

## The Center of Judaism

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Tomorrow morning, Teddy will stake his claim as an adult participant in our covenant, a bond with God that has sustained our people for more generations and in more lands than we can count. This Shabbat isn't about Teddy – well, at least it's not only about Teddy. We are part of something larger than ourselves, stretching across space and time. We connect with ancestors who have affirmed our covenant, long before we were born. We unite with those we will never know, because their generations are yet unborn. We are links in the chain of a great religious heritage.

What happens when we move beyond these inspiring thoughts? What answer do we give, when we are asked, “What is the meaning of this tradition?” “What is Ted's generation's role in keeping Judaism alive?” “Why should he bother?” Why should any of us care to perpetuate this covenant?

Are we here for God? Do we gather in support of our fellow Jews, for the State of Israel, our family history – tradition? Or does Torah define our faith? What is at the center of Judaism: God, Torah, or Israel?

Many among us are single-mindedly focused on the State of Israel. Who among us could remain indifferent – especially this summer, as terrorist rockets and tunnels targeted our Jewish State? The Zionist dream continues to be fulfilled in real life, every day, as the Land is built, develops and grows, even while devastating threats endure.

When Ted reads from Torah tomorrow morning, he will read from Deuteronomy about the observance of Passover and other sacred festivals. These holidays are discussed in earlier books of the Bible. Something is different in Deuteronomy, though. Consistent with the selection Rick read this evening, we will hear tomorrow that religious observances – for the biblical Jew, at least – may be held only in the Jerusalem Temple. From the point of view of Deuteronomy, Zion, and the Temple that stood there, are the heart of the covenant.

Those who place Israel at the center would find solace in the views of early Zionists. They imagined that Judaism as we know it would die with the birth of modern Israel. In the early, heady days of the State, most Israelis were stridently atheist. Perpetuating Judaism was not their goal. Their mission, instead, was the

welfare of the Jewish people, in Zion. They thought that the rest of us would stop being Jewish, or we would make *aliyah*, joining the Zionist dream in person.

The response of the Diaspora, and particularly of North American Jewry, was stark. Not only did we refuse to die; we have grown Judaism creatively in free lands. Though few among us immigrated, we dedicated ourselves to political, financial, and spiritual support of Israel.

Israeli thinkers and leaders today are often heard to praise the success of North American Jewry, even as they issue a challenge. They urge us to dedicate ourselves to our own meaningful development. Paradoxically, too many Jewish leaders on this side of the Atlantic emphasize Israel to the exclusion of all local and spiritual needs.

Israel is crucial to us as Jews. We rejoice in the vitality of the Jewish State, as a strong nation, and as the cultural and geographic center of the Jewish people. We delight in the spiritual growth of our Israeli brothers and sisters over the last decade. Atheism is being challenged, even among Israelis who still call themselves secular, as they embrace new-found value in Jewish tradition. Moreover, the tragic history of anti-Semitism and the greatest horror of the 20th Century, taught us that a Jewish homeland is essential. Still, let us acknowledge: Torah tells us that our people flourished, even in Egyptian slavery. We not only survived, but thrived, through our millennia of exile.

Israelis of today understand, and so may we: No parcel of land, however holy, however critical to the welfare of our people, is the be all and end all of a tradition as strong as ours. The faith of Israel flourished in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple, more than once. Israel is not the heart of Judaism.

Perhaps, then, God is the answer. Many wish God to be our central religious focus as Jews. Our worship, after all, is directed toward God. We have gathered here at God's command, to observe Shabbat as one united community.

Today, though, many are unsure about the very existence of a Supreme Being. The teachings of science make many of us skeptical. Some cannot reconcile the reality of tragedy with the notion of a living God. Others deeply believe in God. Perfectly good Jews embrace diverse beliefs. For some, God is literally as described in Torah. For others, God is an idea, not a Being. Perhaps God is like "the Force," in Star Wars, the sum of all positive power in the universe. As I teach

my Confirmation students: Maybe George Lucas actually got that idea from Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan!

Even if God exists in the most traditional sense, we still can't know exactly what God wants of us. By aligning ourselves with Reform Judaism, we have agreed that no one person or entity holds a monopoly on interpreting the word of God.

However we conceive of God, we must not be atheists. Our teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, contends that faith in God is required. Atheism is much easier than grappling with the variety of Jewish theological possibilities available to us as Reform Jews in the 21st Century. If we reject God, though, we assert that each of us is the ultimate arbiter of our own existence. Instead of practicing the idolatry of self, we are required to affirm God's existence, however differently perceived, as we do each and every time we recite the Shema. We Jews are called Israel, a word meaning, "one who struggles with God." Determining how God wants us to live our lives is the ultimate question of human life.

So how do we know what God wants of us? For over 2000 years, since the earliest Rabbis began striving to make sense of an already-ancient document, Torah has been our path.

The Rabbis made Torah live. They began a process of interpreting Torah, which all Jews continue today. Yes, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and other Jews view Torah differently. Still, all base our religious actions on Torah and no other. Most importantly, those first Rabbis taught us that Judaism is so much more than a set of beliefs. Judaism is action, a system of *mitzvot*, a way of life.

As Ted receives Torah this Shabbat from the generations before him, we do join him to affirm: Torah is the heart of Judaism. More importantly: let each of us pledge to live as Jews, not only on a Bar Mitzvah Shabbat, but every day of our lives.

Torah teaches us how to be Jews. We are Jews when we behave as Jews.

Let me tell you how some folks have found ways to live as Jews at Congregation B'nai Israel and beyond it.

Every Saturday morning, a dedicated group gathers for Shabbat study and prayer. Participants are always welcome to join; the portion is new each week. Whether we come at 9:30 am, or for services at 11:00, or both, we are a

dedicated group; and we are serious, about learning what Torah means at every level, and how those sacred words can guide our lives.

One remarkable attribute of this group is its diversity, some with doctorates, and individuals with no college education. A few are friends, but most don't seek out one another socially beyond those holy moments each Shabbat morning. Nevertheless, members of this Shabbat morning community truly care about one another, constantly seeking each other's welfare. These Torah partners do not ask themselves, "Is that person my friend?" They know the answer: The word *chaver*, "friend," is not merely a social designation. From the point of view of Torah, we are connected to the members of our community, and we must love them as ourselves, not merely in our hearts, but in our actions. Being Jewish is doing Jewish.

Next month, we shall gather for our annual season of reckoning these lives we've been given. This coming Wednesday, we begin the month of Elul, a month of preparation for the High Holy Days. Let us utilize this season to ponder and to analyze how we may move closer to the center of Judaism, how we can let Torah lead the way. Let each of us learn from Torah, and let us choose new *mitzvot*, new Jewish religious obligations, to take upon ourselves in the year ahead. This year, some will need to go back to rejoicing in the Sukkah, while others will no longer eat bread during Passover. Some will be called to give more *tzedakah*, while others will realize that they should devote more time to those who are lonely. Most of us will find ourselves wanting, both in our observance of Jewish rituals and in our failures to do all we can for those in need. We have a month – a little more, actually – so let's each find multiple new ways to live Torah in the year ahead.

Whatever new obligations each of us assumes, may we be more faithful to Torah. Then, may we come closer to our people and more devoted to our Holy Land. Then, may we truly honor God.

Then, we shall know: We have found the heart of Judaism.

Amen.