

Fate or Faith?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Jewish Week recently published [a review, written by Steven Bayme, of a book by Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK](#). The review said that Rabbi Sacks disagrees with [the late and great Rav Soloveitchik's](#) belief that it is a shared fate that unites Jews. Rabbi Sacks insists it is a shared faith. Rav Soloveitchik Z"l doesn't need me to support him, of course, and I haven't read the book, so I don't know if the reviewer is right or if Rabbi Sacks said such a thing. So let this piece not be read as a critique of him but simply of the idea that Steven Bayme mentioned.

Only someone whose ideas have been shaped more by Christianity than Judaism could possibly come up with such an idea. The Jewish people, bless them, ever stiff-necked, divided, have never truly been shaped by "faith". By obedience perhaps, by national identity at certain times, by anti-Semitism at others—but faith? The very word is a late invention and borrowed from Anglicanism. The Torah itself does not use the word "emunah" (belief, faith) to mean anything more than "trust".

I always found the term "faith communities" a peculiarly Christian term, because it is "faith in Jesus" that determines Christian grace and salvation. Judaism is rather a "way of life". Torah means "teaching". "Halacha" means more than "law"; it is "the way we live". In its structure and nature, if not in its historical development, Judaism is closer to Islam than Christianity. The fact that now politically we are about as far from each other as is possible should not disguise the fact that we are both systems based more on behavior than theology. And you know I really don't even like the term "Judaism". I prefer "Am Yisrael", the People of Israel.

I do not say, as some do, that there is no theology in our tradition, or that belief has no fundamental importance; but faith is a matter of personal, intangible mental processes and can never truly be tested or verified. Action, behavior, can. Halacha, like Sharia, expects behavior. That is why actions are punished, not thoughts.

So what is it that links and connects Jews in terms of ideas? Is there a common denominator? I think not. Jews are best described as a "Gestalt". That is, a collection of elements, each distinct, that makes up a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

Pray tell me what faith unites a Charedi and a Reform Jew? They do not both believe in Torah from Heaven or Sinai. They do not both believe their lives should be circumscribed by Jewish law. They usually do not share political or theological loyalties, neither do they agree on the idea of nationalism or Zionism. It is true they will both probably agree they believe in God, but then so too will Christians. Where is their common faith? What do both share with a significant body of Israelis who fight to the death to defend their homeland, belong to a "Jewish state", but are atheists?

You may stand on 5th Avenue and see a man with a black or grey Biblical beard, long black or grey earlocks ("payos" or "peyote", but not to be confused with the drug), an eighteenth century Polish hat, a nineteenth century long black frockcoat, twentieth century white socks, and twenty-first century black sneakers. You will look in the other direction and see a bare headed, cleanly shaven, sweet smelling, Zegna-dressed, Prada-shod, Dunhill-briefcase-carrying executive, both even hurrying to afternoon prayers. They have certain important practices in common, but one views God, the world, history, and text with a literality the other does not. Can they possibly share the same faith?

Many Jews around the world have little interest in or affiliation with religious institutions. The rate at which they marry out of the "faith" (there you are, funny word again) is 50%, on average. What do those who marry out share with those other Jews who consider doing so a betrayal? The most trumpeted vehicle for retaining the loyalty of non-affiliated American Jews is the Birthright program which ships large numbers of Jewish youth to Israel each year on free junkets. Religion is virtually taboo. When in the past some of its programs had a religious dimension, it provoked an outcry. Let us assume it succeeds. Does it succeed in creating faith communities? As they say, "I don't think so." Any more than Israel itself does.

But I suspect they do share more common values than one might think. They will be prepared to admit to being part of a people descended from some ancient tribes. They will be proud of the survival of Jews and their remarkable contribution to civilization. They will support the right of Jews to have some sort of homeland, as well as their right to settle elsewhere. They will defend Jews against anti-Semitism and expect civilized societies to resist the attempt to write the Holocaust out of the dark history of human inhumanity. Even if they no longer adhere to more than occasional rituals, many will still contribute to those who live and devote themselves to Torah. Even the most Marxist, anti-Zionist, anti-religious of them will still claim at some moment in his life, even when he is trying his best to undermine Jewish identity, that he or she is a Jew. Faith? Bah. Jew? Still!