

What I Believe

RICHARD NEAL · MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2017

My Thoughts about my Judaism.

In high school, I was a 2nd tenor. I thought I still am. But Ellen, the Choir Director has placed me with the basses. Yet another identity crisis, I guess.

A few weeks ago on my 25,000th day of life, I wrote that I discovered my place of spiritual comfort and that I discovered my voice - in writing, song, photography and improv.

I wrote those sentence recently when I was thinking about how my life has changed in 25,000 days. My connection to Judaism has been one of those changes.

My father came from a family that was more observant. My mother came from a family where Judaism had more to do with charitable work. I was raised in a Jewish home that really functioned as Reform. But my Jewish education came from Ner Tamid, a Conservative Jewish congregation in Chicago where I went to Hebrew School 4 days a week for 5 years. It culminated in my becoming a Bar Mitzvah on March 17, 1962 (And yes it was St. Patrick's Day and in full disclosure Cantor Brandhandler never knew that I had a 4 leaf clover hidden in my suit coat pocket... I guess that I'm "outing myself" 55 years later).

I shared some holidays with members of my extended family who kept kosher homes and worshiped in Orthodox synagogues. I have had a cousin who was an Orthodox Rabbi and my great grandfather was a Cantor in Poland. (I wonder if he was a tenor or a bass). But prayer and connecting with "a spiritual higher power" were not a part of my home growing up. So what denomination was I really? And what did I believe? For most of my life, I just didn't think about it.

I felt an affinity (if that's the right word) for being Jewish. I appreciated that I came from a people that was one of the only groups to survive for more than 3,800 years. I don't know of any Canaanites, Sumerians or Babylonians who have made it this far. When was the last time you ran into a Philistine? The Jewish people have survived, against some great odds.

During my adult life, I celebrated Passover Seders, went to synagogue for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, lit candles for Chanukah. I had two sets of dishes while married the first time in my 20s, but neither the two sets of dishes nor the marriage lasted more than 9 months. My wife, son, daughter and I were members of a Reform Congregation for 17 years. I can read Hebrew and pronounce consonants and vowels correctly. But what am I reading? I can sing prayers in Hebrew, but I rarely understand what I'm singing. And even when I recite the English translation of the same prayer, do I really believe the words that are coming out of my mouth?

Did I even pray or talk to God or G_d? Well there was that one thought I had as they were wheeling me in for prostate cancer surgery. But what do I really believe if the thought about God comes up only in an emergency. Is that my underlying true belief that was revealed when I felt that it was really needed? Or was that a “just in case” kind of thought?

It was only around the age of 60 that I bothered to think about what I believed. It started when I sent out an e-mail to every Jewish man and woman I knew and asked them why they were members of a Jewish congregation or why they hadn't joined one. The results of my informal survey were of great interest (at least to me). I went to Israel for the first time in my life and I felt something. I really did. It was a connection with my heritage, with my people. But not to God. I took a couple of Florence Melton classes on Judaism to learn what Jewish people were "supposed to believe." Only then did I realize that in my heart, I wasn't a believer.

I appreciate Jewish traditions from a cultural, historical ancestral perspective. Looking at things from a rational, logical, archaeological and scientific perspective (as I like to do), I had trouble looking to a "higher power" for peace, forgiveness and good health.

I respect other people who have faith. Actually I think that the vast majority of my family members and friends have faith. Doctrine and religious teachings are important to them... it helps to guide their lives. Some of them are my best friends. They are bright, intelligent, caring, good people. So I do not judge other people who are believers... and I ask that they do not judge me. I respect that we see things differently. But I found myself asking them:

"How did you get to the point that you believed that?"

How did you get Faith?

How does anyone come to have a belief in something that can't be explained.

Did you come to believe on your own or were you just able to accept what you were told to believe by your parents?"

I was offered different answers – ranging from people who took the Torah literally as the word of God to others who were more inclined to interpret the underlying message that was meant to be conveyed. But it still didn't help me to know how someone came to believe... to have that feeling inside of confidence that something is the truth without having any absolute proof.

I eventually found a congregation that encouraged me to ask those same questions above of myself: *"What can I do to bring more peace in the world? "What can I do to get forgiveness from others?" "What can I do for my own good health?"* ... rather than looking to a higher power for the answers.

A cousin of mine once told me that he had a very serious surgery when he was very young. It lasted many hours and his very religious grandfather prayed and prayed. And when my cousin came out of the surgery healthy, his grandfather thanked God and said *"See God answered my prayers."* My cousin turned to me and said *"Didn't anyone think that maybe it was the doctors who should be thanked for their skill and expertise."*

I found a congregation that lets me decide for myself what to do rather than being told to follow a doctrine, a congregation that helps me to be a Jewish man while not having to recite words that I don't believe or perform rituals that have no logical meaning for me.

I found a Humanistic Jewish congregation... called Kol Hadash.

Now I go to Friday night services fairly regularly (something that I never did in the 17 years with my previous congregation). Now I take Adult Ed classes to look at Jewish laws, practices and traditions from a different perspective. (Who would have thought after my 5 years of Hebrew school that I would ever have been interested in learning more about my religion). Now I participate in the "Taste of Kol Hadash" and the "Progressive Dinner" and I'm singing in the choir. And G_d help me (oops... scratch that), I even agreed to be on the Board of Directors.

So I found my voice. (Both in the choir and also in being Jewish). I feel more in touch with my Judaism than ever before in spite of the fact that we (I guess I do feel a part of the Humanistic Jewish movement since I use the word "we")... that we see the Bible as literature and we look to ourselves for answers rather than praying to a higher power. And now I'm not ashamed to say it or write about it.

There are a few times when someone will ask me about why I joined a Humanistic congregation. I probably can't describe it any better than that written by the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Humanism is described as *"an ethical philosophy of life that emphasizes critical thinking, equality, progress, and human responsibility to address human problems, rather than acceptance of dogma or the hope for supernatural intervention."* (They're big on equality – for example, allowing women the same privileges as men, accepting interfaith marriages and same sex marriages).

Humanistic Judaism is described as *"a Jewish movement that replaces religious dogma with a humanistic philosophy, while retaining and reimagining those aspects of Jewish life that still provide deep meaning and value to people."*

I still respect others who believe differently than me. I recognize that I have no lock on "The Truth." Who am I to say that those who follow Islam, Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism or even Scientology are wrong. Perhaps others who follow the word of God are correct in their religious beliefs. But I discovered my voice and it feels right for me.

And now I gotta go rehearse Al ShlosHa D'Voraim for the upcoming Jewish High Holidays. It's my favorite song. And I sing that song because it's got a great melody and I

believe in those words. Translated, the words mean “*The world is sustained by three things: by truth, by justice, and by peace.*”

(If you were starting to think: “*Truth, Justice and the American way,*” you’re showing your age).

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNoxBe_4oGyxQrhGIS2543WmcUsBjini3