

Reclaiming Religion



For thousands of years Jews have been studying in pairs or in groups, respectfully debating each other, learning the stories and legal texts of Judaism, and investigating their past as a means for enriching their present. Tonight, we continue to engage in the millennia-old practice of exploring the written word as a means to connect with our tradition, open ourselves up to our inner selves, make sense of the world around us, and inspire us to action. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

*This evening's event is part of The Well's **CSI: Coffee. Study. Interpret.** series, in partnership with the Berman Center for Jewish Education at Congregation Shaarey Zedek, and is made possible in part by funds granted by The Berman Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of The Well.*

Wakefulness

“Whoever can influence the members of his household to stop in their wayward behavior, but does not, is punished for the behavior of his household. If he can influence the people of his city to stop their wayward behavior, but does not, he is punished for the behavior of the people of his city. If he can stop the whole world from their wayward behavior, and does not, he is punished for the behavior of the whole world.” – Bab. Tal. Shab 54b

“There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *“The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement”* (1972)

Discussion Questions:

- What role do / are we meant to play in this world?
- What today might constitute “wayward behavior” where it’s incumbent upon us (and/or you’d be motivated) to act?
- How do we avoid being overwhelmed by / turning a blind eye to suffering?





Hope

"An essential ingredient of faith is hope. Not the wild optimism of Pollyanna, but the hope that calls upon the untapped energies of basic trust. In my pastoral experience, the patient does not seek my permission to let go, but the courage to hold on. We both need to be reminded that neither physician nor prophet is infallible. Faithful hope is related to wisdom. And true wisdom 'is the ability to act when it is necessary on the basis of incomplete information' (Robert Frost)."

- **Rabbi Harold Schulweis** z'l (Shma Journal, Issue 34: 2004 -- pulled from the Berman Jewish Policy Archive --

<http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=6486>)

Midrash Tehillim 4:9

R. Eliezer ben Jacob said: "God is the hope (mikveh) of Israel" (Jer. 17:13) means that just as the ritual bath of purification (mikveh) (spiritually) cleanses those who are unclean, so does God cleanse Israel. Hence, God declared to Israel: When you pray, pray in the synagogue in your city; if you cannot pray in the synagogue in your city, pray in your open field; if you cannot pray in your open field, pray in your house; if you cannot pray in your house, pray on your bed; if you cannot pray aloud in your bed, commune with your heart. Hence it is written, "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah" (Psalm 4:5).

Discussion Questions:

- Do you see the relationship between "incomplete information" and hope/faith that R' Schulweis is trying to highlight? Does his argument resonate with you?
- Does hope have a purifying effect on you? Why or why not?
- What would your hierarchy of prayer locations be if you were drawing it up from scratch?

Mightiness



Genesis 1:26-30

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ; וְיִרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ, וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ, הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

26 And God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.'

כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.

27 And God created man in God's own image, in the image of God God created him; male and female God created them.

כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, וּכְבֹּשֶׁהָ; וְיִרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם, וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

28 And God blessed them; and God said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.'

כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פְּרִי-עֵץ, זֶרַע זָרַע: לָכֶם יִהְיֶה, לְאֹכְלָה.

29 And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed--to you it shall be for food;

ל וְלֹכֶל-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְלֹכֶל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹכֶל רֹמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, אֶת-כָּל-יֵרֶק עֹשֶׂב, לְאֹכְלָה; וַיְהִי-כֵן. **30** and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is a living soul, [I have given] every green herb for food.' And it was so.

Mishnah Avot 2:21

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task; but you are not free to desist from it....

Discussion Questions:

- What role is humankind meant to play in the world?
- When do you feel the most mighty in your life?
- Are there particular techniques you use to remind yourself of the power you have as a human being whenever you're feeling low?
- What inspires you to change the world around you for the better?

Interconnectedness

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

"It was for this reason that humankind was first created as one person [Adam], to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life it is as if he saved an entire world." And also, to promote peace among the creations, that no person would say to their friend, 'My ancestors are greater than yours.' And also, so that heretics will not say, 'there are many rulers up in Heaven.' And also, to express the grandeur of God: For a man strikes many coins from the same die, and all the coins are alike. But God strikes every man from the die of the First Person, and yet no person is quite like their friend. Therefore, every person must say, 'For my sake the world was created.'"

Discussion Questions:

- Does this aspect of our narrative / cultural mythology resonate with you? Why or why not?
- Does this worldview allow for monarchies? What would princess Kate say?
- There seems an awkward tension in the text (and frankly, in life) between interconnectedness and personal fulfilment. How do we strive to find the appropriate balance? What is that balance? Need it be the same for everyone?

