

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bereshit
October 17, 2020 * Tishrei 29th, 5781**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Breishit in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3137/jewish/Bereishit-in-a-Nutshell.htm

God creates the world in six days. On the first day He makes darkness and light. On the second day He forms the heavens, dividing the “upper waters” from the “lower waters.” On the third day He sets the boundaries of land and sea, and calls forth trees and greenery from the earth. On the fourth day He fixes the position of the sun, moon and stars as timekeepers and illuminators of the earth. Fish, birds and reptiles are created on the fifth day; land animals, and then the human being, on the sixth. G-d ceases work on the seventh day, and sanctifies it as a day of rest.

G-d forms the human body from the dust of the earth, and blows into his nostrils a “living soul.” Originally Man is a single person, but deciding that “it is not good that man be alone,” G-d takes a “side” from the man, forms it into a woman, and marries them to each other. Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden, and commanded not to eat from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The serpent persuades Eve to violate the command, and she shares the forbidden fruit with her husband. Because of their sin, it is decreed that man will experience death, returning to the soil from which he was formed, and that all gain will come only through struggle and hardship. Man is banished from the Garden.

Eve gives birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain quarrels with Abel and murders him, and becomes a rootless wanderer. A third son, Seth, is born to Adam; Seth’s eighth-generation descendant, Noah, is the only righteous man in a corrupt world.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/573554/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The haftarah of this week's reading opens with a statement by "the Almighty G-d, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who laid out the earth and made grow from it." This echoes the Torah portion's recounting of the creation of the world in six days.

G-d speaks to the prophet Isaiah, reminding him of his life's purpose and duty, namely that of arousing the Jewish people to return to being a light unto the nations, "To open blind eyes, to bring prisoners out of a dungeon; those who sit in darkness out of a prison."

The prophecy continues with a discussion regarding the Final Redemption, and the song that all of creation will sing to G-d on that day. G-d promises to punish all the nations that have persecuted Israel while they were exiled. The prophet also rebukes Israel for their errant ways, but assures them that they will return to the correct path and will be redeemed. (*all nutshells borrowed from chabad.org*)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Taking Responsibility (Bereishit) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/bereishit-5781/>

If leadership is the solution, what is the problem? On this, the Torah could not be more

specific. The problem is a failure of responsibility.

The early chapters of Genesis focus on two stories: the first is Adam and Eve; the second, Cain and Abel. Both are about a specific kind of failure. First Adam and Eve. As we know, they sin. Embarrassed and ashamed, they hide, only to discover that one cannot hide from God:

The Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:9-12)

Both insist that it was not their fault. Adam blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. The result is paradise lost: they are both punished and exiled from the garden of Eden. Why? Because Adam and Eve deny personal responsibility. They say, in effect, “It wasn’t me.”

The second story is tragic. The first instance of sibling rivalry in the Torah leads to the first murder:

While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” (Gen. 4:8-10)

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, “It was not me,” or “It was not my fault.” He denies moral responsibility. In effect he asks why he should be concerned with the welfare of anyone but himself. Why should we not do what we want if we have the power to do it? In Plato’s Republic, Glaucon argues that justice is whatever is in the interest of the stronger party. Might makes right. If life is a Darwinian struggle to survive, why should we restrain ourselves for the sake of others if we are more powerful than they are? If there is no morality in nature, then I am responsible only to myself. That is the voice of Cain throughout the ages.

These two stories are not just stories. They are an account, at the beginning of the Torah’s narrative history of humankind, of a failure, first personal then moral, to take responsibility – and it is this for which leadership is the answer.

There is a fascinating phrase in the story of Moses’ early years. He grows up, goes out to his people, the Israelites, and sees them suffering, doing slave labour. He witnesses an Egyptian officer beating one of them. The text then says: “He looked this way and that and saw no one” (vayar ki ein ish Ex. 2:12, or more literally, ‘he saw that there was no man’).

It is difficult to read this literally. A building site is not a closed location. There must have been many people present. A mere two verses later we discover that there were Israelites who knew exactly what had happened. Therefore, the phrase almost certainly means, “He looked this way and that and saw that there was no one else willing to intervene.”

If this is so, then we have here the first instance of what came to be known as the “Genovese syndrome” or “the bystander effect,”[1] so-called after a case in which a woman was attacked in New York in the presence of a large number of people who all knew that she was being assaulted but failed to come to her rescue.

Social scientists have undertaken many experiments to try to determine what happens in situations like this. Some argue that the presence of other bystanders affects an individual’s interpretation of what is happening. Since no one else is coming to the rescue, they conclude that what is happening is not an emergency.

Others, though, argue that the key factor is diffusion of responsibility. People assume that since there are many people present someone else will step forward and act. That seems to be the correct interpretation of what was happening in the case of Moses. No one else was prepared to come to the rescue. Who, in any case, was likely to do so? The Egyptians were slave-masters. Why should they bother to take a risk to save an Israelite? And the Israelites were slaves. How could they come to the aid of one of their fellows when, by doing so, they would put their own life at risk?

