for our life decisions. Because we no longer speak with absolute certainty, the element of doubt should leads us to be more tolerant and accepting of difference and disagreement, even as we choose the paths that we find best for us.

Heresies, freely chosen, define us. I’ve been willing to stand up for the beliefs, behaviours and belonging that matter to me. As we go forward into the year, what will define your personal path?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/opinion/prayer-belief-kaddish.html>

Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Doubleday, 1980).

Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar), *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* (Maggid, 2017)