

OVED BEN AHARON, EX-JEW, USA (PART 1 OF 4)

Rating: 5.0

Description: 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and their Tradition, and in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, finally leads Oved to Islam. Part 1: A truthful evaluation of the "exiled" Jewish community.

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Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon) comments in Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) that we should "pause and stop" at that which appears doubtful. At various times of my life I have paused to consider the truthfulness or accuracy of my Jewish faith and tradition. But for the last 15 years especially I have been pausing and reevaluating Judaism and the status of Klal Yisrael (the entire congregation of Israel). The duration of our current exile, the Roman exile, has now surpassed by five times the duration of our exile in Egypt. The vast majority of Israeli citizens in our "Jewish" homeland are militant atheists. A survey of Israeli Jews asking whether they believe in the coming of Moshiach and the building of the Third Temple reveals the answer to be an apathetic NO. All of these things are fixable, but I bring it up for the purpose of showing that something is wrong, sincerely asking all of you to pause and consider with an open mind what has happened within our community.

When moving to a new community or when the community receives a new family, the very first three questions are the following: " 1. What do you do? 2. Do you keep kosher, and if so how strictly, and does strictly include not eating out or just strictly in your home? 3. Are you Shomer Shabbos (Sabbath Observant)?" The questions themselves aren't the problem, but the cultural changes underlying these questions is disturbing. Why don't we ask the following: "1. Do you believe in one God and recite the Shema daily? 2. Do you pray 3 times a day, and if not do you need help learning how to pray?" Why is it that congregants are categorized by occupation and Sabbath adherence as opposed to worship of the One True God via the duty of prayer?

For years I have had conversations with friends about God being replaced in Judaism, more accurately God being replaced by Judaism. If you have any doubts simply pay closer attention to the conversations at your Sabbath Table and the newspaper articles during Rosh Hashana and Passover. These newspaper editions over the last few years have highlighted architecture and recipes, and two of the articles contributed by my local rabbis failed to mention God entirely until the very end, "God give you a sweet new year." During the period of time when we are supposed to be drawing close to God and renewing our commitment, we are delving into recipes to impress. When I attended a

learning activity offered by an international Chassidic organization's adult education platform, the questions at the end of units included, "What does the Torah want you to do in this situation?" My reaction is that the Torah doesn't want me to do anything, as it is parchment and has no emotions, but God wants me to do something. Why has God been replaced, and how long ago did this happen in our Tradition? Why is it that when the Temple stood the entire community understood the grave sin it was to use honey on sacrifices or include honey with ritual feasts--recall the Talmud section on the incense mixture included in the Siddur for Sabbath prayers, the recitation of which makes clear that the use of honey in the incense mixture invalidated the incense. Why so serious? It was serious because the use of honey was popular with idolatrous offerings, and we did not use honey in order to distance ourselves from idolatry and reverting back to forbidden practices. Rambam explains that idolaters chose sweet things for their sacrifices, which they seasoned with honey; in contrast salt is never mentioned among their sacrifices, and accordingly our Law requires salt with every sacrifice (see Lev. 2.13). Yet today, from Rosh Hashanah through Sukkot we drown our Challah Bread and apples with honey, and the Jewish community is more alert to this ritual addition (albeit inappropriate and with no Torah or Talmudic foundation) than it is to the requirement of wording changes in the recitation of Kaddish and the changes in the daily prayers. In other words, honey is more popular and holds a greater emphasis than God being approached as Melekh (King).

I believe the problem is that Judaism had to reinvent itself after the destruction of the Second Temple if not earlier. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai escaped the Roman carnage and went to Yavne, and there fashioned together what has become Rabbinic Judaism today—prayer services without the Temple sacrifices, references made within prayer of what should but can't be done, and Festivals and Day of Atonement with no High Priest reciting the Name of God. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai created a system of daily observance and maintenance, not dependent on the Temple or pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which would get us by until the end of exile, which he himself believed to be imminent (see Berakot 28b, with his approaching death he instructed his students to prepare a throne for Hezekiah, the King of Judah, who is coming). Ben Zakai had to emphasize external observance to approach God because the Divine Presence was gone, and the instructed method of approaching God (ritual sacrifice) was gone. Educated Jews know that the Divine Presence (Shechinah) wasn't actually in the Second Temple either (as the Aron Kodesh, Ark of the Covenant, was lost when the First Temple was destroyed), so the system established by ben Zakai was at that time two steps removed from truly approaching the Divine.

It should be noted that ben Zakai's actions in Yavne were questionable as he adorned his school there as the new Sanhedrin in a unilateral shift of power in order to make decisions after the destruction of Jerusalem. In this light, Rabbinical Judaism is the child of an illegitimate institution (Mamzer Judaism?). In terms of approaching the Divine and Holy place today, I recall going to the Western Wall with my yeshiva friend Naftali. He told me that he didn't feel anything at the Wall, that he was jealous of the old men in beards crying, that he wanted to have that experience. I explained to him that they felt the same as him, nothing, which is probably why they were crying. We are crying because we feel nothing, are in exile, and the Divine Presence is gone. This is

our excuse for a lot of community shortcomings—we are in exile.

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