

Let me begin by saying, I believe in Intelligent Design. In fact, I embraced the concept *before* the Religious Right invented the phrase. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great theological poet of the last century, termed it “radical amazement,” the sense of awe at the mystery of creation, at its magnitude and complexity, at its beauty and majesty. I believe that the universe is not an accident but the evidence of design—*intelligent* design.

Having said that, let me also say that I am equally adamant that such a belief—and make no mistake about it, it is a *belief*—has no place in a public classroom. Just as God has no place in a public classroom. Just as any aspect of religious doctrine has no place in a public classroom (unless, that is, one is teaching *about* religion). By the same token, I have absolutely no problem teaching such ideas—such as Intelligent Design—here in the synagogue; it’s my job. But when teaching in state-sponsored schools about the observable reality of the universe, about how life came to be, about how life came to be the way it is—*that* is science and (my personal faith notwithstanding) the only scientifically demonstrable model for the development of life on earth—culminating in the human species—is Darwin’s theory of evolution.

You should know this about me: before I was a rabbi, before I ever even entertained the notion of becoming a rabbi, I was an amateur paleontologist. I collected fossils. Brachiopods. Cephalopods. Trilobites. I loved trilobites. Still do. They are the weirdest looking things, like something from another planet. But, of course, they’re not. One of the earliest life-forms on this earth, the trilobite remains unique in its shape, forever fossilized in design as well as in stone. Even more, it was the trilobite that was at the foundation of my faith, a primal building-block in my emerging theology of “radical amazement”. The trilobite was just too cool to be an accident, a mere consequence of random chaos. And to then observe how life emerged on earth—from the oceans to the land, from the trees to the tundra, from single-celled organisms to creatures capable of contemplating their own existence—for me (and I emphasize this is my own personal belief) there was no alternative other than to embrace the notion of a power, admittedly beyond my intellectual capabilities, that brought this all into being. More I cannot say. That’s why we call it *faith*.

I believe in religion. I believe in religion’s power to transform. I believe in religion’s pursuit of peace. I believe in religion’s instinct for compassion. But I also fear religion. I fear what religion can do to people; or better put, what people can do *with* religion. I fear those for whom faith is a matter of loyalty. I fear those who see God but are blind to man. That is why my faith in God is balanced by a deep and abiding devotion to our constitutional separation of Church and State. As Jews we have been history’s students in the dark lessons that come from the marriage of governmental power and religious fervor. We know all too well what such unions can bear. We know just how slippery the slope can be.

How interesting then, even ironic, that one of the other more celebrated causes of this battle in the American marketplace of ideas between the public and the private role of religion should center around the symbol of the Ten Commandments. Ironic because, by my estimation, the most outwardly religious people, those who present themselves as the most passionate for God, often turn out to be the most egregiously guilty of violating the 3rd of those Ten Commandments.

‘Lo tissa et shem Adonai Elohekha leshav—You shall not take the name of Adonai, your God, in vain.’ And you’re saying to yourself, “Swearing? They’re guilty of *swearing*?” And you’d be right, but not necessarily the way you’re thinking.

A short history lesson: In ancient Israel God’s name was sacrosanct. You didn’t *just* utter it. You didn’t *just* say it. Like our liturgy during the *Kedushah* or “sanctification of God’s name” proclaims: “*Ata kadosh v’shimkha kadosh—You are Holy and Your Name is Holy...*” In other words, everything about God is sacred, “set apart”, in a category of its own, including God’s name. That is why we say “*Adonai*” which actually means “My Lord”. God’s name is so holy we are even prohibited from uttering it altogether. The tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God—*yud-heh-vav-heh*—which was pronounced something like...(actually, I’m not supposed to say it), was forbidden to be recited out loud. It was invoked only once a year, by the high priest, inside the Temple’s inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, on the afternoon

of Yom Kippur—when he was alone. No one was even there to *hear* it, except, of course, God. So we invented this pseudonym: *Adonai*.

For Jews, God's name is so holy that you utter its pseudonym only in the most sacred of contexts: the reading of Torah, prayer and the taking of oaths. And how, I ask you, does one take an oath? By *swearing*. "Do you *swear* that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—*so help you God?*" Even today, in American judicial process, we still retain the ancient Israelite formula. You swear "by God". But if you give *false* testimony (see commandment #9), or if you use God's name in a non-sacred context, you are—to wit—taking God's name "in vain". *Leshav*. Of the same *shoresh* or linguistic root as *Shoah* (*shin-vav-alef*) the contemporary Hebrew word we use for the Holocaust, which literally means a *complete*, an *utter* destruction.