It took a Moses to act. But that is what makes a leader. A leader is one who takes responsibility. Leadership is born when we become active not passive, when we do not wait for someone else to act because perhaps there is no one else – at least not here, not now. When bad things happen, some avert their eyes. Some wait for others to act. Some blame others for failing to act. Some simply complain. But there are some people who say, “If something is wrong let me try to put it right.” They are the leaders. They are the ones who make a difference in their lifetimes. They are the ones who make ours a better world. Many of the great religions and civilisations are based on acceptance. If there is violence, suffering, poverty and pain in the world, they accept that this is simply the way of the world. Or, the will of God. Or, that it is the nature of nature itself. They shrug their shoulders, for all will be well in the World to Come.

Judaism was and remains the world’s great religion of protest. The heroes of faith did not accept; they protested. They were willing to confront God Himself. Abraham said, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:25). Moses said, “Why have You done evil to this people?” (Ex. 5:22). Jeremiah said, “Why are the wicked at ease?” (Jer. 12:1). That is how God wants us to respond. Judaism is God’s call to human responsibility. The highest achievement is to become God’s partner in the work of creation.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God called out “Where are you?” As Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointed out, this call was not directed only to the first humans.[2] It echoes in every generation. God gave us freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility. God teaches us what we ought to do but He does not do it for us. With rare exceptions, God does not intervene in history. He acts through us, not to us. His is the voice that tells us, as He told Cain, that we can resist the evil within us as well as the evil that surrounds us.

The responsible life is a life that responds. The Hebrew for responsibility, *achrayut*, comes from the word *acher*, meaning “other.” Our great Other is God Himself, calling us to use the

freedom He gave us, to make the world that is more like the world that ought to be. The great question, the question that the life we lead answers, is: which voice will we listen to? Will we heed the voice of desire, as in the case of Adam and Eve? Will we listen to the voice of anger, as in the case of Cain? Or will we follow the voice of God calling on us to make this a more just and gracious world? [1] For a discussion, see

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Kitty_Genovese. [2] Noted in Nissan Mindel, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, A Biography (New York: Kehot Publication Society, 1969).

Beginning, Rebuilding by Daniel Nevins

<http://www.jtsa.edu/beginning-rebuilding>

Like millions of American children in the 1970s, I tuned in weekly to ABC's Wide World of Sports. The opening sequence showed skiers gracefully racing down a mountain, and then spectacularly wiping out while the narrator promised viewers "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Something tragic and true was contained in this message. The possibility of calamity makes moments of triumph precious and worth pursuing.

The same narrative device is employed by the Torah. Dazzling victories are paired with ignominious defeats. Consider, for example, three victorious moments in the Torah: The dedication of the Tabernacle; the declaration by Israel at Sinai that they will "heed and hear" God's teaching; and God's proclamation at the end of Creation that all of it was "very good." Each moment completes an arduous process, signaling blessing and joy. Yet the Torah barely allows one to celebrate before delivering a devastating narrative twist. What does this say about the nature of victory, and what can it teach us about resilience in a pandemic? The end of Exodus and the beginning of Leviticus describe the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings, and then details of the sacred service. Finally, when all is ready, Moses instructs his brother and nephews to begin an eight-day vigil, after which God's glory will appear. Aaron and sons offer their sacrifices, Moses and Aaron enter the Tabernacle and then emerge to bless the people, summoning the divine glory (Lev. 9:23).

The Talmud states that the dedication of the Tabernacle was the greatest joy for God since the creation of the world (BT Megillah 10b). It was a labor of love, generosity, skill, and devotion. The Tabernacle project engaged the people of Israel as creators and allowed the divine presence to dwell in the center of their camp. And yet barely have the altar embers extinguished than calamity strikes. Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu offer "strange fire" and are struck dead by a fire from God (Lev. 10:1-2). The transition from joy to sorrow is lightning fast.

Now scroll back to Exodus 24, following the theophany at Sinai. Moses dedicates a different altar and reads the "book of covenant" to the people, after which they proclaim, "all that has been spoken by the Lord we shall heed and hear" (Exod. 24:7). In other words, they pledge obedience to God, but also something more—to study the teachings that they have committed to keep.

This double promise is central to Jewish spirituality. When the people make this statement, they signal trust in God and in their teacher Moses. They also indicate their intention to live

in partnership with the Divine, not as unquestioning servants, but as students and teachers with their own insights to add to the ever-flowing well of Torah. What a spiritual triumph for Israel and for God!

The Talmud says that when the people made this double promise, ministering angels came from heaven and adorned each Israelite with two crowns. And yet, this victory was short-lived. Moses returned to the summit of Sinai, and the insecure people turned to worship the golden calf. This time twice as many attacking angels descended and ripped the crowns from their heads (BT Shabbat 88a).

