

Judgmentalness, Ambivalence, and Authenticity

Sermon for the Taos Jewish Center • David E. S. Stein • Rosh ha-Shanah 5767

The Day of Reckoning has come—*Yom ha-Din*, the Sages called it:

Tonight we stand on the cusp between two years—a break in time—peering down into the abyss, blinking into the blackness of eternity before that precious and terrible sight is obscured again by ordinary minutes and everyday consciousness. Do we have the courage to stop and look, to learn from this momentary encounter, to perceive what must be done in our own individual lives, and to set about to doing it?

During these Yamim Noraim, something powerful—something transformative—may occur! It may change our lives. Dare we wish for that possibility? Can we allow for it—allow for today to depart from yesterday, allow for the present to be different than the past?

Judgmentalness

On this *Yom ha-Din*, which some people translate as “Day of Judgment,” I’m paradoxically concerned about *too much* judgment—more precisely, about *harsh* judgment. I’ve observed an impulse that we Jews have to be judgmental about Judaism and about other Jews.

By the lights of that impulse, Jews can’t do anything right—every Jew is either “too Jewish” or “not Jewish enough”; by its lights, every Jewish organization is too much *this* way, or not enough *that* way. I can’t help noticing that the inclination to pass judgment is also habitually directed at Jewish *leaders*. Indeed, when we pose the question “Why does a community need a rabbi?” it seems to me that (whatever the answer *in theory*) in *actual practice* the correct reply to that question is: “A community needs a rabbi to *unite* the community . . . in *gossip* about the rabbi.”

Where does that judgmental impulse *come* from? What *fuels the boiler* of our faultfinding energy? I believe that underneath it all is an emotional need to keep our distance, which has been learned from universally shared past experience that involved a division of our human world into a dichotomy of “us” versus “them.” But I’m not going to dwell on the past here. Suffice it to say that on *Yom ha-Din*: instead of *judgment*, we may find ourselves overtaken by *judgmentalness*; and our felt need to keep our distance attaches itself to excuses: “I don’t wanna be here—there’s too much Hebrew in the services!” Or: “. . . there’s *not enough* Hebrew in the services!” “Those aren’t the *real* tunes that I know from childhood!” Or: “Those are the same old tunes that I heard growing up, and they’re still boring!” “I can’t believe it: here I am, sitting in shul on the holiest day of the year, and they want me to sing folk songs from the ‘60s!” “I’m so turned off that the rabbi commandeered our holy days to condemn our government’s foreign policy—what’s *that* got to do with religion!” “I’m appalled that *not once* did the rabbi mention *Israel!*” “I’m upset at how they ended the *Yom Kippur* services so late—it was already dark, my stomach was growling—don’t they *know* that some people have to get up early the next day because we *work* for a living?”

(I'm not saying such issues aren't *worthy of discussion* within a congregation. They are. It's just that they cannot be productively *settled* so long as judgmentalness is our unchallenged sovereign.)

Judgmentalness is hard to abide. Who wants to stick around in a place where no matter what you do, it's not good enough? An atmosphere in which everyone is ready to pronounce a verdict makes us feel *ambivalent*, and that is in itself unsettling.

Ambivalence

"Having conflicting feelings or thoughts with regard to one's ethnic group or faith tradition" is a fact of life for all groups everywhere. *Native Americans* go back and forth about just how "Indian" they still can be even when they live "off the reservation." *African Americans* deal with inner struggles about how "African" they should be in their dress, in their speech patterns, in their loyalties.

But most of us here are *Jews*, and so I'm going to talk about what it's like for Jews. And we're gathered here in worship, so I'm going to focus on our *relationship* with that much-maligned thing called "organized religion." And I'm going to address myself to ambivalent Jews—to those who keep one foot out the door of *organized Jewish religion*, which I presume means every Jew here—including me.

I've lived in or visited many Jewish communities in many states and countries, and I have observed that with regard to our Jewish communal institutions, we Jews have decidedly *mixed* feelings: How do you know it's a *Jewish* restaurant? Because when the *maître d'* stands at the podium in the entryway and asks, "Do you have a reservation?" the answers are always things like, "Yes, I do: the food is *too salty* here!"

You know, let's see a show of hands: How many of us "have reservations" to be here tonight? I mean *mental* reservations like: "I can't sit up front because who knows, I might want to make a quick getaway!" How many of us *have reservations* to be here tonight?

