

Spiritual Meaning in a “Remixed” World

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A young man once came to see Rabbi Baruch Frankel, a widely revered scholar in early 19th-century Eastern Europe. The young man wanted Rabbi Frankel to give him a ruling on a matter of *halakhah*.

As they conversed, Rabbi Frankel realized that this young man was something of a prodigy in Jewish law, as he demonstrated intricate knowledge of each of the four pillars of *halakhah*. So, the story goes, Rabbi Frankel decided then and there to ordain him as a rabbi.

In doing so, Rabbi Frankel said to his new protégé: “Now you know, once you’re appointed as a rabbi, you have to learn the fifth pillar of Jewish law.”

“The *fifth* pillar?” asked the young man. “But there are only four!”

“True, there are only four in the law books,” said Rabbi Frankel. “But for rabbis, there is a critical fifth pillar—and that is, how to lead a community of people. If a rabbi doesn’t understand his people, it doesn’t matter how much Torah he knows; he will not be able to lead them well.”

Sometime, years later, Rabbi Frankel went to visit this young rabbi. By now, the young man had become the rabbi of his own community.

“So,” said Rabbi Frankel, “have you succeeded in learning the fifth pillar of the law?”

“Indeed, I have,” responded the young rabbi. “And not only that, I have also become proficient in the *sixth* pillar of *halakhah*.”

Rabbi Frankel was stumped. “The *sixth* pillar?”

“Yes,” said his young protégé. “The sixth pillar is how to lead a community of *free* people.”¹

The young rabbi’s response to Rabbi Frankel points to the challenges to institutional religion posed by modernity.

Throughout Jewish history, up until about 200 years ago, Jews in countries around the world lived together in what the historian Jacob Katz calls “traditional societies.”

In these insular enclaves, a Jew’s daily life—from morning to night, in synagogue, in business, in the public square, and at home—was ordered and governed by *halakhah*, traditional Jewish law.

The rabbi, as the recognized expert in Jewish law, was the ultimate source of authority for the community. His *halakhic* rulings were binding on the members of his community. Should anyone choose to disobey or ignore them, they could be excommunicated and left to fend for themselves in an unfriendly non-Jewish world.

True, as Rabbi Frankel explained to his rabbinic protégé, the rabbi, like any good leader, needed to understand the particular needs, interests, and circumstances of his people in order to lead them effectively. But it was also true that for a Jew to flout the rabbi's authority was to bring immense hardship upon himself and his family.

But all that changed in the late 18th and 19th centuries when, thanks to draconian political and cultural changes in the wider world, the walls of traditional Jewish society came tumbling down.

Given the opportunity, for the first time in history, to come "out of the ghetto," as Katz puts it, and participate in the broader non-Jewish society, many Jews jumped at the chance.

As you can imagine, integrating into the wider world often necessitated softening their commitment to traditional Jewish practices or abandoning them altogether.

And, of course, they were now free to do so because, in the new political reality of post-Enlightenment Europe, they were subject only to the laws of the country in which they lived, and no longer to the rule of their local rabbi.

This shift in the sociopolitical structure of Jewish life left rabbis, who once had the power to command and control their populations, with the ability—and the *need*—to use what David Ellenson and Daniel Gordis call "influential authority"² to persuade their people to follow Jewish traditions.

This is what Rabbi Frankel's young protégé meant when he said the sixth pillar of Jewish law is to learn how to lead *free* people.

This has been the \$60,000 question of religious life in the 200 years since then.

It's a question that applies not only to Jews but to everyone interested in religious life.

And it's a question that has never been so hard to answer as it is in 21st-century America, where we have more religious, political, and cultural freedom, infinitely better technology, more access to information, and more spiritual content than at any time and any place in the history of the world.

Contemporary scholars of American religion and culture argue that the radically free and open landscape we live in has led to yet another fundamental reorientation of religious life.

Not so long ago in America, multiculturalism reigned. In contrast to earlier times, when white Protestantism dominated the culture, Americans of all religious, ethnic, and cultural stripes were invited and encouraged to live out their particular beliefs and practices—a culturally, religiously, ethnically pluralistic tapestry of communities living alongside each other.

But some scholars are now saying that multiculturalism is passé; that it has given way to a more radically democratic post-ethnic, post-tribal culture that no longer values loyalty to or exclusive identification with any one religious tradition. Instead, it extols individual choice, intuition, and tailor-made spirituality.

The headlines from the Pew studies throughout the last 10 years have been that non-orthodox religion in America is on the decline, that church and synagogue affiliation has dipped below 50 percent for the first time in our country's history, and that the fastest growing religious identification in America is "None."

While all that is true as far as it goes, Tara Isabella Burton, a contemporary theologian and observer of American culture, argues that these data do not correspond to a decline in *spirituality*.

