

**What It Means to Be a Jew**  
**Chapter I: A Different Type of God**  
**Rosh Hashanah Eve 5769**  
**Rabbi Stephen Fuchs**

When we were slaves in Egypt, the Pharaoh was not just the country's king but nothing less than a god. That pagan god was afraid that we Hebrews were becoming too numerous. So he called in the Hebrew midwives Shifrah and Puah and told them: when you help the Hebrew women give birth, if you see that the child is a boy, kill it. If it is a girl, let her live.

But, the Torah tells us, the midwives ignored Pharaoh's order. They listened instead to the voice of the one true God, a different type of God, and kept the boys alive.

The pagan god Pharaoh then ordered his soldiers to throw every Hebrew baby boy into the Nile. But Yocheved was loyal to a different type of God and would not give up her baby. With a fervent prayer she set her precious child in a basket and floated him in the water. It was a desperate move of a desperate woman. When Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, she knew it was a Hebrew. She knew that her father her king and her god ordered Hebrew boys drowned. If she was faithful to him she would have simply tipped over the basket and went on with her bath. But Pharaoh's daughter somehow heard and heeded the voice of a different type of God, named the boy Moses, and adopted him as her own. For that reason the rabbis give her the name Bityah, which means "daughter of the Lord."

Before the Torah introduced the world to "a different type of God," people viewed their gods as forces which they presumed had power. The whole purpose of religion was to appease those gods—to keep them from using their power to hurt or, perhaps to entice the gods to use their powers to help the worshippers.

So, for example, if I was a farmer I would plant my crops and then make an offering to the crop god, or the farm god, or the agriculture god or whatever deity was supposed to be in charge of such things. If I had a good harvest I would assume that my offering had been accepted.

But if there was a problem—if for example there was a drought, or a famine, or a plague of locusts, or anything that prevented my harvesting a successful crop—then I would assume that the god had found my offering inadequate, and I would make a larger offering the next time.

Eventually and inevitably these escalating offerings to pagan gods led to human sacrifice.

Our God—the God our Torah introduces to the world—is completely different. Our God is not simply a dispenser of rewards and punishments in response to offerings. Our God abhorred and utterly rejected—as the story of the binding of Isaac teaches—the abominable practice of human sacrifice. Our God created the world with one overriding purpose: for human beings to create a just, caring and compassionate society.

In pursuit of that lofty goal, God made a Covenant with Abraham and his descendants. That Covenant underlies everything we do today as Jews. It is a Covenant in which God promised to protect us, give us children, make us a permanent people, and give us the land of Israel.

In return God charged Abraham and all of us: Be a blessing, walk in God's ways and be worthy, and use our talents to establish a society filled with *Tzedakah*, Righteousness and *Mishpat*, justice!

Several generations later we found ourselves enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. The value systems of Pharaoh and God were so different that they could not coexist. Pharaoh was a typical pagan god. We were enslaved to build his monuments and pyramids for no greater purpose than to glorify and exalt him. If his taskmasters beat us so that we would work harder that was fine. If they threw our baby boys into the Nile as a sacrifice to the river-god, that was fine too according to their beliefs.

But God, the Torah teaches, remembered our Covenant, went to war with the pagan god Pharaoh and got us out of there. Because God freed us from Egypt and brought us to Mt Sinai to renew our sacred Covenant, we owe God a debt we can never fully repay. But we should spend our lives trying!

Are these biblical stories true? Did they really happen? I honestly do not know. But the truth of these stories does not depend on their historical veracity. The truth of these stories lies in the world changing ideals and values we learn from them.

At Sinai our narrative teaches in much greater detail God's hopes that we worship no other gods, keep the Sabbath holy, not murder, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness or covet. We learned not to spread false rumors and to treat the poor, the widow and the stranger with dignity and respect.

Later on we adopted the ideal that study and learning were vital ways of worshipping our God. We were to study and learn, our tradition taught, not just so that we could be successful, but so that we could use our talents and training to make the world a better place.

We Jews comprise less than one-half of one percent of the world's population. The immense value the Jewish community placed on study is a chief reason that Jews represent an enormously greater percentage than that of the world's professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, musicians, scientists, social workers or any profession that you can think of that requires advanced learning or training.

In his Monthly Bulletin columns, Temple President Gary Greenberg has written informative articles about Jewish heroes. Those heroes range from orthodox Jews to non-believers, from scientists to jurists to statesmen of the world.

Those people did what they did, and I would add, we do what we do when we tutor kids in reading or math, conduct food drives, coach little league teams, become a Big Brother or Sister, dedicate ourselves to healing the sick, teaching, or philanthropy because long ago our ancestors made a Covenant with a single, invisible, incorporeal God who wants us to use our talents and abilities to make this world a better place.

It does not matter how far from religion one has strayed. It does not matter if one does not believe in God at all. It does not even matter if one is Jewish or not.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner recounts a chilling event that occurred in Munich, Germany during the dark days of the Nazi regime. A Jewish woman was riding home from work on a city bus when storm troopers boarded the coach to examine the identification papers of the passengers. The SS men ordered all of those with Jewish papers to leave the bus and get on a big truck that was waiting nearby.

As the soldiers made their way through the bus, a Jewish woman began to sob softly. When the gentile man next to her asked her what was wrong, she answered that she was Jewish and the soldiers would surely take her.

All of a sudden the man shouted at her, "You stupid wretch! I can't stand being near you!" The SS men asked the man what all the shouting was about.

He pointed to the woman and sneered, "My dumb wife has forgotten her papers again. She does this all the time. I'm fed up with her."

The SS men laughed, shook their heads, and moved on. The woman never learned the name of the German stranger who had saved her life.

What impelled this German gentile to risk his life for a Jewish woman he had never met? Like the midwives and Pharaoh's daughter thousands of years earlier, this man defied the gods of cruelty and

oppression that ruled his world to heed the voice of “A Different Type of God”, the one true God of justice, caring and compassion.

All of our Jewish practices—Shabbat, Chanukah, Passover, weddings, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, even funerals—have one main purpose: to inspire us to work toward the ultimate goal of creating the type of society God wants.

We celebrate our High Holy Days for precisely the same reason. During this sacred season we imagine that we must present ourselves to God for judgment. When we hear the shofar tomorrow we understand it as a wake up call for us to examine our lives with an eye to making them better. We imagine that God judges our deeds, our words, and our thoughts.

The balance scale on our sanctuary’s magnificent Rosh Hashanah roundel reminds us of a famous Midrash. That Midrash calls on each of us to imagine on Rosh Hashanah that our good deeds and our bad deeds way equally on the scale of judgment. Our task, therefore, is to do more good deeds during these next ten days so that when our fate is sealed on Yom Kippur, our judgment scale will tilt to the side of good.

I remember vividly sitting next to my father in Rosh Hashanah services when I was 12 years-old. He pointed to the words that expressed the theme of judgment in the prayer book and whispered to me softly, “If one believes that.”

“I believe it!” I answered, and I still do. Of course like the biblical stories I don’t take the judgment metaphor literally! But because for centuries Jews have acted as if (*k’ee/oo* in Hebrew) the judgment is real and as if we are accountable to God for our actions, we have made positive contributions to society out of all proportion to our numbers.

Tonight as we mark the beginning of a New Year, we do so not to engage in the revelry associated with December 31. We do so to renew our Covenant with God. The shofar will beckon us to ask ourselves how are we living, what can we do better, and what are the many different ways that we might use our talents to make a better world? Making the world a better place has been our people’s goal for thousands of years! We have pursued that goal since the authors of Torah introduced the world to a different type of God!

Amen