We Jews tend to keep one foot out the door. We neither stand all the way in ("too Jewish"), nor all the way out ("not Jewish enough"). Neither alternative feels right, so we hesitate in between. The problem is, standing with one foot out the door can get darned uncomfortable: your toes get wet when it rains; your leg gets icy in the winter; you catch a cold from the draft; your body gets stiff. It's not surprising that many of us eventually say, "Excuse me, I need to go for a walk to stretch my legs"—and next thing you know, we're sitting comfortably in a buddhist temple, or an ashram, or a sweat lodge, or at a druid bonfire, or a quaker meeting!

(I'm *not* putting down the inherent value or truly meaningful religious experience that can be found in other faith traditions; I'm just saying that we Jews may tend to go into our encounters with other religions *already off balance*.)

Look, nobody has to love being in synagogue *all* the time! I sure don't. Nobody has to love being Jewish *all* the time. I don't. Conversely, Judaism doesn't have to be perfect for us love it. Nor does a congregation and its leaders need to be perfect in order for us to cherish them. That truism was demonstrated in the Summer issue of your *HaKol* newsletter: Cindy Grossman mused about "Why am I doing this?" while Bruce Ross recalled memories from his childhood synagogue—not only the "good" but also "the

bad, and the ugly”; and someone styled only as “the Kotzker de Taos” candidly grumbled about having first been approached for a donation to the TJC—an encounter after which, he recounted, “My head was pounding. I went to bed wide-eyed.”

Speaking for myself, let me say that back in June—before I accepted this position for the High Holy Days—I read those expressions of ambivalence by people in Taos who all were clearly *committed Jews*, and it reassured me that this was a place that I might like to visit! It seemed refreshingly real.

Because I’m a rabbi—and because rabbis have a certain reputation—let me be clear about what I’m *not* saying. I’m *not* trying to get you to become “more Jewish.” I am *not* trying to induce you to become “more observant.” Rather, I’m trying to make enough breathing room for us all so that we can wriggle a little bit out of the rigid grip of *judgmental* thought patterns, and move beyond *ambivalence*-induced paralysis. My wish is that we Jews might be a tad more able to make a truly free choice—that we might recover the ability to make fair and wise decisions for ourselves about our Judaism. That’s *my* agenda! So for years now, when people have come to me and said, “Rabbi, I’m thinking of maybe joining this congregation as a member,” or “Maybe soon I’ll learn to read the Torah in Hebrew,” I have generally replied, “Consider doing so just *a little bit before* you feel comfortable.” That usually prompts a look of puzzlement, but later I get thanks—because they have remembered that if we never stretch, we may not grow any bigger.

Are you holding out each year for the *perfect* rabbi? Are you insisting on only the *ideal* minyan to pray in? Are you keeping yourself on the margins in order to justify why you *feel* marginal? Are you waiting for the conflicting thoughts and feelings inside to resolve themselves *before* you join in community with other Jews? Are you insisting that your personal religious commitments keep you *within* your comfort zone?

Then consider: ambivalence will probably never go away. Never! And when we keep Judaism at arm’s length on the grounds that it’s not perfect, it may feel righteous and be a relief at the moment, yet we may be granting our judgmental impulse a power over our lives that ultimately doesn’t serve us well.

Authenticity

Thus far I’ve talked about the *difficulty* of judging fairly, of what gets in the way of doing so. So let’s say that we do manage to set aside the judgmentalness: we’re keeping a sense of perspective—and especially a sense of humor. Suppose that we do embrace our ambivalence, deciding to go ahead and be ambivalent *together* with other Jews. We are ready to proceed. There’s still the question of what to aim for, of how we judge what’s right for us. We long to live Jewishly in a way that is worthy of our own self-respect. But how?

I’ve discussed that question many times with earnest Jews around the country. I ask, “What makes something *Jewishly authentic*?” (In the interests of time, I simply summarize what I’ve learned.) People usually come up with two opposing answers.

One of their answers is: what’s Jewishly authentic is that which is true to Jewish tradition as handed down from antiquity (if not directly *from God*) and as interpreted

through the ages by generations of rabbis who themselves hew to that tradition. (Perhaps you've heard that kind of approach before somewhere.)

Their other answer is: whatever Jews do is Jewishly authentic simply because it's Jews who are doing it. (Perhaps you've heard that one before, too.)

The problem is, many people whom I speak with will admit to being uncomfortable with *both* answers.

What we can call the Orthodox claim to authenticity has a reassuringly confident ring to it, yet also an air of unreality; it is simply unappealing to many of us.

On the other hand, the second approach ultimately sounds like "anything goes," which seems to lack integrity, let alone truly redemptive possibilities. Judaism ought to stand for something, people tell me—something more than "whatever Jews do."

