

Many Ways To Serve One God

May 30, 2014

Rabbi Barry Block

Most Israelis describe themselves as "secular" Jews. They identify strongly as Jewish people. They see themselves as living powerfully meaningful Jewish lives, rendering vital service to the Jewish people, by populating the Land of Israel and serving in the Jewish State's Armed Services, thereby safeguarding a refuge for Jews everywhere. These "secular" Israelis definitely see their lives as Jewish. By contrast, in the early days of the State, secular Israelis regularly accused religious American Jews of deficient Jewish lives. After all, Israelis are the ones living by the Jewish calendar. They are the ones speaking Hebrew, giving new life to our sacred ancient language. They are the ones planting new Jewish life on ancient Jewish soil, literally and figuratively. We do none of these things.

American Jews would respond vociferously. Our own lives are vitally Jewish. After all, while secular Israelis take the day off for Shabbat, we are the ones who hold religious services. While secular Israelis may eat kosher food by default in some restaurants, we believe in God and perform *mitzvot*, religious obligations, out of a sense of commitment. While secular Israelis pay taxes to the Jewish State, most of us are moved to give *tzedakah*, charitable giving that supports Israel on top of our obligatory American state and federal taxes.

All comparisons are invidious, of course. Thankfully, American Jews visiting Israel today are welcomed graciously, not lectured about the alleged inadequacy of our Jewish choices. American Jews admire secular Israelis' sacrificial commitment on behalf of the whole Jewish people, not to mention Israeli pluck and ingenuity.

Moreover, religious life has grown among non-Orthodox Israelis in recent years. Today, the Israeli who describes herself as "secular" may well kindle Shabbat lights. The supposedly secular Israeli family likely holds a Seder and builds a Sukkah. Bar and now Bat Mitzvah have become increasingly common, bringing unprecedented numbers of so-called "secular" Israelis to the synagogues of the still-fledgling Israeli Reform Movement.

Last week, from this pulpit, we heard a moving presentation by a representative of IsraAID, here in Arkansas to provide disaster relief in Mayflower and Vilonia after the recent, devastating tornado. Such an effort would have been unthinkable a generation ago: Israelis performing *gemilut chasadim*, acts of divinely-commanded lovingkindness, here in the United States. Israelis may be seen as following the American Jewish example of living Jewishly through philanthropy and voluntary good works.

Our Torah portion this week, *Naso*, suggests that there are many ways to serve God. No, the Torah is not addressing our situation, with some Jews living in the Land of Israel and others in diaspora. Nor does Torah contemplate that a Jewish person might identify as "secular," and still perform mitzvot. Still, *Naso* continues a description begun in last week's portion, about the Levites, assistants to the priestly *Cohanim*, and their duties during the decades of desert wandering after liberation from Egyptian bondage. Each time the Children of Israel break camp to journey forward, each family of Levites has a distinct task with respect to taking down, carrying, and reassembling the Tent of Meeting -- the traveling sanctuary, if you will. One clan disassembles, transports, and erects the tent and enclosure, for example, while another group cares for the holiest vessels. Each family's labor is critical to the ongoing service of God in the wilderness of Sinai.

Similarly, among our Jewish people, secular Israelis and devoted American Reform Jews have different roles, all critical to vouchsafing the future of our sacred covenant. Closer to home, within our own congregation, each of us has a different but equally vital responsibility as we build a better tomorrow for Judaism in our families and in Central Arkansas.

Some of us provide sacred service here in the Sanctuary, offering the words and music of prayer. Others labor in the kitchen, nourishing our bodies in a way that invites us into our synagogue home with love. Some teach Religious School, providing a Jewish education that none of us is qualified to provide alone to our own children. The volunteer and professional efforts of a myriad of congregants here are astounding and impressive, from advising the youth group to stewarding our Temple's building and grounds, from overseeing Temple finances to enhancing the Jewish knowledge and competence of adults, from welcoming new members to assuring the proper burial of our Jewish dead, from planning a fundraiser to preserving and displaying our unparalleled Temple archives, from writing and directing a Purim Shpiel to caring and sharing for our fellow congregants at their time of greatest need.

Moreover, I know full well that some of our congregation's most involved and devoted members wouldn't describe themselves as "religious." Though they might not use the Israeli term "secular," more than a few would claim to be atheist or agnostic. The rabbi may bristle at the notion of atheist Jews, while teaching that agnosticism may best be described as God-wrestling, perfectly appropriate for Jews. Still, whatever our motivation, hundreds of members serve God at Congregation B'nai Israel, whether they see themselves as believers or not.

Tonight, we have gathered for an unusual a Shabbat Eve at Congregation B'nai Israel. You and I, here in the Sanctuary, are engaged in "normal" Shabbat worship. Others are worshiping while practicing yoga. In our Jewish tradition, study is a form of worship, so both youth and adults are learning in the Temple tonight. And then we will all gather for Shabbat dinner, a meaningful expression of our Jewish community, lovingly prepared by volunteers who are serving God in the kitchen tonight rather than in the Sanctuary or in study.

Like the Levites before us, and like secular Israelis and religious American Jews of all stripes, may all of us find meaningful ways to serve the one God and to fulfill our Covenant. And may all of service be pleasing in God's sight, all deserving of blessing.

Amen