She points out that, according to the same studies, "A full 72 percent of the Nones say they believe in, if not the God of the Bible, at least *something*."

"In other words," she explains, "our Nones may not be traditionally religious, in the sense that either Jerry Falwell or Sam Harris is used to. But they're not exactly *secular*, either."³

Unlike medieval times when religiosity was about following the rules dictated by some rabbi or pope or some other guy in a fancy costume, post-Enlightenment religion has been about the voluntary quest for *meaning* in life.

In the 20th century, spiritual Americans tended to seek that meaning in a single religious tradition. Jews, for example, would look for meaning in the practice of Judaism.

But today, Burton explains, due to the breakdown in tribal boundaries and the unlimited access to spirituality afforded by the Internet, many Americans—particularly those of the millennial generation and younger—"envision themselves as creators of their own [individualized] religions, mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions."⁴

Burton calls this "Remixed" religion.

"The Remixed hunger for the same things human beings have always longed for: a sense of meaning in the world and personal purpose within that meaning, a community to share that experience with, and rituals to bring the power of that experience into achievable, everyday life. But they're doing it differently. ...Today's Remixed," she says, "prioritize intuitional spirituality over institutional religion.

"And they want, when available institutional options fail to suit their needs, the freedom to mix and match, to create their own daily rituals and practices and belief systems."⁵

And they're finding it, she argues, in a mix of conventional "religious" or "spiritual" forms like Judaism and Christianity and Buddhism, together with "secular" practices and philosophies like wellness culture, yoga, social justice and DEI, and even Harry Potter.

Which brings us back to that sixth pillar of Jewish law: how to lead a community of people who are radically free. How—to borrow David Ellenson's phrase—to create "Jewish meaning in a world of choice."

It's a deeply complicated question, to be sure, but one thing, I think, is pretty much for certain:

The philosophy articulated in the opening words of this week's parashah is not the way.

"Eileh mishpatim—These are the rules." (Ex. 21:1)

That's a no-go for the religiously remixed who, as Burton describes them, "reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism."⁶

Rules-based religion is passé outside fundamentalist religious communities, and the idea that there is but *one* legitimate form of religion or spiritual practice—and that that form must be pure and self-contained—is anathema to our modern culture.

From our standpoint as a Reform Jewish congregation, I think that means we need to let go of the rules—the orthodoxies (with a lower-case "o")—that we've held on to for so long.

Like the oft-heard assertions that "Reform Jews *don't* do this or that.

"Reform Jews *don't* pray more than once a week. Reform Jews *don't* wear *kippot* or *tallitot* or *t'fillin*. Reform Jews *don't* keep kosher."

Those are orthodoxies rooted in 1885, and that was a different time.

Today, Reform Judaism is a religious philosophy premised not on rules, and not on doing something or not doing something else because some rabbi or external authority told you to.

Instead, ours is a religious philosophy that encourages learning, and spiritual exploration, and experimentation, and taking on practices that you feel enrich your life and elevate your soul.

We ought to reclaim the idea suggested by one of our German Reform founders, Rabbi Samuel Holdheim, who taught that Jewish tradition is like a treasure chest filled with incredible riches. Look through it, try some on, see what captures your fancy, what inspires you, and make them your own.

And what doesn't. Feel free to leave them in the chest, because even though they don't suit you, someone else might find them beautiful.

At the same time, I believe we need to recalibrate the way we think of Judaism.

I believe, like the scholar Shaul Magid, that in modern America's post-tribal culture, we need to get comfortable with disentangling Judaism from an essentialist kind of "Jewishness."⁷

Our tradition is too rich and too profound to be viewed as the sole property of people who happen to be born into a Jewish family or undergo the rituals of formal conversion. Indeed, our American Reform communities have already moved past that.

The wisdom and practice of Judaism is something that everyone should be able to experience and grow from, regardless of their ethnicity or personal status—and we ought to make it available to them.

"Let all who are hungry come and eat": That declaration from the seder ought to be a guiding principle for us.

We should make the barriers to entry low, but the content and the experiences we offer all who seek should be deep, rich, authentic, sophisticated, spiritually and intellectually challenging—unabashedly the best of what Judaism has to offer.

There's so much more to say about this, of course; so much more thinking to do.

But it's clear to me that institutional Judaism needs to reorient itself to address the spiritual needs of an American population that is radically free and afforded limitless choices.

Judaism will probably never again be any American Jew's exclusive source of spiritual meaning. But that's OK. We ought to do all we can to make them, and others, want to rummage around in that treasure chest from time to time.

1 Story told by Y. Achisham, quoted in *Itturei Torah, Mishpatim #7 (v'eileh mishpatim...)*

2 David Ellenson and Daniel Gordis, *Pledges of Jewish Allegiance*, 6

3 Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, 17

4 *Ibid.*, 10

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 See Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*