In short, many Jews are living their lives as Jews without being in possession of a concept of Jewish authenticity that they can respect.

I suspect that many of us here are in that same boat: We show up on this holy day, at Rosh ha-Shanah services, attracted by the opportunity it reputedly affords for self-assessment, for measuring our lives against some objective standard, a standard reassuringly offered by longstanding tradition—and as some say, by none other than the Creator of the Universe. And yet when we look closely, we find that we are lacking a yardstick that makes sense to us, that we can apply with intellectual integrity.

Lest we be disheartened and give up—or lest we adopt an inadequate yardstick just because it seems to be the best one available—let me now offer a third concept of Jewish authenticity. This way of approaching the question is not owned by any one religious denomination; it is potentially available to all Jews. It has to do with the *nature or quality of our presence*—what we ourselves bring in the door with us—when we engage with things Jewish.

I can express it best with a metaphor: Jewish authenticity is an ongoing *dance* that requires two partners. One partner is Jewish tradition. The other partner is us—us Jews here today. Authenticity is not measured by what Jews believe nor by how they practice their Judaism. Rather, it's a function of our willingness to engage in the dance—to truly engage. By that I mean: alive to the moment, willing to be open to whatever might happen, allowing for the possibility that something unfamiliar, unexpected, and even transformative might occur. An authentic dance is one that has never been danced before in precisely that same way.

We Jews have the opportunity to be full partners in that dance. Each time we get up to waltz or tango across the floor with our Jewish heritage, that encounter gives rise to our own self-definition and growth. We engage with our heritage *on our own terms* yet honestly—and in the process, we become more our true (authentic) selves. To the extent that we are present in the ongoing dance with our religious tradition, we lead inherently *fulfilling* Jewish lives. As the travel writer Eric Sloane observed in his 1960 book *Return to Taos*, "happiness is not a place at which one arrives, but the manner in which one travels."

On the other hand, to the extent that we decline to dance, or agree to participate but are not fully present, or that we let Judaism lead and we mindlessly follow, the endeavor

is not authentic—and we can be in the middle of reciting Hebrew prayers, studying Talmud, chanting mystical texts, observing Shabbat, what have you (it doesn't matter): To the extent that we are not fully present, that endeavor is Jewishly *inauthentic*.

If you will permit me now to leave behind the metaphor of dancing, I will underscore my point briefly in three other ways as well:

1. ALLITERATION: Jewish authenticity is a matter of *relationship*, not of *rules*; of *process* rather than *praxis*.

2. ECONOMIC METAPHOR: Jewish authenticity calls for full employment, not for outsourcing [by which I mean: the outsourcing of our religion to rabbis, or to Chabad]. Authentic Jews are not just “consumers” of Judaism but also “producers” of it.

3. EDITOR'S METAPHOR: As we live our lives, it can be said: we each write a kind of book—the spiritual and emotional traces of our presence on this planet. If we write our book authentically, we are changed by the experience of composing each chapter. And at the same time, Jewish tradition is also altered by our encounter with it. For Judaism is a work in progress. What was authentic yesterday may or may not be authentic today. Authentic Jews are thus *authors* of the Jewish *present*, not simply *readers* of the Jewish *past*. And this means that when we encounter Jews doing something new and calling it Jewish, it might actually *be authentic* even if what they do has never been done that way before.

* * *

It is said that the great Hasidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev once spotted a man whom he knew hurrying along the street—head down, preoccupied, looking neither right nor left. The rebbe hailed the fellow, who paused somewhat reluctantly.

“Why are you rushing so much?” the rebbe asked the man.

“I'm rushing after my livelihood,” the fellow answered.

“And how do you know,” the rabbi asked, “that your livelihood is running on before you—so that you have to rush *after* it? Perhaps it's *behind* you, and all you need to do is stand still.”

We have been given the will and the way to be authentic Jews—to be Jews who lead meaningful and purposeful lives. If we're not there yet, let's perhaps pause—let's stand still—and ask ourselves whether the path we're on is maybe leading us *away* from being present: and thus from being authentically Jewish.

* * *

Judgmentalness. Ambivalence. Authenticity. . . . Tonight we stand on the cusp between two years—a break in time—peering down into the abyss, blinking into the blackness of eternity before that precious and terrible sight is obscured again by ordinary minutes and everyday consciousness: Do we have the courage to look, to learn from this momentary encounter, to perceive what must be done in our own individual lives, and to set about to doing it?