

INSIGHT

Is religion enough? A call for justice and repentance



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“So much of human religiosity comes down to a hoax we perpetrate on God.”

I read this quote in August in an article by Rabbi Shai Held, president and dean of the Hadar Institute in New York City. It appeared in the *Christian Century* magazine, considered one of the leading popular publications for Christians — not the typical place for a Jewish reflection.

In the article, Rabbi Held was discussing a passage from Isaiah 58 and its role in the readings for Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, which occurred this week at the conclusion of the High Holy Days for Jews. As he points out, Yom Kippur is a day of fasting, and he writes that this reading “lands like a stick of dynamite upon the congregation. By late morning, when Isaiah is read, most of us are hungry and thirsty and perhaps a little irritable from fasting.”

Rabbi Held continues, “We’re right smack in the middle of the holiest day of the year ... when the words of the prophet come thundering at us, questioning just what it is we think we’re doing in God’s house. ‘Do you call that a fast,’ Isaiah asks, ‘a day acceptable to the Lord?’”

Rabbi Held then suggests a true fast would not just be going through the rituals but, quoting Isaiah again, “No, this is the fast that I desire ... to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.” (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

It is not that ritual is bad, but it must be “coupled with a passion for justice and a heart full of kindness,” Rabbi Held continues. “If our fasting convinces us that God is in our pocket, then our religious lives are a scam, and God wants no part of them. So much of human religiosity comes down to a hoax we try to perpetrate on God.”

Yes, this must indeed be a shock to hear these words in the middle of a Holy Day fast. As a Christian, it makes me reflect on how much of my tradition’s rituals easily can blind me to my own failings of justice.

As Jesus warned in the Gospel of Matthew: “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’” (Matthew 25:42-45)

Last week, we read the Insight from my colleague, Allison Egrin, about the joys of



The shofar is traditionally blown at the end of the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. *Getty Images*

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the challenges to reflection and forgiveness during Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. I am also reminded of the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi in the United Kingdom. He describes Yom Kippur as the time to look back, pray, repent and seek to change. It is the time we ask the deepest questions about our lives: Who are we? How shall we live?

Sacks writes regarding this holy day: “This was one of Judaism’s greatest gifts to Western civilization. ... It is also God’s call to us on Yom Kippur. This is the time when we ask ourselves where have we gone wrong? Where have we failed? When we tell ourselves the answer ... we need the courage to change. If we believe we can’t, we won’t. If we believe we can, we may.”

It is a good time in the religious calendar to reflect that we do not exist alone and we have responsibilities for others. As individuals, as well as our nation and culture, we often find it too easy to blame others rather than examine our own failings. We easily overlook the needs around us as well as the suffering in the world. We get caught up in the divisiveness of difference rather than seeing the value in the diversity around us. We forget that other Hebrew prophet who also asked, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

We have the power to change our ways. It is our ability to make a decision, to decide to act differently — that is critical to the concept of repentance. Our religious traditions remind us that we have the opportunity to choose, to repent, to live a better life.

In this season of Yom Kippur, no matter what our religious tradition, let us take time to examine our lives, repent, seek justice and then act in ways we know to be right.

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