

Jewish Literacy – What Do You Need To Know?
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The United States is one of the most religious countries in the world. It is also a nation of appalling religious illiteracy. While nearly two-thirds of Americans endorse the teaching of creationism in our public schools, fewer than half can identify the Book of Genesis. About the same proportion of Americans attribute the words “Let there be light” to Thomas Edison.

Two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible is God’s word and holds the answers to life’s most basic questions, yet only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels in the New Testament. Ten percent of Americans believe that Joan of Ark was Noah’s wife.

Over the summer I read an intriguing book entitled *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn’t*. In it, Stephen Prothero, who chairs the Religion Department at Boston University, bemoans the lack of basic knowledge about religion among Americans. We may be a deeply religious nation, but one where “faith without understanding is the standard” and “religious ignorance is bliss.”

Prothero considers such religious illiteracy dangerous, “because religion is one of the most volatile components of culture and has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in the world, [also] one of the greatest forces for evil.” Politicians and pundits continue to cast public policy arguments in religious language, with meanings missed or misinterpreted by the vast majority of Americans. According to Prothero “we have a major civic problem on our hands.” Prothero’s remedy is teaching religion in the public schools – religion as an academic discipline, without endorsement or preaching. Along with reading, writing and arithmetic, religion would become the “Fourth R” of American education.

He proposes a course on Introduction to the Bible as literature and a basic course on Comparative or World Religions for all high schools. The question, of course, is how and by whom would such courses be taught and, given the failure of so many schools to teach even the basics of American history and civics, how to find teachers who would qualify to elucidate and distinguish the subtleties of biblical arguments on any given moral or doctrinal issue.

It would constitute a true religious miracle to get Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Protestant scholars, along with religious and secular parents, to agree on a viable curriculum. And what about the role of other minority religious communities, from Mormons to Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs.

Yet, Prothero is right. We cannot graduate and send into our increasingly religiously diverse world Americans who are ignorant or misinformed about one of the most important forces shaping American and international relationships. Our country has

sent diplomats to Arab countries who are hardly aware of the differences between Sunni and Shia forms of Islam.

Prothero dates the long decline in American religious literacy from the Second Great Awakening of the early 19th C. when a wave of evangelical revivalism swept the country. Revival was rooted in the experience of a personal relationship with God rather than in knowledge of religious doctrine and theology. (A similar development took place within Judaism with the birth of Hasidism in Eastern Europe during the late 18th and early 19th C. The Hasidic emphasis was on spiritual awakening and mystical experience rather than on learning and knowledge; it addressed the heart rather than the mind).

Along with such a spiritual awakening in America, there came a strong anti-intellectual trend that one can still find in many evangelical, born again expressions of Christianity and is often unabashedly professed by some of our most visible political leaders.

The 20th C. decline in religious literacy is a result of changes in both religion and society. The blessings of American democracy and pluralism have required a tolerance of faiths for the purposes of getting along, an emphasis on religious similarities rather than distinctions. The very American notion of a Judeo-Christian tradition submerges the significant differences between Judaism and Christianity under the happy hyphen of equality and cooperation. Today, of course, we need to talk about a Judeo-Christian-Muslim nation, and the list keeps growing.

What worries me as a Jew is that we too have accepted this approach. In the name of universalism we are happy to reduce religion to a minimum common denominator and buy into the notion that religion is all about “faith” and “spirituality”, terms that are devoid of content. Our Judaism is diluted either into a simple notion of monotheism (belief in one God), or emphasis on rituals and practices, whose origins and meanings are hardly understood by the majority of Jews who claim to observe them.

Regrettably, very little of American Judaism is based on a thoughtful, informed, reflective approach. And while a new generation wants to learn and engage more, Judaism is still primarily “a good feeling” we get from coming together for weddings, B’nai Mitzvah, Brises and namings; or the nostalgia and comfort we garner from saying Kaddish at a graveside and at Yizkor on Yom Kippur. American Judaism is life-cycle Judaism, episodic Judaism for the extraordinary moments. It is not life informing and transforming Judaism. It takes us from pinnacle to pinnacle, but it hardly sustains and nurtures us during the journey.

One of the most common questions I get is: “Rabbi, what do “we” believe about such and such?” The answer presumes there is a Jewish collective “we” that uniformly believes the same way. My usual response is “what do you believe? Here are some ways in which Judaism has responded to this question. What do you think?”

