

Erich Fromm

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Erich Fromm, was one of the most influential psychiatrists of the last century. He was educated in Germany. When the Nazis came to power in 1934, he moved to Switzerland and then on to New York. He was a restless and brilliant man. I first encountered his work when, as a student, I read his short book *You shall be as Gods: a Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*. It was originally published in German in 1954 and English in 1966. I still recommend it heartily as it is still relevant today.

Here was one of the most acclaimed psychiatrists of the century arguing for the benefit of Orthodox Judaism – but without God. He was a completely non-religious, atheist Jew writing about how psychologically important Jewish Law and its behavioral rituals (including keeping Shabbat and Kashrut) were for the sanity of modern society.

He was born to an orthodox, scholarly family in Frankfurt. He studied Talmud and Chasidism in depth. He had a deep knowledge of Jewish mysticism. However, in 1926 he turned away from orthodox Judaism and towards secular interpretations of scripture. He described his position as “nontheistic mysticism”.

Reading his book had a huge impact on my thinking. I had my own very personal relationship with God. But Fromm argued that religion did not have to be circumscribed by the idea of God. Being religious without God could still be very beneficial. At the time, I was coming into contact, with many Jews who had rejected the idea of God and or Jewish practice and could not identify with the Jewish religion. Here seemed an answer for them.

He argued that humans should take independent action and use reason to establish moral values rather than blindly adhering to the dictates of authorities. He disliked all authoritarian systems yet argued that humans needed the discipline that religious practice provided. Their rituals and training helped people think about the morally right decisions. Otherwise, humans would tend to take the easiest and most selfish way out.

Fromm often used the Bible to illustrate his points of view. The story of Adam and Eve was, he said, an allegorical explanation for humans defying God and struggling to work out for themselves how to act. And, of course,

mistakes have consequences. The book of Jonah described someone who did not wish to save Nineveh from the consequences of their sins. It advocated the importance of care and responsibility for others – even if one disagreed with them. Important ideas for human beings both religious and non-religious. Autonomy, the freedom to make up one's own mind, was paramount. But so was being part of a community.

Fromm liked the Talmudic story of Rabbi Eliezer who, in a dispute with a majority of his fellow rabbis over a minor issue of Jewish law, asked God to intervene with miracles to prove him right. But the rabbis insisted that, since the Torah had been given, it was no longer up to God to intervene in such matters but for human beings to use their powers of thought to deal with current situations and challenges. This was evidence that we should be able to use our deductive tools to deal with life.

He admired Chasidic tales in which God was challenged and called to account by man for the horrible things that happen on earth. It was dangerous to accept God unquestioningly. The Bible, he said, was more concerned with the fight against idolatry than with a correct theology. Idolatry was the worship of oneself, one's own intelligence, and one's own strength. Only by embracing freedom could one free oneself from idolatry. Failing to do this was the root of psychological conflicts.

He thought that modern societies focused too much on freedom from responsibility. Too few people respected the autonomy of their fellow human beings – what other people truly wanted and needed. They preferred conformity. This led to destructiveness – the process which tried to eliminate others. All of which became manifest in Nazism and Marxism. Sadly most people find it harder to try to be free than to simply accept conformity. By submitting one's freedom to someone else, this act diminishes freedom of choice. This preference for controlled lives was a danger for religion itself, as well.

As I look around me nowadays I see too much of today's Jewish life is conformism. Layers have been added for social reasons, not spiritual ones. Too many people observe rituals out of social pressure instead of religious commitment. Yet, without accepting the disciplines of a religious way of life, one flounders and struggles for comfort and a sense of belonging. Humans, said Fromm, needed to be excited and stimulated by striving for goals. And to find their own places in the world.

He wanted to eliminate the concept of "God" except as a "poetical symbol" of the primary and mystical ego-transcending experience of man. This was where I

parted company. I believe the idea of God is important as a personal experience (more than a concept). This is what adds the spiritual dimension to the structure of the law. God is a way of reaching beyond oneself. Even if I question the theology.

I agree we must try to experience life on a higher, more intense, personal level. But I also value the Torah concept of accepting first and questioning afterward (*Na'aseh VeNishma*). Without a structure to begin with, one is in danger of wandering, getting lost and not finding. Like a child with no discipline.

All of this makes *You Shall Be as Gods* one of the most important books on the relevance of religion – even in our skeptical, modern world where everything is open to challenge.