For our ancestors, to render God's name as *chol* or common or ordinary was to *destroy* God's name, and therefore was equivalent to rendering God as ordinary, and that, as such, was tantamount to destroying—*kivyachol*, were it possible—God. I contend that these religious fanatics have become so perverted in their doctrinal ideologies, they have become so immersed in their extraordinarily narrow definitions of what, to paraphrase the prophet Micah, they think "...the Lord requires of thee," that they have not merely lost touch with God, they are ostensibly destroying God. *Kivyachol*—were that possible.

To be sure, it is the Islamic fundamentalists who have captured our attention most dramatically. No one needs to be reminded of the horrors of September 11, 2001. Those acts of terrorism still cut to the core. But for me, it is simply the thought of the hijackers crying out "*Allah Akbar—God is Great*" as they brought their horrific missions to a fiery end that disturbs me the most. More than their actions, it is their ideas, their distorted theology that has the most destructive potential.

This summer we're driving into New York to see an art show and Aviva, sitting in the backseat, is reading out loud from the current issue of Time magazine. "Dad," she says, "you've got to listen to this." Mohammed al-Obaidi is a 27 year-old living in Baghdad. A barber. As he was "snipping away at a customers' hair, a text message beeped on his cell phone. 'Change your profession,' it read, 'or else you'll lose your head.' At first he thought it was a joke. He immediately called back the number, expecting that he would reach a friend...But in the climate of fanaticism that now prevails in Baghdad, barbers are being singled out by Sunni extremists who say that cutting a man's beard violates Islam. 'Do what we say,' a stranger on the line says, 'or we'll kill you.'"

After 9/11, after Daniel Pearl, after two decades of suicide bombings—barbers getting killed for cutting hair is not all that big a big deal. Hardly a week goes by that the headlines are not filled with reports of another bombing, witness this past weekend. But for all the stories that make it to the front page, we must know to what extent the pathology permeates insidiously the daily lives of millions of people. Beyond physical violence, they have taken God to the nadir, to the depths.

But let us be fair. And honest. Islam is hardly the only faith that breeds such madness. We Jews have our share as well, and while our fanatics are far fewer and dramatically less lethal than our Islamic counterparts, for me the perversion is no less troubling. Just a few weeks ago, Ovadia Yosef, Israel's former chief Sephardic rabbi, suggested that the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina was in fact the hand of God, an act of punishment for American support for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. I'm sure you'll take my word for it, but his words need to be heard:

"There was a tsunami and there are terrible natural disasters," he said, "because there isn't enough Torah study...black people reside there (in New Orleans). Blacks will study the Torah? (So God said) let's bring a tsunami and drown them...Hundreds of thousands remained homeless. Tens of thousands have been killed. All of this because they have no God."

"Bush was behind the (expulsion of) Gush Katif (one of the Gaza settlements)," he said. "[Bush] encouraged Sharon to expel Gush Katif...we had 15,000 people expelled here, and there (New Orleans) 150,000 (were expelled). It was God's retribution."

Of course none of this is terribly shocking. We've heard it all before. Indeed, after one ultra-Orthodox rabbi a number of years ago proclaimed that the six-million died because we Jews didn't keep Shabbos or kosher, all else pales in comparison. But these are not *just* words. What we also know to be true, what we also know this can lead to is a Baruch Goldstein walking into a mosque in Hebron and mercilessly opening fire on scores of Moslems at prayer because the Book of Esther gives permission for Jews to avenge their enemies, or a Yigal Amir assassinating Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin because, in Amir's own words, "According to the *Halachah*, you can kill the enemy." And when asked whether he acted alone, Amir replied: "It was God."

I have often wondered, perhaps it is the very nature of monotheism, perhaps it is inherent in faith-traditions that posit singular answers for truth that make for such perversions. Like everything else in the natural world, too much inbreeding can lead to genetic abnormalities. Deviations. Aberrations. Perhaps that is why in the sequence of the Ten Commandments, after we are told that there is only one God and we are forbidden to worship other gods, that Torah then warns us against becoming *too* God-intoxicated? Don't *use* God too much.

Unfortunately these are the ones—the fanatics, the headliners—who give religion its identity. I wonder if on some deeply hidden level they have even the slightest idea of the damage they do to their own self-proclaimed cause? When they assassinate abortion doctors and proclaim AIDS as God's punishment for homosexuality, they dishonor religion and disgrace God. When they interpret their scriptures so literally that its consequence is to demean and diminish (such as concluding that wives should be subservient to their husbands because in Genesis Eve is identified as Adam's "helpmate"), they dishonor religion and disgrace God. When they wield their power, when they abuse that power with indifference to the people they are purportedly serving, they dishonor religion and disgrace God. When they speak in the name of God, when they *act* in the name of God as if they know precisely what it is that God wants, they dishonor religion and disgrace God. They take God's name *in vain*. *Leshav*. They perpetrate a *shoah*, a destruction of God's name.

Can you really blame people for being turned off to organized religion?