Judaism, unlike Christianity, is less a religion of correct doctrine and belief and more a religion of communal practices and behavior. That does not mean that anything goes in Judaism when it comes to matters of belief. And that is where being an engaged

and learning Jew becomes relevant. Notice, I did not say being a “learned” Jew; I said a “learning” Jew, for in Judaism intellectual and spiritual growth are ongoing and go hand in hand. The ancient rabbis said, *Lo am Ha’aretz hasid*, “The ignorant cannot be pious.” The Book of Proverbs reminds us: “Zeal without knowledge is not good.” (Prov. 19:2) This is in contrast to the dominant ethos of revivalist faith where intellect is the enemy and blind certainty is preferred to questions and doubt.

Early in his book, Prothero includes a “Religious Literacy Quiz.” He poses 15 questions that he presumes any educated American should know about Christianity and other world religions. Here are some:

- List the Ten Commandments
- Name the Four Gospels
- Name a sacred text of Hinduism
- What is Ramadan? In what religion is it observed?
- Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.
- What are the two religious clauses of the First Amendment?
- “God helps those who help themselves.” Where in the Bible is this?

Other than to tell you that the last quote is not in the Bible – it was an aphorism of Ben Franklin – I will not answer the rest of the questions. I encourage you to read the book. But I wondered, what would be 15 questions about Judaism that an informed American Jew should be able to answer? Well, get 15 rabbis and you’ll have 16 different lists.

So, I went through my bookshelves and found scores of books that teach the basics of Judaism, several of which I have used successfully in Adult Education courses. There is Joseph Telushkin’s, encyclopedic *Jewish Literacy*. I have a book called *Essential Judaism*; another titled *Down to Earth Judaism*. I also have *Judaism for Dummies*. I have Jacob Neussner’s, *Judaism: The Basics*. And then there is *Basic Judaism*, which albeit somewhat dated (1947), remains one of the most succinct and beautiful introductions to Judaism, written by Beth-El Zedeck’s own first rabbi, Milton Steinberg. Since this year we mark the 80th anniversary of our congregation’s founding under the leadership of Rabbi Steinberg, I thought I’d look into that book to see what our first Rabbi would have us know about Judaism. Rabbi Steinberg intended his book for three groups of people:

First, it is addressed to believing Jews in the hope that “finding it a lucid and ordered formulation of their faith, they may be encouraged to live [it] more consistently and forthrightly.”

Secondly, it is directed to indifferent Jews who, “whether in response to pressures from without or voids within, are groping to establish rapport with the Jewish Tradition, standing at the synagogue’s doors “heart in, head out.”

Lastly, the book is designed for non-Jews “who happen to be curious about Judaism. The Christian in quest of an objective understanding of the Jewish religion....”

Early in the book Steinberg, defines the essence of Judaism as “love of God and love of fellow human being”. This, he says, is Judaism’s “postulate and final inference, the point of departure and its destination, the root and its fruitage.” But then, he adds, all truth, all ideals, “strive for embodiment...” Just as “Democracy requires translation into concrete instructions and practices” Judaism is more than its core doctrine. Like Hillel of old, he ends the chapter “*Zil G’mor*, go forth and learn.”

So this year, I urge you, “*Zil G’mor* – come learn”. Be part of the rich adult education program we have in store for you, beginning with a weekly Sunday morning video series and discussion entitled “Your Place in the Story”. With Abba Eban as our narrator, join me in a meaningful conversation on the events, people and ideas that shaped Jewish history. In the spring, join Sandy in an exploration of midrash as we seek to understand how the earliest rabbis interpreted and reimagined biblical narrative. Please take the time to review your Adult Education brochure mailed recently for the many exciting programs and learning opportunities in the Alan and Linda Cohen Center for Jewish Learning and Living, including our “Cinema at the Cine-gogue!”, an evening festival of Jewish films coming up on October 10th (for which we are grateful to Peter Weisz). Or you may wish to enroll in our Feigenbaum Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah program with the Cantor, whether or not you celebrated your Bar/Bat Mitzvah at thirteen and would like to renew your skills.