Examples of this spiritual contrast between victory and defeat abound, but none is as prominent as the very first. In Genesis 1:31, God is pleased with the creation, declaring it to be “very good.” But by the end of the first Torah portion—after the sin of Adam and Eve, Cain’s murder of Abel, and the mysterious incident with the Nephilim—God bitterly regrets creating humanity, which is “evil all day” (Gen. 6:5–6). The Creator’s joy turns suddenly to sorrow.

A puzzling midrash plays on the first proclamation that the creation was “very good” (tov me’od). Rabbi Meir had a Torah scroll which added a shocking alternative: “Death is good” (tov mavet). The Sages add that God initially intended for humans to be immortal, but, anticipating that they would then see themselves as divine, decided that mortality was for the best (Genesis Rabbah 9:5).

Victory without the likelihood of failure feels inevitable and thus cheap. Life without death would lack limits and humility. The fleeting nature of triumph makes it more precious. It also intimates that the converse is true—that moments of sorrow and defeat may give way to new accomplishments and celebrations.

The past year has been rife with sorrow, with more than one million people killed by the novel coronavirus and nearly every aspect of life disrupted. Even in our sorrow, however, we are gaining new skills and purpose. As we return to the beginning of Torah, we also return to rebuilding our Jewish community to flourish once more, crowned by our dual commitment of service and study in partnership with God. (Daniel Nevins I the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership)

[Bereshith 5781 by Rabbi Berel Wein](https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2332.html)

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This week's opening parsha of the Torah can be viewed as having bookends. There are two main characters in the story of humanity that are introduced to us. At the beginning of the parsha, the Torah tells us of the creation of Adam, the original human being, and the progenitor of all of us. Thus, the Torah records the tragedy of his life and he becomes, so to speak, the story of all human beings who are prone and susceptible to sin and temptation, who live on in regret and recrimination.

Even though Adam will live an exceptionally long life, almost a millennium, we are not told much about the rest of his life. According to midrashic tradition, Adam spent most of his life

in loneliness, isolation, sadness, and depression over his transgression, and this affected not only him, but all humanity as well.

Jewish tradition teaches us that there were 10 generations, over 1500 years, between Adam and the generation of Noah and the great flood. These generations sank further and further into the abyss of idolatry, paganism, immorality, robbery, tyranny, and brutality. Adam, who certainly was aware of what was happening, apparently was of no influence on these generations.

Instead of being an exemplary influence and a leader, he seemingly withdrew into his own isolation and sadness. We can certainly sympathize and even empathize with his behavior, but his non-actions do not, in any way, aid the cause of humanity, nor its spiritual and emotional development and growth.

At the conclusion of the parsha, we are introduced to Noah, who will be the central character in the drama of the Flood that we will read about in next week's Torah reading. We see a somewhat similar story with Noah as we saw with Adam. After surviving the flood and having the opportunity to build the world in a more positive fashion, he also fails the test, and loses influence on his children and succeeding generations.

He also lives an exceptionally long life, almost a millennium, but extraordinarily little is revealed to us about the rest of his days, or what other accomplishments, if any, he achieved. Noah, like Adam, remains an enigmatic figure, a reservoir of failed potential and human decline. We are taught there were, once again, 10 generations from Noah to Abraham and that these 10 generations – and Noah was alive for a great deal of them – simply sank back into the idolatry, paganism and immorality of the time of Adam. And, once again, Noah apparently was of little of any influence in being able to stem this tide of evil and brutality.

It is only once we reached the story of Abraham and Sarah that we find people who not only were pious in their own right, as Noah certainly was, but who also had an enormous influence upon their times and all later times, as well. And Abraham and Sarah are the example that is set before us. We all are people of influence, on our families, communities, and societies. We must see ourselves in that light, and behave accordingly, and reveal ourselves as examples and influence. That has been our mission from time immemorial and remains so until today.

What Does it Mean to Be Human? By Rabbi Michael Dolgin

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/what-does-it-mean-be-human>

Parashat B'reishit is both the first portion in the Torah and the foundation of our Jewish tradition. These chapters teach us how to find meaning in our days, not just what happened before they began. While the Torah is certainly not a history or science book, this parashah is our starting place to learn what Judaism has to say about the basic reality of the human experience. Science tells us how humans evolved, but not what it means or how it feels to be human.

What are the questions that animate our thoughts and challenge our assumptions? Here are two possibilities drawn from this portion.

Regardless of what religion one may practice, few stories are more familiar than Adam, Eve,

and the Garden of Eden. Its details are so colorful (forbidden fruit, a talking serpent, curses, the concept of clothing, etc.) that they continue to fire the human imagination thousands of years later. However, we can be so easily distracted by the trappings of the story that we might miss one of its most basic messages.

