

# HUFFPOST RELIGION

April 8, 2016

## What American Jews need

by Rabbi ABRAHAM UNGER, Ph.D.

Wagner College, Assistant Professor, Department of Government and Politics

We are living in a world in crisis. Millions of refugees from brutal civil conflicts in the Middle East have fled to the West in just one year. Major European cities have become a theater of the War on Terror. Globalization — the most amount of capital and labor moving faster around the world than at any time since the industrial revolution — has resulted not in a coming together, but in a deeply fragmented international system. The U.S. is experiencing vast disruptions. There is a palpable anger about the impact of structural economic changes.

On the level of American Jewish identity, Judaism is at once a more globally competitive and accepted identity, as seen by the large number of converts entering its fold each year, while also in massive decline through younger Jews' disaffection from the formal Jewish community and assured forms of continuity such as in-marriage. The open society has facilitated a fluid, postmodern sense of Jewishness that leaves traditional religious denominations and communal organizations at a loss. Nothing less than a restatement of Diaspora Jewish identity is in order for a generation coming of age as global citizens.

The Jewish tradition is fundamentally prophetic. In its earliest Biblical and Talmudic formulations it is a public theology. Judaism speaks almost completely of justice through the deed, the "mitzvah." Practically the whole of Jewish teaching is concerned with the material world of the here and now, and its perfection.

In American Jewry, despite demographic studies predicting its demise, that historic Jewish purpose still streams through the lifeblood of the community. The Pew Research Center reports that over 50 percent of American Jews feel that "working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them". Those same 50-plus percent of American Jews may be intermarrying and raising their children without institutional Jewish ties, but, as Pew found, their central, self-identified Jewishness is wrapped up in the pro-active idea that their heritage compels repair of the world.

Judaism seeks, in every nook and cranny of its literature and history, one simple goal: to make things right. It has gone through numerous permutations, ranging from the mystical to the political, but the Jewish experience has been one that, no matter errors made, stands overall for an attempt at bettering the human condition with the heated passion of utopian fervor.

Whether the medieval Maimonides or the post-War Joseph Soloveitchik, the foremost Jewish thinkers agree: we may not know what G-d is, but we know what G-d demands of us. We are partners with the Divine in the ongoing act of Creation. It is our task to get back to Eden.

American Jewry was at the forefront of unionization and civil rights. The three greatest Jewish minds of the modern period: Marx, Freud, and Einstein were unafraid to confront the fallacies of their times. The greatest traditionalist Rabbis, bearded sages waving their fists at heaven demanding equity, have done the same. One need only recall Ephraim Oshry, who, with his fierce Talmudic voice — and pen — fought for the rule of law in the midst of the Holocaust, standing up for human dignity against nihilism and genocide in a Lithuanian ghetto.

Sustaining the best of what it means to be human is the engine of an ever-evolving Judaism. In this age of massive dislocations due to globalization, a Jewish statement about

justice and equality — which Pew tells us American Jews continue to define as elemental to their Jewishness — has never been more needed.

There is much Jewish theology, but there is no Jewish public theology. Abraham Joshua Heschel may be the most venerated of contemporary Jewish theologians. But Heschel did not develop a thorough practical philosophy.

To this end, imagine a Jewish contribution to the conversation on globalization. It begins with a scholarly and communal agenda prioritizing this issue. Imagine a first study and concurrent seminars at host institutions, such as universities and think tanks, that offers a clear comprehensive statement, grounded honestly in classical Jewish sources, about what Judaism has to say on issues such as terrorism, the income gap, immigration, urbanization, trade, and public private partnerships. It will take time, but as ideas cascade through the public space, starting with a text and a teaching, American Jews may find they have a new source of consensus around which to more firmly ground their historic Jewish sensibility. Through that consensus a more connected and relevant form of contemporary Jewish community can appear.

It is precisely because of its emphasis on community that Judaism has something unique to offer to the global conversation. Social justice starts locally. Philosopher Michael Walzer echoes that historic Jewish position in his work. Globalization starts with immigrants at the city gates, or with a factory closing. Judaism offers no “ism” we are used to, whether on left or right. It is its own thing. For example, corporations in Jewish law are extensions of their owners, exactly the opposite of them as “persons” separate from their owners as in the U.S. The free market is enabled to exist, but Jewish values simultaneously compel corporate responsibility. Legal fictions have no place when it comes to social justice.

Because of the rise of the global city, democracy has been made fragile in neighborhoods across the world. A Jewish public theology that accounts for the overriding role of community in Jewish tradition speaks truth to power, in terms of practical thinking on the levels of local, regional, and global democracy. If globalization means we are living together more connectedly than in previous eras, this study ought to have value not just for Jews. A faith resource rooted in eliciting positions on justice from the Hebrew canon can be a positive stepping stone for dialogue between diverse populations seeking pathways to relieve global cleavages.

We are waiting while our shrunken world implodes. Judaism has something to say. Its scholars and theologians just have to say it.