

My problem with Religion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Marx was right. Religion is the opiate of the masses. And Freud was right, too, that religion is wish-fulfillment and satisfies the need for a father figure. Religions produce murderous fanatics (and occasional saints). They often require mindless, obsessive ritual and petty restrictions that can impede progress and keep people socialized and passive. Religious authorities are concerned with preserving power and suppressing individuality. Many outwardly religious people behave in ways that discredit their religions.

Not a week goes by without reading that yet another charismatic, religious figure has been charged with sexual crimes. Or creating a coercive cult that preys on vulnerable women and children. Or sexual abuse within the strictest of religious circles. Or financial corruption, deception and fraud and suicides. I am reliably informed that, in Israel, secular abuse by rabbis has become an epidemic. The religious enclaves of the USA are just as bad. The behavior of too many religious Jews makes me feel ashamed of my religious identity. If you have been watching "The Young Pope" on HBO you will see how corruption corrodes the church (and Italian genius makes it stunning visually). This is the case for the prosecution.

In defense, I love my religion passionately. I love everything it stands for. It can excite me, elevate me, comfort me and inspire me. But I can't find my place in my own religion. On one level, it is intellectual. As Professor Ernst Simon once said, "The people I can pray with I cannot talk to, and the people I can talk to I cannot pray with." In terms of living a Jewish life and experiencing its intensity, I am totally at home in the most Charedi of communities. If I had to choose, that is where I would go. But intellectually and theologically, I have almost nothing in common with the Charedi world.

I have spent many years living, studying and associating with Charedi, Jews around the world. The piety, charity, humility, and devotion are beyond anything I have found elsewhere. There are the hidden, unknown tsaddikim, saints and modest men and women who are the true bearers of the religious flame. This is where my soul feels at home. But there is another side. Fanaticism, aggression, bullying, exploitation, and distorted leadership that dares not, or will not, take a stand. That rewards the sinners rather than victims. That hate secular authority while craving its financial rewards. That often puts the letter of the law above the feelings of ordinary people and puts money above justice and honesty.

Almost all authorities are self-serving hanging on to power for their own ends. They twist and manipulate and humiliate anyone they perceive as a threat. Perfectly reasonable, intelligent religious leaders, get to positions of authority and then act to protect their power and status. Sacrificing people on the altar of self-preservation. They seem to think that they, alone, are the possessors of absolute truth and are doing God's work. Many rabbis, rebbes, mystics, pseudo kabbalists and faith healers offer nothing of substance beyond magic, superstitious, feel good, happy-clappy fluff. This is all at a price that enriches them and gives religion a bad name.

There is, of course, the other side. We, who care about Torah, have rightly delighted in the hundreds of thousands of men (and some women) who celebrated the seven-year cycle of reading through the Talmud, the Daf Yomi. (It is misleading to use the word study, for that requires a degree of depth, not just a superficial skip through). Even so, in a world of crass morals and values and rampant assimilation, the pride of showing how much the idea of Torah means was inspiring.

I have seen two letters written by the administrators of the stadia where the events were held in London and New York. Both letters praised the participants and declared how amazed they were by such a large, peaceful gathering without drunkenness, violence or theft in good cheer and friendliness.

But then, in the UK, I saw petty, narrow-minded religious one-upmanship. The ultra-Orthodox disinvited the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis from the celebrations because he dared to say that the community needed to find a way of meeting the requirements of Government to teach children to respect the LGBT community and their right to make their own lifestyle decisions – something the ultra-Orthodox leadership in North London refuses on principle. I don't care how long your beard is or how black or furry your hat. You do not humiliate or treat with disdain people you disagree with. These are our spiritual giants?

How do I deal with it? I can't. I want to dissociate myself. I can only say they are not me. So I am left to pick and choose for myself. In religion, I want passion, devotion, honesty and humility. I do not want conformity, social manipulation, religious show business, and the dead hand of authority. I want sensitivity to the needs of the poor, the weak and the honest searchers. I do not want riches and materialism to decide who gets what and when.

It is easier to see what one does not like than to find perfection. That is

the challenge of life. To be open to new ideas. To see different ways of doing things. To have freedom of choice. And, above all, live and let live, respect differences and don't kill or bully anyone you disagree with.

To those who seek my advice, I validate individuality. Not to feel cowed into either submission or revolt. By studying, knowing, searching, always exploring and being selective. By winnowing out the wheat from the chaff. By being proudly eclectic. By being able to love the Sephardi, the Ashkenazi, Lithuanian, Chassidic and to dip in and out in search of what works.

At the same time, I recognize the need for a unifying way of life – a common constitution -which I call traditional Jewish halacha. A described and defined way pattern of behavior without which there is no common glue to hold us all together. No common thread to call on at times of crisis.

I recognize such freedom and flexible commitment is only possible in large communities that offer a range of religious resources. But, fortunately, the choices are increasing within the committed religious community, not decreasing as they are elsewhere. But individuality can become egoism. And even if one is a loner, one must contribute to the communities, synagogues, and facilities one needs to maintain a communal way of life.

I am very to be comfortable in my religious experience and identity. I have been privileged thanks to the education my parents gave me. I am happy that I do not fit in anywhere entirely. I want to encourage other Jews who feel the same way to feel empowered to make choices and find what works for them, within the magnificence of Torah in its widest sense. Not to give up or throw the baby out with the bathwater.