

Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, taught us something both profound and unsettling: "Judaism is what Jews do." What did he mean? That Judaism is always changing as Jews themselves change their attitudes and behaviors. As much as we might like to think we know what is most valuable and enduring in our tradition, we actually have no way of controlling or predicting what Judaism will become. If most Jews do something, it becomes Jewish.

This is how synagogues became central to Jewish life after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. This is how prayer replaced animal offerings. It's how biblical food rules—which only prohibited eating certain animals—evolved into the complex rabbinic system of kashrut, with its separation of meat and milk and detailed rules about slaughter. And it's how women became full synagogue members and eventually rabbis.

What Jews do has changed dramatically in recent centuries. We have integrated ourselves as citizens into the societies where we live. We have grappled with the destruction of a third of our global population during the Holocaust. We have experienced state power for the first time in over two thousand years with the establishment of the State of Israel. And we have opened full community participation and leadership to women.

Each of these changes would be transformative on its own. Together, they have led us into entirely new ways of understanding Jewish life. Some Jews experience these changes as a great loss—an abandonment of our tradition's foundational practices and principles. The old familiar ways are disappearing, and it's unclear what's coming next. Other Jews have found freedom and possibility in the openings created by the breaking apart of old forms.

Last night I spoke about how the Hebrew word for crisis, *mashber*, comes from a root meaning "to shatter or break" and was originally the word for a birthing stool. This connection between breaking and birthing helps us see emerging Jewish traditions in a positive light. Our world may seem broken, but as Leonard Cohen—that great Jewish sage—observed, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

This morning I want to share my thoughts about the light entering Jewish life. We live in what some scholars call the Third Era of Judaism—the first two being the biblical era and the rabbinic era. I think of it as "Interim Judaism" because we are only a few hundred years into this stage, and there's an unsettled quality to our mix of old rabbinic forms and new ones still emerging.

The grand project of rabbinic Judaism was to create a comprehensive code of Jewish behavior from the Torah's rules. The idea that God gave the Jews 613 mitzvot—commandments—became the framework for this enterprise. Yet the Torah itself never specified how many commandments exist or categorized them in any way. If you read the Torah, you'll find it completely silent on significant details of Jewish observance, such as what it means to "work" on the Sabbath. The rabbis provided these details and created others, based on what they understood to be the text's underlying principles.

For centuries, this system provided structure and meaning. But Jewish communities across the globe interpreted these obligations differently, and we don't really know how much they were actually observed. One possibility is that traditional Judaism functioned much like Sephardic communities do today, where public communal practice follows rabbinic codes of Jewish law, but what happens privately in people's homes varies widely.

Two hundred years ago, the founders of Reform Judaism questioned the rabbinic system, arguing that not all mitzvot were equally valid or binding. They emphasized individual choice over comprehensive obligation, believing that Judaism's essence was ethical monotheism—a system of values rather than specific ritual behaviors. They thought that in earlier times, less sophisticated people needed ritual rules to preserve the moral tradition. But in their more "enlightened" time, this outer shell of ritual was no longer necessary to preserve the seed of ethical behavior.

We now take for granted the idea that if a tradition conflicts with what we believe to be important Jewish values, we are free—or even obliged—to reject it. One example is the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people as equal members of our communities. While there are numerous arguments about whether biblical texts prohibit male homosexuality, queer identities of all sorts were historically suppressed and marginalized in Jewish communities. For the vast majority of the world's Jews, those attitudes and behaviors are no longer acceptable—not because the rabbinic framework has changed, but because it no longer aligns with our understanding of what is central to being Jewish.

Today, for most Jews, the system of mitzvot is no longer our framework. It has been replaced by foundational values—a return to Torah principles, but from a modern perspective. While there is not yet—and perhaps never will be—a code of Jewish ethics comparable to the rabbis' code of Jewish law, there is widespread agreement among Reform and other liberal Jewish movements about foundational values. Perhaps chief among them is the understanding, taught in Genesis's first chapter, that every human being is created in the image of God.

One formulation of key values has been developed by Keshet, an organization working for the full equality of LGBTQ+ Jews and their families in Jewish life. In addition to the teaching from Genesis, their list includes the principles of: respect; peace in the home; communal responsibility; guarding one's use of language; loving your neighbor as yourself; and solidarity.

One reason for this shift from commandments to values is our changing understanding of to whom we owe our obligations. Our experience as contemporary American Jews makes it difficult for many of us to find value—let alone credibility—in the idea of being commanded by a king in the sky. It makes more sense to follow traditions out of solidarity with our families, our communities, and our history.

This transformation extends to our spiritual practices. Many Jews have become disconnected from traditional prayer. Some are content to recite Hebrew they don't understand as a kind of mantra. Others participate out of nostalgia. But that's not what prayer is meant to be. As Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision."

The effort to develop liturgy that allows us to encounter the sacred in this revolutionary way has frequently made use of song and poetry rather than biblical and rabbinic texts. Our High Holiday prayerbooks reflect this mix, including modern readings alongside traditional prayers.

Historically, Judaism emphasized God's transcendent nature. As the rabbis taught, the universe is not the place of God; God is the place of the universe: God is larger than and beyond creation. In the Bible and rabbinic tradition, God is apart from creation and very much in control

of what happens to us. For that reason, our ancestors explained collective suffering—the Babylonian exile, the Temple's destruction—as punishment for abandoning God.

For the vast majority of Jews, that traditional explanation is no longer acceptable after the Holocaust. The idea of a transcendent God in control feels like cruel victim-blaming or portrays God as sadistic. We are still too close to those events to reconsider, let alone reclaim, belief in God as transcendent.

Where contemporary Jews are developing new spiritual practices, they are increasingly rooted in mysticism. We can more easily relate to encountering the sacred within our lives than believing in a God over and above us. Jewish mysticism emphasizes direct personal experience of the sacred—whether collectively through experiences of joy, dance, and song, or individually through meditation and encounters with nature that evoke awe.

This has led contemporary Jews to explore various mystical traditions: medieval mysticism, which taught that sparks of holiness exist throughout creation and we have the task of seeking them out through *tikkun olam*—world repair; early Hasidism, which emphasized joy and the Torah found in nature; and contemporary thinkers like Heschel, who taught, “[Hu]mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation... What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.”¹

As we gather here on Rosh Hashanah, at the beginning of a new year, we find ourselves in this interim space—no longer fully rooted in the rabbinic framework, not yet arrived at whatever comes next. This can feel unsettling, even frightening. Where are the clear guidelines? The certainties? The comfort of well-worn paths?

¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*

But perhaps this interim period is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be embraced. In this space between what was and what will be, we have unprecedented freedom to discover what Judaism can become. We are not bound by rigid interpretations of the past, nor limited by fear of an uncertain future.

This Rosh Hashanah, let us approach our tradition with both reverence for its wisdom and courage to adapt it for our time. Let us seek those sparks of holiness in our daily lives—in acts of justice, moments of wonder, experiences of community, and encounters with the sacred that speak to our souls.

The shofar calls us not back to an idealized past, but forward into possibility. It calls us to be fully present in this interim moment, to take responsibility for what Judaism will become, and to trust that in doing so authentically and thoughtfully, we honor both our ancestors and our descendants.

May this new year bring us the wisdom to navigate uncertainty with grace, the courage to create new paths when old ones no longer serve, and the understanding that in seeking holiness wherever we find it, we continue the eternal Jewish journey toward meaning, justice, and hope.

Shanah tovah u'metukah—may it be a good and sweet year.