

Two Great Experiments: An Argument for God

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Judaism is and always has been *an experiment*— a course of action tentatively undertaken without certainty of the outcome.

Judaism as an experiment is a useful framework within which we can understand this great project we all desire to be a part of, to carry on—a framework that goes back to Abraham. “*Lech*,” God told him. “Go.” And in Abraham’s first footsteps toward Canaan, the Jewish experiment was birthed. And the experiment endured through our wanderings in the desert, and continued as we established a kingdom in the land of Israel under Kings Saul, David and Solomon. And then in exile in the study halls of Sura just west of the Euphrates river, as our people continued to quarrel and muse over how best to live. And in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, and then northwest to the alps and the Baltic Sea, and then to the western regions of Russia. And of course, the experiment continued one hundred years ago as millions of Jewish immigrants made their way across the Atlantic to the *Goldene Medina* and established homes, from California to the New York island, from the Redwood Forest to the gulf stream waters.

And even as we crawled out of squalor, acquired wealth, and began the flight from city tenements to suburban homes, the experiment continued. No matter how imposingly and luxuriously we designed our houses of worship, and our homes, no amount of money, prestige, influence or power could ever undermine a central tenet of who we are, that is, a people defined by an experiment.

But if Judaism is an experiment, what is it, exactly, that we hope to discover or prove? The Jewish experiment asks one central question: Can we live our lives in covenant with an invisible, commanding God who exists beyond rationality, and even amidst tragedy and despair, and can that covenant—realized through Torah and ritual—offer us a sense of coherence and meaning from birth to our very last breath? The covenant, after all, is not a signed contract, binding for all time. Rather, it is a challenge. “Be holy,” God says, “because I am holy.” But this is less a declarative statement than a recommendation. Will we truly be able to live up to God’s demands, to pursue justice and righteousness and be a light unto the nations? Or, will we give in to false Gods and be shaped by the alluring proclamations those gods make? And we respond not with any sense of surety to these questions, but with further struggle and inquiry: “What does it mean to be holy? What does it mean to lead a life worthy of God’s blessing?” And every time we ask another question, the experiment continues and is given new life.

The story of America, too, is an experiment, or to use the language of the late, provocative thinker, Neil Postman, America is “a perpetual and fascinating question mark.” As Postman writes, the American story “properly begins... with a series of stunning and dangerous questions. Is it possible to have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people? And who are the people anyway? And how shall they proceed in governing themselves? And how shall we protect individuals from the power of the people? And why should we do all this in the first place?” And he goes on with more questions brought about by the very idea of our country. “What is freedom? What are its limits? What is a human being? What are the obligations of citizenship? What is meant by democracy?” Our “constitution,” he says, “is not a catechism, but a hypothesis... The Declaration of Independence... an argument.”

I have come to realize the community we call Micah is the living embodiment of both the Jewish and the American experiments. We are the inheritors of the questions proposed by the writers of the Hebrew Bible, and the inheritors of the propositions of Madison and Jefferson. We are the continuation of Abraham and Sarah’s historic journey, and the continuation of the voyage undertaken by the 103

passengers of the Mayflower. Like Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, and like the generations of Americans in whose footsteps we follow, we too seek to discover ourselves, to find our reason for being. We too want to know what it means to live a life in covenant with God, to live a life in community with our fellow countrymen and women.

But as we gather to bring in this new year, there is undeniably a profound feeling of anxiety, sadness and fear that cuts the sweetness of our apples and honey. It's a kind of unease that transcends words, but if you've been living in Washington for the past year you know what I'm talking about. We feel it as Jews and we feel it as Americans.

An important question then: From where do these feelings stem? They do not come from the ongoing quarreling we see in our daily discourse, no matter how uncomfortable it gets, for tension between factions is a healthy and necessary part of a democracy. "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition," Madison famously wrote in Federalist 51. And this is how the American experiment lives on. So, if not from grisly argumentation, then from where do these feelings stem?

They come, in large part, from a core piece of the Jewish and the American project that lies forgotten, neglected and malnourished. In a word: God. Yes, any mention of God could disturb our modern sensibilities. And for some, God is the very cause of dangerous extremism. But there is no Judaism without God, and there is no America without God.

Of which God do I speak? As my teacher taught me, the word "God" is simply a placeholder, and I agree. I imagine God, then, in the broadest of terms. I speak of the God of our forefathers and foremothers, *Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak, v'Elohei Yaakov, Elohei Sarah, Elohei Rivkah, Elohei Rachel, V'Elohei Leah*. I speak of the indescribable God of Maimonides, the loving God of Bachya, the relational God of Buber, the historic God of Kaplan, the covenantal God of Borowitz. And even of the God Amos Oz rejects!

I speak of the mysterious God of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchek who wonders, "Who is He who trails me steadily, uninvited and unwanted, like an everlasting shadow, and vanishes into the recesses of transcendence the very instant I turn around to confront this numinous, awesome, and mysterious He..."

In both the Jewish and American experiments, the controlled variable (if you'll allow me to push this metaphor of experiment a bit further) is the acknowledgment that we are not the final arbiters of our own lives.

As Jews, we accept the responsibility of our covenant. We continue to wrestle with God and seek meaning in our days. As Americans, we accept the responsibility in the rights of our constitution. And as both, we accept the responsibility that the freedom of each experiment gives us to determine what is good and right and what brings meaning. So, call it God, or what you will, but the *Jewish* story begins with an authority beyond you and me, an authority *that created* you and me, an eternal truth that transcends the cultural and social norms of the day. And our *country's* story begins with the "self-evident" truth that all humans are created equal.

We are "endowed by (our) creator with certain unalienable rights," but to realize the potential for such an idea, we need strong religious institutions that uphold a moral, Godly voice in the public square. We are unique among the animals, created in God's image, but we cannot live up to that image without a clear source of truth. This is the experiment solidified by the Israelites who accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and this was the experiment of our nation's founders when they created our system of government.

But God has been deserted. Bitterly she weeps at night. Because. Because we are busy and find little time to consider why we're here. Because we're shaped instead by secular liturgies, seduced by the constant beeping of our phones, the glowing screens of our computers. Because we're distracted by the barrage of entertainment choices and the bombardment of stuff to consume.

If we're missing God, then we're missing God exactly because we live in a country with unique freedoms. But for that country to work, there has to be a limiting factor, otherwise all we are is free. We are not bound to anything. Everything is elective—whether we participate in society, whether we take care of our own family, whether we help others in our community. Liberty becomes license. God, and God's code of conduct for us, provides the outside limiting factor that knits us into community and responsibility.

As Professor of Jewish Studies and Religion at Princeton University, Leora Batnitsky, writes, “without a God that somehow transcends human history, Judaism becomes just one cultural option among many.” And as George Washington said in his final address to the People of the United States, “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” God, as the psalmists wrote, “you are our dwelling place, in all generations.”

As we welcome 5778, please allow us to continue to engage in these sacred experiments. Allow us to see that there is more to our existence than the current moment, to know that we are part of something greater. May we know a world full of transcendent meaning, for us, for our children, and for our children's children. And may our community be a catalyst to bring us ever closer to you, our Rock and Our Redeemer.