

What I Love About Judaism

By Roy Young

Although born Jewish, I am actually a Jew by choice. As my daughter Hava, now 29, insightfully told me, I am the only one in my birth family of five who chose voluntarily to take Judaism seriously. My mother, my late father and my two brothers are bagels-and-lox Jews. Unlike my birth family, my wife Sharon's parents, who survived the Holocaust, imbued her with a strong sense of Yiddishkeit. We raised our two daughters to love Judaism with a strong commitment to Jewish learning and practice.

So, what do I love about Judaism to have chosen it? What makes Judaism a fundamental part of who I am? And why do I believe liberal, non-orthodox, Jews should choose Judaism? My doorway into Judaism was and still is the annual holiday cycle, prescribed in the Torah. Through study and observance of the holidays, I came to understand that Judaism is a recipe for our happiness. In fact, Judaism teaches that God created the world for our enjoyment.

To guide us to enjoy life, Judaism's core ingredients – its eggs, butter and sugar -- are three deep, fundamental values: Liberty, Responsibility and Joy, each aligned respectively with Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot.

These three holidays – the Torah's three pilgrimage festivals -- teach us what we need to live a good life. Rather than provide authoritative insights on science, history or politics, they reinforce values: values that we must embrace to enjoy life; values to which we must actively commit to positively focus our natural yearnings; and values to teach our children.

At the Seder of Passover -- the holiday most widely celebrated by Jews -- we are each obligated to once again experience and celebrate our freedom. In telling our story of going from the darkness of slavery to the light of liberty, Judaism teaches us that Jews are valued, protected and resilient – a hopeful and grateful people who will overcome any adversity to become free.

To make the memory of our origins relevant to us individually, we are commanded to personalize our telling of the liberation story each year. To do so, we don't simply read the story of the Exodus as written in the Torah. Rather, we use the Haggadah, the guidebook written by the rabbis of the Talmud and subsequently over hundreds of years of editing and enhancing, to guide us to tell our own individual story.

There are three aspects of the telling that I especially love. The first, of course, is the four questions asked by the youngest at the Seder. The Talmud teaches us that these four questions are examples given to the child by the father to teach how to ask questions. From this, we all learn that asking questions is Judaism's method to grow. I have found that my ability to overcome challenges is related to my willingness to pause, ask the right questions, and reframe the original problem. And I have learned how to ask people questions to learn from them. The holiday requires us learn how to ask questions and to teach the next generation to ask questions.

Second is Dayeinu, the popular prayer at the very center of the Seder focused on gratitude, with a melody we all learn and quickly come to love. So central is gratitude as a positive force of happiness that Dayeinu is the one Ashkenazic melody in a major key, while all other melodies are set in minor keys. I have theories about why, but this is a big subject for another essay about Jewish music.

Third, the Haggadah does not instruct us to tell our story by reading the lengthy description in the Torah of the Exodus from Egypt. Rather, it includes a brief Torah passage of our history written in the first-person singular, starting with "My father was a wandering Aramean." Commenting on this text to personalize the story, we ask our guests to share their own transformative or growth journey. In this way, we learn how Jews individually travel from darkness to light.

Moving on to Shavuot, our holiday reinforcing the value of Responsibility, tradition teaches us to recognize this is the festival that marks the time we received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Written in the singular, each commandment is a personal instruction directed at each of us. Unlike many of the commandments in the Torah, together, these are the essence to being good and overcoming our bad nature. To make the world better, why don't we spread the Ten Commandments? An effective approach would be to require Jewish high school graduates to do a mission – like Mormons – to bring the Ten Commandments to some place in the world. As the Orthodox focus inward to its small community of Jews, we non-Orthodox should use Judaism to fix the world. That is, use Judaism universally rather than particularly. As Rabbi Arthur Green, the scholar of Hasidism, teaches in the name of his teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great scholar of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, on why the Ten Commandments forbids graven images, "You can't make God's image; you can only be God's image."

