The faith of a liberal Jew

By RABBI ARYEH MEIR

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Rabbi Aryeh Meir of Teaneck is on the faculty of the Academy for Jewish Religion and is the chairperson of the Teaneck Environmental Commission.

I am a Conservative (better “Masorti/traditional”) Jew. I am writing to explain to the broader Jewish community how one liberal Jew defines his Jewish beliefs and commitments with the hope that this will bring Jews like myself into a closer dialogue with Jews who have different beliefs and approaches to Jewish faith and community. I welcome responses from anyone who would contribute to a broader communal discussion on these issues.

I choose to define my Judaism in a positive way rather than what I am not (ie. not Reform, not Orthodox, not secular).

I think it important first to list those teachers who shaped my path in Jewish life. At the Jewish Theological Seminary I studied with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose writings on Jewish faith, practice, and prayer, and whose commitment to social justice and interreligious dialogue, had a powerful impact on my life.

Other significant teachers and influences have been (and continue to be) Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook, Martin Buber, Nechama Leibovitz, the poet Yehuda Amichai, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and Rabbi Arthur Green. There certainly are others, but that list will suffice for now.

I begin with a verse from sefer Bereshit 18:19, where God says “Indeed I have known him [Avraham], in order that he may charge his sons and his household after him: they shall keep the way of YHWH, to do what is right and just (tzedekah u’mishpat), in order that YHWH may bring upon Avraham what he spoke concerning him.” According to this verse, the way of God, derekh haShem, is to bring equity and justice to a world greatly in need of both. This is perhaps the reason for choosing Avraham and his progeny and is the very essence of what Jews are supposed to do in the world.

The reason for Jewish existence, the Jewish project, is to dedicate ourselves to achieving a world in which equity and justice are achievable for all humanity.

And what of faith? I believe that in being and living Jewish lives, we come to experience the presence of the sacred. At Sinai, the children of Israel said, “na’aseh ve’nishmah” — we will do and we will hear, we will understand. In the performance of a mitzvah we come to understand its meaning and its power. When we visit the sick, we experience God’s presence. When we pray with kavannah, with deep focus and with the full presence of mind and heart, we sense God’s presence in the words of prayer. When we help to feed a person in need, we understand the meaning of Chesed, of love and kindness.

When we stand and fight for a just cause, we truly are children of Avraham and Sarah.

For liberal Jews, the equality of women in all aspects of Jewish communal and religious life is a core principle. In every major Jewish community, women serve as rabbis, cantors, and teachers of Torah. They are leaders in their communities. This is perhaps one of our major differences with Orthodox Judaism. We believe that every Jewish girl should have the opportunity and the education required to prepare for whatever leadership role she chooses. We are so much richer in spirit and so stronger as a community because of the contribution of Jewish women.

All Jews, regardless of their gender identification, should be able to participate fully in all aspects of Jewish communal life, including leadership in our religious life. We should welcome them with open arms to our synagogues.
and shuls, to our organizations and movements. They will help to strengthen us and bring a unique contribution to our Jewish community.

Judaism has a powerful tradition of working towards a more equitable society. Here in America this means doing our part to eliminate racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments in our society and within the Jewish community. This country must continue its historic role as a refuge to the oppressed seeking the safety and freedom that our ancestors found here.

Ahavat Yisrael, ahavat Medinat Yisrael. My Jewish identity was shaped by my years as a student and as a teacher in Israel. I love the Land, from the top of Mount Hermon to the beaches of Eilat and everything in between. Zionism and the creation of Medinat Yisrael were among the greatest achievements of the Jewish people in our entire history. I love and support the State. But I reserve the right to criticize its government and many of its policies.

My criticism grows out of my love for Israel and my concern for its future. Simply put, Israel cannot continue to occupy and develop the land that the Palestinians view as their future state. The occupation is unjust and deeply harmful not only to the Palestinians, but to Israel and to the Jewish people. Israel must do more, much more to seek an end to the occupation and to seek a just peace: “bakesh shalom v’rodfeyhu”, seek peace and pursue it.

The present government is not seeking peace while it continues to support the Jewish settlement project. Its policies are making the achievement of peace ever more remote. Palestinian leadership must renounce terrorism, recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and respond positively to any Israeli overtures toward peace with their own serious political outline of what a peace agreement would entail. Palestinian political leadership, such that it is, bears a major responsibility for the stagnation of the peace process.

My rebbe R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel wrote that “We live by the conviction that acts of goodness (g’milut chesed) reflect the hidden light of God’s holiness.”

“God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds.”

Heschel also wrote that Judaism is “the theology of the common (the everyday) deed. The Prophet is concerned not with “the mysteries of heaven, but the blights of society, the affairs of the marketplace...with those who trample upon the needy, who increase the price of grain, use dishonest scales, and sell the refuse of corn....

“Only one response [to the mystery of being] can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill.

“It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.”

Rabbi Aryeh Meir is an active member of Congregation Beth Sholom in Teaneck, a member of the New Israel Fund, the Teaneck Environmental Commission, and the J Street Rabbinic Cabinet.

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