Meir Sternberg, professor of literature at Tel Aviv University, examines the two trees that are named in this text. In his book, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1987, page 46), he describes the significance of the “tree of knowledge of good and bad” (Gen 2:17) and the “tree of life” (Gen 3:22). They represent two basic issues in human life: our mortality and the limits of our knowledge. Many cultural and religious perspectives assert that wrestling with mortality defines the human experience. The Torah’s story of the birth of humanity focuses not only on our struggle with mortality, but also with the limits of what we can know.

Why do tragic events occur? How can we be agents of good and holiness, when we cannot fully know the consequences of our choices and actions? Our moral knowledge is limited and the multiplicity of questions to which we most desire answers are in the center of our proverbial garden.

We cannot turn away from the gap between the moral order we desire in our world and our often-painful reality. Like the Divine One, we are aware of the moral dimension of life, but that gift of moral awareness comes with a high price. We struggle with hearts filled with questions that have no clear answers, but we struggle together. In our shared quest, the burden of right and wrong is lessened.

Gender is another key topic in B’reishit. While many believe that the Creation story is centred on the story of one man and one woman, a close reading of the text reveals that it is significantly more nuanced. In B’reishit Rabba 24:7, Rabbi Akiva deemed the essence of Torah to be “Love your neighbor as yourself.” His colleague, Rabbi Ben Azzai, asserts that the essence of Torah is found in Gen 5:1-2:

“This is the written record of the human (adam) line from the day God created [adam] making [them] in the likeness of God, creating them male and female, blessing them, and naming them [adam] on the day they were created.”

Staying true to the original Hebrew, we see that Adam is entirely human, while being neither uniquely male nor female. The pronouns in these verses are quite intentionally inconsistent; our Torah merges differently gendered forms with singular and plural all at once, echoing Gen 1:26: “And God said, “Let us make [adam] in our image, after our likeness...” This declaration’s plurality is usually explained as reflecting a sense of majesty or a consultation with the divine angelic host, but I prefer a more direct interpretation: Only God is one.

This Divine unity is reflected in a diverse human plurality – gender, race, culture, ability, etc. The human image is ours; it belongs to all, and by our very Divine creation, we have the right to self-definition. The Hebrew first-person tense knows no gender, which allows each of us to find and affirm a unique identity, a personal singular expression of the Divine image and likeness.

We are all children of God. No matter how we identify or which moral questions occupy our thoughts, we each express the image of God through the powerful human act of self-definition. (Rabbi Michael Dolgin has served Temple Sinai Congregation of Toronto since 1992. He is proud to have fostered a culture of innovation and tradition during his decades as senior rabbi. Rabbi Dolgin has worked with his professional colleagues to create a new, cultural approach to prayer and spirituality, bringing into the synagogue many forms previously found only in the theatre.)

The Legacy of the Tree of All Knowledge by Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/legacy-tree-all-knowledge>

One Yom Kippur, a rabbi was warning his congregation about the fragility of life.

“One day everyone in this congregation is going to die,” he thundered from the bimah.

Seated in the front row was an elderly woman who laughed out loud when she heard this.

Irritated, the rabbi said, “What’s so funny?”

“Well!” she said, “I’m not a member of this congregation.”

Membership and affiliation aside, the most important lesson we learn in life is that one day it will end: one day we are going to die. That is the great lesson and gift of this

week’s parashah, B’reishit with its iconic tale of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Amidst all the lush greenery, flowing rivers, and natural beauty of the garden, at its center stood two trees. All of the trees and their fruits were permitted to human beings as food, except for the Tree of All Knowledge and the Tree of Life. We read:

God Eternal then commanded the man, saying, “You may eat all you like of every tree in the garden — but of the Tree of All Knowledge you may not eat, for the moment you eat of it you shall be doomed to die.”(Gen. 2:16-17)

When they eat from the Tree of All Knowledge, the knowledge they get is that one day they are going to die. Before the forbidden fruit, they didn’t even know death was part of the equation. Now they know and it scares them — to death. They like the garden: life there is beautiful, they don’t want it to end, and standing right next to the Tree of All Knowledge is the answer to their anxiety — the Tree of Life. One bite from that fruit and they will live forever. This terrifies God. We read:

God Eternal then said, “Look, the humans are like us, knowing all things. Now they may even reach out to take fruit from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever!” So the Eternal God drove them out of the Garden of Eden to work the soil from which they had been taken. (Gen. 3:22-23)

God kicks them out of the Garden of Eden — not as punishment, but as a blessing: If they think they will never die then how will they truly live? If you have eternity then there is no urgency for anything; with unlimited tomorrows, everything can wait.