As we enter the New Year; here are some basic questions about Judaism I offer for you to ponder:

1. Name the three parts of the Hebrew Bible. What acronym do they spell?
2. When did the biblical exodus take place?
3. Which two ancient holidays are not mentioned in the Torah? Which is not mentioned in the Bible?
4. Which is the last Book of the Bible in terms of its arrangement?
Chronologically?
5. Explain the terms: Mishna; Talmud; Midrash; Zohar; Shulhan Arukh. Which of these titillates Madonna?
6. Who was the most influential Jew of the First Century?
7. What does the word kosher mean? Are grasshoppers kosher?
8. The author of the *Guide for the Perplexed* was excommunicated in his own generation. He later would become the bastion of Orthodoxy. Who was he? What famous Christian and Muslim military leaders did he serve as physician?
9. Explain the origins of the terms Sephardic and Ashkenazi. To which of these groups do Yemenite Jews belong?
10. Who was the grandfather of musician Felix Mendelssohn and how did he help shape Jewish modernity?
11. Which modern American Jewish religious denomination got started because of a shrimp cocktail? When? Where?
12. Who was the Turkish Jew who proclaimed himself the Messiah and ended up converting to Islam?
13. What famous Jewish theologian was among the earliest proponents of the Jewish Community Center idea?

14. With what modern Jewish ideology are Theodore Herzl and Ahad Ha'am connected?
15. Who are: Ehud Ohlmert; Tzipi Livni; Mahmoud Abbas; Ismayil Hanniye?

And a final question about Hebrew, the historic language of our religious civilization. We may not all be speakers of the language but do we recognize and can we use in bilingual conversation some of its basic values vocabulary – words like: *tzedaka*, *mitzvah*, *d'var torah*, *halakhah*, *yom tov*, *siddur*, *mahzor*, *emet*, *t'shuvah*, *g'milut hasadim*, *b'rakhah*....

It is not necessary to know the answers to these questions to be part of general American society, except for one, perhaps, “Who was the most influential Jew of the first century?” (Answer: Jesus of Nazareth for general western history; or Yohanan ben Zakkai, whose insight and teachings assured the continuity of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple). But, knowing about some of these questions, or at least resonating to their vocabulary, and most importantly, wanting to know more about them is, I think, an important component of being a learning, engaged and caring member of the Jewish community.

Despite the fact that a number of Yiddish terms have entered American English (from *hutzpah* and *kvetch* to *schlepp* and *schlemiel*) the messages of American civic and pop culture and the vocabulary and seasonal rhythms of Christian folk traditions saturate the environment and media about us. But the messages of Jewish culture and faith are neither so overt nor subliminal. We need to pursue them, to create them. Forget about being the “chosen people”. To be a Jew is to be a “choosing people”: to exercise options, to establish priorities, to make the effort and set aside the time.

Jewish learning is too important and interesting, too intimately tied to our personal growth and communal future, to relegate only to the kids. If we are simply content that our children get a Jewish education, if we are happy just to drop them off at Sunday School or Hebrew school or even Day School, for the synagogue or the rabbis and teachers to interest and induct them into Judaism, if Jewish learning stops for all practical purposes at Bar/t Mitzvah age or Confirmation, then we will end up with a pediatric or adolescent Judaism, a level we would not tolerate in any other facet of learning and experience in our personal or communal lives.

As we make our New Year resolutions, let us resolve to make Judaism not merely our inheritance, a museum piece that we uphold and respect out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. The ancient rabbis warned: *Ein hatorah overet k'yerusha kol dor tzarikh lilmod otah mehadash* – “the Torah is not inherited as an heirloom; every generation needs to learn it anew from scratch! It is not enough to receive and conserve Judaism; to preserve Jewish nostalgia. Judaism requires that we own and transform and transmit it; that we create new experiences and provide fresh memories for a new generation that will in turn learn it, live it and care for it, because they know that we learned it, lived it and cared too.

On this season of *teshuva*, of change, of new beginnings and renewal, I ask you to renew your commitment to Jewish learning, our history, our ideas, our faith, our heritage,

our challenges, our successes. Let this not be a year when we simply pay our respects and nod to Judaism. Let it be a year of engagement, a year when we put Jewish celebration and learning into our calendar. Much is at stake. The entries you make may be an appointment with destiny.

As Hillel said: *Zil G'mor* – let us go learn... and live....

How many Jews does it take to turn the light bulb of learning? Just one. You! It may be the brightest turn you take.