I have a confession to make: When I come home from Temple on Friday night I love to watch HBO's "Late Night With Bill Maher." And one of the reasons I find his program so compelling is because of his unabated contempt for religious hypocrisy and the politicians who play to religious sympathies. But like so many others who have become alienated from their faiths because of these charlatans of God, he overreacts when he throws the baby out with the *mikveh* or baptismal water. For as much harm as has been done in the name of God, there is profoundly more good that has been inspired from the pulpit and the *bimah*. Lest we forget, the passion for doing good in our world comes directly from sacred scripture. We even have a word for it—*mitzvah*.

I have absolutely no doubt that the prophets of ancient Israel would have been guests on Bill Maher's show. It was just such religious arrogance and self-serving theology that infuriated Micah and propelled him to exclaim: "It has been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of thee—only to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God." [Micah 6:8] As the prophets reminded us, being *religious* is not about what you put into your mouth as much as what comes out of it. Being religious is less about loving God and more about loving man. Being religious is not speaking or acting in God's name, rather it is allowing God to act in our names. To paraphrase from Abraham Lincoln's 2nd inaugural address, the question is not if God is on our side but are we on God's side? Are we capable of distinguishing between doing God's will or using God to bring about our will?

Several years ago I had the opportunity to hear Emanuel Cleaver, then the mayor of Kansas City—now a member of Congress—speak on how he, as an evangelical minister, could reconcile the tension between his religious calling and his career as an elected official. He shared how he was often challenged by members of his church for allowing gambling in his municipality when it is strictly forbidden in their faith. By the same token, Cleaver said that as a minister of the Gospel he would hear the voice of God, but as a public servant he often had to consider the possibility that at those times he thought he was

hearing the voice of God maybe it was actually the voice of Emanuel Cleaver speaking to him in disguise.

For me the operative phrase in Micah's teaching is not the justice and mercy part but rather "...and walk humbly with your God." The true religionist lives in "radical amazement" of the world. The true religionist embraces "intelligent design", not because he believes literally in a six-day process of creation but because he stands in awe at the ultimate mystery of creation, and it is precisely because of his "amazement" that he dares not impose that perception on others. It is a matter of faith, not knowledge. To "walk humbly with God" means to be just a little unsure, not quite so confident, because if you think you understand the Mystery, then it's not mystery. And more to the point, it is only with this spiritual humility that one can ever hope to "do justice and love mercy." It is only when we stand in awe, not only of God but of creation, that we will be moved to transcend our own personal desires and actually *care* about creation and its creatures.

The problem of religion's weakening in our world is not the fanatics. Fanaticism goes part and parcel with faith and theological passion. The real issue is where is the theological *com*-passion? Where are those of us who are "modestly walking with God?"

One of the great failures of liberal Jews is the way in which we abdicate our authenticity to more traditional Jews. No doubt we are less observant. We don't follow the *halakhah* as absolute law. But Micah's point is that the essence of being a Jew is not so much about ritual performance as it is about moral integrity. This is not to dismiss the ritual elements of the Jewish way of life, yet Micah understands that if moral and ethical behavior is not at the center of our beings then we fail in our sacred obligations. I do not intend to denigrate traditional Judaism, but can we not see that we are mainstream Judaism? Do we not see that we are the guarantors of the Jewish tradition? Do we not see that we are the ones who have the power to restore religion to its proper estate? You don't have to be fluent in Hebrew to pursue justice. You don't have to study Talmud to care for the hungry and the homeless. You don't have to be a rabbi to perform *mitzvot*.

At stake here is the integrity of religion. Of the place a reverential belief in God can have in our world. Sadly, there will always be those who pollute religion's sacred waters by using God's name to sanction their own agendas. There will always be crusaders and inquisitors. There will always be *fatwas* and *cherems*. There will always be those who wield religion as a weapon. Yet for all those who destroy in the name of God, there must also be those who redeem in the name of God, those who show love and tolerance because that is what God demands of us.

I wonder if Ovadia Yosef encouraged his followers to send aid to the flood-ravaged Gulf states? I wonder if he is as concerned with the genocide in Darfur as he is with the displacement of Jews from Gaza? And what about us? Have we followed our hearts? Have we responded to the still small Voice that cries out to us from within our souls? Have we pursued justice, as we are commanded? What would Micah say to us? And more to the point, how would we respond?

Actually, there's one more part to Micah's prophecy. His teaching doesn't end where most of us stop quoting him. According to the translators of the New Jewish Publication Society version of the TaNaKH, there is a textual emendation which yields another verse. The full text then reads: "It has been told you what is good and what Adonai your God requires of you—to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. *Then you will achieve a name of wisdom.*"

In other words, it's not God's name we should be concerned with but our own. And the way in which we achieve that is not by *invoking* a name but by *making* one.

For Micah, the path to that is through acts of justice and mercy—and a pervading awareness of humility that we walk continually in the presence of the sacred. Heschel called it *Radical Amazement*.