The German existentialist Martin Heidegger, in his masterwork Being and Time, taught this: he said that in order to truly live authentically we have to confront death head-on. In other words, knowing that I am going to die is what allows me to truly live. Heidegger wrote:

“If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life — and only then will I be free to become myself.” (Heidegger)

But as Ernest Becker wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning masterwork, The Denial of Death,

even though we objectively know that we are all going to die, we don't actually believe what we know to be true. Becker's work is important because of his astute observation that our obsession with not dying actually gets in the way of our fully living. We are so focused on outwitting, outlasting, and outplaying death, staying in our own Garden of Eden, that we make amazingly selfish choices in life. We set up what Becker calls "immortality systems" — non-rational belief structures that give way to the belief that we are immortal.

For example, we try to buy immortality by accumulating possessions and wealth, as if our things will somehow protect us when death comes knocking. We take on heroic roles in our business or our household: we think that if we make ourselves indispensable, death can't touch us. "I can't die this week; I have a sales meeting on Thursday."

Judaism suggests a different approach to death and to life. Rather than deny death, Jewish tradition instructs us to embrace it. Judaism teaches that we should live each day as if it is our last because we don't know, it very well may be (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a). Imagine, as God does in this parashah, if human beings directed all the energy they focus on not dying toward the more sacred goal of truly living. How would you fill each moment of every day if you truly knew and understood that you will never get that moment back once it has passed is gone forever? The psalmist declares:

"The span of our life is seventy years, or given the strength, eighty years; ... and they pass by speedily and we are in darkness; Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may attain a wise heart" (Psalm 90:10, 12).

The wise person, our Rabbis teach, counts each day and makes each day count. Knowing that our days are numbered helps us clarify our priorities and our purpose. Our most precious possession is not money or things: you can always get more of those. No, our most precious and finite possession is time.

Henry David Thoreau wrote:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life, and not when I had come to die discover that I had not lived." (Thoreau, Walden [reissue ed., Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2016])

When Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden, the Torah records the very first thing they do. "And Adam knew his wife Eve and she bore him a son" (Gen. 4:1). They have a child: the very realization of "I'm not going to live forever" is answered with our best attempt at immortality — progeny.

And so, a final question remains. Where is the true paradise? Is it in the Garden of Eden where no one ever dies and time is limitless? Or is it East of Eden, outside the garden, where every moment is precious, every decision is life changing, and the fruit, sometimes bitter, compels us to appreciate the sweet?

(Rabbi Dan Moskowitz is senior rabbi at Temple Sholom in Vancouver, BC, and author of "The Men's Seder" (MRJ Publishing). Rabbi Moskowitz is also chair of the Reform Rabbis of Canada. His writing and perspective on Judaism appear in major print and digital media internationally.)

[More Food for thought:](#)

The Evangelicalization of Orthodoxy by Joshua Shanes

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/evangelicalization-orthodox-jews>
Republican partisanship is becoming expected of the Orthodox—the way it's expected of evangelical Christians

Last December, I was talking with Rabbi Irving Greenberg—a titan of progressive Orthodoxy and humanist ideals for over half a century—when he shocked me by saying Jews owe President Donald Trump “hakarat hatov,” gratitude for his kindness to the Jewish people. A few weeks later, he published a statement favoring Trump’s “peace plan,” dismissing objections as knee-jerk anti-Trump sentiment. Once on the left fringe of Orthodoxy on the Palestinian issue, Greenberg now seems to view Palestinians as solely to blame for the current situation, and their reduction to a rump territory devoid of sovereignty as just punishment for refusing earlier offers. When asked if he planned to vote for Trump, Greenberg replied, “The right to a secret ballot and privacy in voting is a fundament of democracy, so I won't answer that question.”

As somebody once in the progressive wing of Orthodoxy, who now refuses to use his clout to fight Trump, Greenberg is not alone. One of the leaders of “progressive” Orthodoxy in Israel is Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who along with Greenberg is among the most famous modern Orthodox rabbis of the past half century. Riskin, the chief rabbi and architect of the West Bank settlement of Efrat, fights the good fight on questions of gender and acceptance of less religious Jews. Yet he celebrated Trump’s election as “a victory for the common American.” “People felt he spoke the truth,” he added. “Trump is a gift to the United States in the field of economics, and of course, to Israel.”

It would be too much to say that Orthodox Jews are uniformly pro-Trump—we aren’t, of course. Indeed, although exact polling is contested, at least a large minority and possibly a bare majority of Orthodox Jews actually voted for Clinton. Nevertheless, whatever our voting patterns four years ago, affection for Trump almost seems to be expected among Orthodox Jews. Most Haredi communities were already voting deeply red in 2016, but now support for Trump, and the excusing of his deeply immoral behavior and other shortcomings, have grown typical of modern Orthodox communities as well. The trend toward voting more Republican was several decades old, but there is something new afoot: a cultural norm, in some synagogues an expectation, that anyone with common sense is a Trump supporter. This is dismaying to me, as one who has lived as an observant Jew for some 30 years, first in Chabad (here and in Israel) and now in the modern Orthodox world. My community has long claimed religious values as a centerpiece of their political worldview. Yet, when offered a candidate who seemingly represented the opposite of every one of their values—marital fidelity, worship attendance, faith, character, personal decency, care for the indigent and distressed—many rushed to his side, excusing every flaw. To be sure, there are Orthodox synagogues where the Trump-skeptical are welcome, and even predominate. In New York, and in liberal college towns, you can find them. But it’s telling that in Greater Chicago, where I live, there are dozens of Orthodox synagogues, and I have found only one—mine—to be a comfortable place for a Biden supporter, let alone someone with progressive ideas about

Israel/Palestine.

