

Sylvester

I only became aware of the controversy surrounding the New Year when I was in Israel as a young man and discovered that the rabbinate was refusing to give kashrut certificates to hotels that held New Year's Eve parties. Angry rabbis made typically hyperbolic statements about the profound disasters that celebrating something called Sylvester would wreak on the Jewish world.

Back in England, New Year's Day was like Boxing Day, just Bank Holidays, off from work. And people had parties to welcome the new Civil Year. I had only heard of Sylvester as a cartoon cat. Nowadays it is kept primarily by central European Catholic communities to celebrate the change of the year with a "Sylvester Ball." In Scotland, it is Hogmanay and an excuse for a good booze up, but then Scots never need a holy day for that.

The night of the Holy Sylvester, the last night of the year had once been the night of fools and a fun time. But it was turned into a religious festival. We don't know for certain who Sylvester was. An amorous monk? A pious Bishop? According to one legend, Pope Sylvester 1st had cured the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great of leprosy and had baptized him. But there's no evidence that Constantine was baptized. Catholics calculated that it was the anniversary of Jesus's circumcision (but the Orthodox churches and Copts all have other days for this). The probability is that it was a pagan festival originally.

The most that the New Year meant to me was that it was a time for new Year Resolutions, self-assessment, and a new start. Not unlike our own Rosh Hashanah. And if every New Month, Rosh Chodesh was a sort of mini-New Year, then what could be wrong with yet another occasion for self-examination? Besides resolutions are no different from Jewish vows, *Nedarim*, which occupy a major part of Biblical and Talmudic discourse. And function both to encourage greater piety as well as civil rectitude. And you can make a *Neder* any time!

As for feasts and parties, the Talmud seems to approve and encourage them. Not just on religious occasions but as any time to enjoy the material world and by thanking God for the delights of the material world, to add a spiritual dimension too, and with a nod to the Greek Symposium to discuss religious topics.

Then, as now, I believed that religion should focus on the positive and the creative and leave the negative to others. If parties were essentially opportunities to eat and drink and praise the Almighty, then what could be wrong? The Gemara is choc a bloc full of rabbis having parties. But of course, over time I realized that most parties have nothing to do with celebrating religious values, quite the contrary!

Religious life has a great deal to commend in terms of structure, a way of living that introduces certain rituals and practices that reinforce home, family, and society. Its core values of personal care, charity, and community

are essential for the moral welfare of humanity. But more than this, religious experience, and spirituality can elevate and excite certain types of human sensibility and bring an important extra dimension to human living.

Yet religious practice so easily becomes a dry routine, a mechanism of social conformity, and a method of social control and power. I see how often spirituality is used as a tool of superstition, a way of manipulating the credulous and the insecure. I see religious structures preoccupied with power and control, sometimes breaking lives instead of elevating and exciting them. And yet the increasing urge to find something more, to reach out into the metaphysical is a sure sign that the rationalist alternatives leave much to be desired.

The promises of scientific rationalism have achieved much but in the realms of personal development, very little. Humanity seems no more capable of finding inner satisfaction and peace than it ever was. A few, maybe, but the majority is as lost, vulnerable, and as susceptible to magic, of varying sorts as it ever was.

I understand that the further society pulls towards valueless, even corrupt material society, genuine religion pulls the other way. But what disturbs me about the religious world is the absence of self-criticism, and the way abuses are too often covered up in the name of security. The prophetic tradition that parallels the priestly, asserts the need for constant self-examination, and rebuke, even while the structures of religion are in place and encouraged. But too much spirituality gets lost in the overburden of conformity and indulgence.

It is impossible to ignore the conflicts and stresses within and between the different whirlpools of Jewish life around us in Israel and the diaspora. But everywhere there are also wonderful examples of creativity, dynamism, and restorative spirituality. And that is what I want to celebrate this secular New Year. To focus on what is positive and creative rather than on what is wrong or corrupt. If that is what Sylvester or any New Year is for, then I am happy to join in.

Happy New Secular Year.

Jeremy