Shavuot recognizes that Liberty requires a code of conduct and hard work. When we were freed from slavery in Egypt, our first instinct before receiving the

Torah was to complain about the food in the desert and express a wish to return to slavery. Liberty is not something we yearn for naturally; rather we humans yearn for security and to be cared for even if it means being slaves. Knowing this well, the Jewish psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl in his seminal book *Man's Search for Meaning* suggested we Americans need a Statue of Responsibility. The Statue of Responsibility he envisioned would be located on the West Coast to pair with the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. This placement of the two bookended statues on either side of our country teaches us that Liberty requires Responsibility. Similarly, the esteemed teacher of Judaism, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, said that "Judaism is God's call to responsibility."

The third aspect of Shavuot I find most powerful is that it stresses Judaism's fundamental value of behavior over faith. What matters is what we do, much more than what we believe or say. We always overcome adversity, becoming victors, not victims. And doing is what God wants from us. When God gives us the Torah, we say "we will (first) do, and (then) we will understand." That is, we must first act to fully understand the wisdom of the Torah's teachings.

This brings us to the third festival, Sukkot. Sukkot is the only one of the three festivals when we are commanded to feel joyous. Strange, just when I thought Judaism emphasized behavior, I face a major festival that requires me to feel a particular emotion. This commandment to feel something is uncharacteristic not just for a festival but for all commandments of Judaism (with the exception of do not covet). So, I have struggled for years now to fulfill this commandment. Every year (except this one) when we host friends and family in our sukkah, we come up with a new idea on how we can experience joy. In different years, we asked our guests to: share their favorite Jewish song, come wearing a silly hat, share someone they would like to invite to sit with us, bring a piece of art they created, create art to hang in the sukkah, share a Jewish joke, and so on.

The one segment of Jews who radiate Joy is Chabad. My younger daughter, Shoshana, introduced me to Chabad, as she attended Friday night dinners at the rabbi's house every week with her now-husband during her college years. Chabad knows that being Jewish is a joyous journey and incorporates the joy of Judaism in their outreach work. By nature, my emotional self includes more worry than joy. I know I should take to heart the lessons of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the originator of Chasidism, who taught that worry occupies your mind and takes you away from joy and leaves you unable to see the wonder that is around you.

I tried to bring the spirit of joy in a Shabbat afternoon program I created at Temple Emanuel when our kids were in the Day School, I called Stop and Smell

the Spices. The idea was to bring the joy of Jewish camps and Temple Emanuel's family camp to the synagogue building.

While I decided to focus my short essay on the three pilgrimage festivals, I do want to conclude with a short reference to Chanukah, the festival of lights, another holiday widely celebrated by Jews, by making reference to a short essay by Theodore Herzl, the visionary behind the reinstitution of a Jewish homeland. Entitled *The Menorah*, Herzl begins his 1897 short story as follows: "Once there was a man who deep in his soul felt the need to be a Jew." For Herzl, the vision of Zionism as the reestablishment of the State of Israel was not only about providing an escape from anti-Semitism, but about making possible a renewal of Judaism itself. Nor was Herzl the strict secularist he is sometimes imagined to be, but someone deeply invested in the Jewish religion. Traditional Jews thought only a pious, learned sage could lead us back to our homeland. In contrast, in this essay, as the Shamash, the light with the sole purpose of lighting the light of all the others, Herzl tells us nothing is more sacred. The menorah is the symbol of what we are going to create and how. This is perhaps a great symbol and inspiration for ChaiVillageLA, with non-Orthodox temple members over age 55 who want to give back to their Jewish community and shine a light of Judaism. [If you are interested in reading Herzl's short essay, you can find the text here:

<https://herzlinstitute.org/en/theodor-herzl/the-menorah/>

How does Judaism make your life meaningful and enjoyable? I would love to hear from you!

L'Chaim!

Roy (roy@beyondb-school.com)