Across the country, I fear my experience is typical. Indeed, it feels to me like what we are seeing is the evangelicalization of Orthodox Judaism—at a time when evangelicalism is more about an idolatrous nationalism than about Jesus Christ. It's a dangerous path for Jews to follow, not least because it's profoundly anti-Jewish.

First, it's important to understand how Orthodoxy is becoming more internally united. Scholars broadly distinguish between the modern Orthodox, who are generally acculturated, socially integrated and Zionist, and the ultra-Orthodox or Haredim (including Hasidim), who tend to segregate themselves from outside culture and society and have historically opposed Zionism. But recent scholarship by Samuel Heilman, Adam Ferziger, and others, has demonstrated that these divisions are collapsing, as modern Orthodoxy “slides to the right” (in Heilman's words) and ultra-Orthodoxy more confidently engages with broader society. But more important, both camps of Orthodoxy have followed parts of evangelical Christianity in coalescing around an ethnonationalist identity, one that views the political right and its ultranationalist worldview, in America and in Israel, as a religious foundation united against the threat of the cultural left. For these swaths of the Orthodox world, support for Trump and the right generally is no longer a political choice separate from Torah. For many, Orthodoxy has fused with a Christianity that is now less a faith tradition than a nationalist civil religion, deeply connected with the Republican Party in general and now Donald Trump in particular. What do I mean by “civil religion”? In 1967, sociologist Robert Bellah published his pathbreaking essay “Civil Religion in America.” The argument was compelling. Traditional religion forged community through the defining of boundaries, sacred narratives of the past and destined future, holy dates, holy places, holy ideals, and rituals intended to realize those ideals. Nationalism—the ideology that nations exist and that one's own nation demands primary allegiance over all other identities—offers most of these sacred truths as well. Bellah's student Robert Wuthnow developed this idea further, describing two competing civil religions in America, one conservative—grounded in a “myth of origin,” “Judeo-Christian” values, capitalism, manifest destiny and chauvinism—and one liberal, grounded in secular humanism and voices of the prophets seeking global peace and justice. Both scholars distinguished between the official churches and this “well-institutionalized civil religion of America existing alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from them.” But, as Jose Santiago put it, “when the civil religion of nation and the civil religion of humanity stopped being as intimately united as [Emile] Durkheim claimed, the idea of nationalism as the religion of modern times was born.”

This is precisely what has happened in the United States. A sizable camp of white evangelicalism (Black evangelicals are overwhelmingly Democratic), a religion based on personal salvation through Christ and biblical obedience, has become as well a political theology defending white, Christian America against its perceived enemies, internal and external. Today, its battle against the competing civic nationalism of secularism and equality includes opposition to LGBTQ equality (under the guise of “religious freedom”) and support for unfettered capitalism, gun rights, highly restricted immigration, the Israeli right,

and strict opposition to abortion access. As Trump promised Iowa Republicans in the early days of the 2016 election, “Christians will have power.”

Over the past several decades, Orthodoxy has been transformed by this ethnonationalist conservative Americanism as part of its religious worldview as well. The alliance has a certain logic, given that many right-wing evangelicals are reliable supporters of the Israeli right, and there are no more fervent Zionists than their Christian politicians. But this coalition is now about much more than Israel. To take one example, look at a short video by Chovevei Zion, a religio-political group connected (until recently) with Young Israel, the modern Orthodox group. It opens with reference to Judea and Samaria, indicating its goal to defend Jewish settlements in the West Bank, but quickly pivots to ground all of Western civilization in the Jews: “London, Rome, Athens all have their start in Jerusalem.” What values did ancient Jews bequeath? “Nationalism is an ideal. Capitalism is good. Property rights are to be honored and protected. All life is sacred, even those of the unborn. That one has the right to defend themselves, their family, their country and their religion.” We see images of large estates, then a pregnant woman, followed by camouflaged soldiers firing weapons.

These are neither ancient nor modern Jewish values. These are the values of the conservative civil religion of Americanism. Orthodox Jews have no history defending gun rights, for example, nor do they traditionally glorify large estates or capitalism, in some iteration of the Protestant prosperity gospel. The actual heritage of Judaism—ethical monotheism and ritual commandments—is totally eclipsed here.

The extent to which these new values have trumped Jewish values, such as care for the destitute or support for immigration, is evident in how Orthodox organizations choose to spend their political capital. Since Trump’s election, leading American Orthodox organizations—the Orthodox Union (OU), the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), Young Israel, Agudath Israel, and others—have collectively published several dozen statements in response to national news, nearly all of them full of praise for Trump, almost none of them criticizing him. For example, Orthodox groups issued statements celebrating the withdrawal from the Iran deal and support for Jewish settlements in the West Bank, but you would be hard pressed to find them ever criticizing him—not on cuts to the CHIP program, not on Stephen Miller’s overt white nationalism, and not on Trump’s accusation that Jews who refused to support him were “disloyal.”

There were exceptions, as when the RCA, after the Charlottesville riots and Trump’s both-sides-ism, reminded the president that failing “to unequivocally reject hatred and bias is a failing of moral leadership and fans the flames of intolerance and chauvinism.” And it’s true that in Young Israel there has been vocal internal dissent about this right-wing turn. And one can reasonably object that the average Orthodox Jew has no interest in what some national organizations have to say about politics. But these statements matter, as they represent the bounds of permissible discourse, and they do reflect the general concerns of rabbis, who have to listen to the members.

And that discourse has changed, in ways recognizable to those who follow trends in

evangelical Christianity. Fifty years ago, many Orthodox Jews would have had no position on abortion; it wasn't a widely discussed topic. Today, there is growing Orthodox opposition to abortion rights—even as Jewish law permits and even mandates abortion in certain cases. Historically, the RCA and OU always insisted that abortion was a question for individuals, not the government, to decide for themselves. By 2019, by contrast, the RCA and the Agudath both opposed a liberalization of abortion access in New York, ascribing personhood to fetuses and, in one statement, describing abortion as homicide.

This shift is easy to understand as part of the evangelicalization of Orthodoxy, as Orthodox work to solidify an alliance with the Christian right. In 2019, Young Israel hosted an array of Trump surrogates at its annual dinner, including evangelical politician Mike Huckabee (and the infamous Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, both Jews, and both now under federal indictment). They celebrated Trump's presidency, distributed MAGA gear and offered speeches to rally the crowd to his reelection campaign. "President Trump is the most benevolent leader the Jewish people have ever known in their 2,000 years in their diaspora, believe me," Yechezkel Moskowitz, the dinner chairman, told the cheering crowd. A year earlier, the Orthodox Union bestowed an award upon then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, at the time separating children from their parents at the southern border to discourage immigration. A tolerance for anti-immigration zealotry—a feature of the new American conservative religion—is a remarkable adaptation for Orthodox Jews, in light of our history as refugees.

The Orthodox press likewise reflects this new evangelical orientation. For example, the Orthodox weekly Jewish Vues, distributed throughout New York, asks Orthodox Jewish men a "fun question for the week." In one recent issue, it asks readers to rank their favorite thing about President Trump—but only one! In another, they ask a leading question, "Are you a supporter of the right to bear arms?" Naturally, there is widespread support for gun access, a part of the new civil religion. In a photo gallery accompanying the poll, the first photo displayed, ahead of many prominent Orthodox Jews, is of Mike Huckabee—an honorary "kosher" member of a community increasingly defined by assimilation into this right-wing civil religion. Other Orthodox papers—from 5TJT (Five Towns Jewish Times) to Mishpacha magazine and the Jewish Press (whose editor the gay rights movement called "evil" and argued that Africans benefited from the slave trade because Christianity replaced their "primitive" religions)—assume the same perspective.

How did the political commitments of one tradition, the civic religion of right-wing American nationalism and evangelicalism, gain so much influence in another, American Orthodoxy? One cause of this transformation is certainly technological: the impact of talk radio. As scholars like Brian Rosenwald have shown, right-wing talk radio has been a powerful force in transforming both the Republican base and its leadership over the past three decades. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Dennis Prager, and Ben Shapiro all have followings among the Orthodox, as they do among evangelicals, particularly because they can be played in the car and seem kosher even to families that ban television and internet. In addition, there are specifically Orthodox voices pushing this ethnonationalist religion within the community,

chief among them Avigdor Miller, who defended slavery as an ennobling institution that should not have been abolished, and preached that liberalism was a moral evil opposed by the Torah. (A typical Miller quotation, in this case about Harvey Milk: “A decent gentile got up and shot him because of his spreading homosexuality.”)

Orthodoxy—particularly ultra-Orthodoxy—is also naturally inclined toward some of these values. For example, it is a highly gendered often patriarchal society that would naturally be inclined to support a political theology that suggested male power. Equally, its rejection of gay partnerships would attract it to a movement fighting LGBT rights, particularly as Orthodoxy has grown more concerned about the encroachment of these values into its own camp. The Haredi suspicion, if not at times outright rejection, of secular science dovetails with support for Trump, while Christian Zionism makes evangelicalism an appealing bedfellow (except for those ultra-Orthodox who remain anti-Zionist).

There is historical precedent for this, although not in America. We can see similar alliances in 19th- and early-20th-century Europe, where Orthodox communities in Germany, Galicia, Poland, and Russia aligned with rightist nationalist movements against the secular socialist left. For some of these communities, the danger of communism, with its mandate to erase ethnic difference and undermine religion, seemed more threatening than hypernationalism or fascism.

Now, some want to explain the current religio-political transformation as connected with economics. Eliyahu Stern has argued, for example, that the high cost of modern Orthodox life has facilitated the community’s swing to the right. Economic and ideological motivations can also overlap, such as with the endless struggle for private-school tuition vouchers, a cornerstone of the conservative civil religion. That said, the economic argument only goes so far. Aside from the fact that non-Orthodox Jews are not poorer than their Orthodox counterparts—and that poorer Haredim were even more likely to vote for Trump than their wealthier counterparts—people vote and act against their economic interest all the time. Many studies since 2016 have documented that race and gender anxieties were the most consistent markers of pro-Trump voting patterns in 2016.

To ignore Trump’s white nationalist politics is to repeat the mistake of Marxists a century ago, who confidently predicted no world war could break out because socialists would prevent it. Nationalism cannot be reduced merely to economic motivations. Economics and materialism are just two threads in the rich tapestry of identity, and we cannot focus simply on those two without examining the broader cultural context of race and nationalism. And here, evidence of Orthodoxy’s embrace of the civil religion of the evangelical right—currently focused on the president—is widespread.

This American civil religion includes adulation of Trump and his MAGA symbology—an example of *avodah zarah*, idol worship, which is expressly forbidden to Jews. It constitutes a common article of faith for evangelicals and the Orthodox who have united with them. Meanwhile, Haredi Jews who were once anti-Zionist, or non-Zionist, have united with evangelicals and the modern Orthodox to support a territorial maximalism in Israel. It’s at this juncture that we find Orthodox Jews becoming fellow travelers of men like the

evangelical John Hagee, of Christians United for Israel, no matter that Hagee also traffics in anti-Semitic mythology.

But it did not have to be this way. Not only Judaism writ large, but Orthodoxy specifically, has a rich tradition of devotion to social justice, on which it could have built a different community, a variety of other paths it could have taken. There were Orthodox antiwar protests in the 1960s (Irving Greenberg himself testified in Congress against Vietnam), Orthodox Jews who marched for civil rights, Orthodox environmental movements, support for immigrant rights, and more. Benny Kraut—a veteran of Greenberg’s long-defunct Yavne student organization—titled his history of the group *The Greening of American Orthodoxy*. In my own lifetime, the direction of Orthodox Judaism was an open question.

These traditions are not totally lost, even if some of our leaders seem to be. For example, the progressive Orthodox rabbinic group *Torat Chayim* issued a model statement of support for the racial justice movement this year, including specific actions they intend to undertake to combat systemic racism in America and within our own communities. I was likewise cheered by the small rebellion in the ranks of *Young Israel* in 2019 when 22 (out of 175) congregations signed a statement rebuking its leadership for supporting Netanyahu’s merger with the Kahanist *Otzma Yehudit* party. (The leadership refused to back down, and one congregation—*Young Israel of Toco Hills* in Atlanta—left the movement.)

And there are certainly shuls and independent minyanim that bend to the left, although they tend to be quieter and less political than the larger, more numerous, right-leaning shuls. This is why, perhaps, some of these lone voices have gathered in secret Facebook groups to lean on one another and organize a better future.

The fact is, progressive Orthodox Jews can feel isolated and even ostracized in their own communities. Except for the most confident, they may face a crisis of religious identity, namely the loaded meaning of being Orthodox in America in the age of Trump, the assumption of political beliefs (both from without and within) that comes with identifying as Orthodox. A pocket of us crave a Jewish community equally committed to the prophets and Halacha, a community committed to fighting racism and hate-mongering, committed to social policy that protects the vulnerable—because Judaism requires it of us—and also supports Sabbath and kashruth observance.

We seek a community that pushes for Joseph Soloveitchik’s conception of the Jewish hero, the “halakhic man” grounded in observance and guided by the pursuit of justice and righteousness. And we need all this without setting those values aside when it comes to Israel and the Palestinians, and without replacing any of these pillars with the civic religion of chauvinist, exclusionary nationalism, a form of idolatry that elevates land and stones over people and God.

Orthodoxy should not need a foundation of right-wing politics to define itself. We have a world of Torah depth—notions of God’s presence, or at least daily prayer, study and mitzvot—on which to base our Jewish communities and identities. It is in these values—including in our commitment to social justice—that we can, and should, root ourselves and our future. (Joshua Shanes teaches Jewish Studies at the College of Charleston. He is currently writing a

history of the word "Orthodoxy" from its German origins until today.)