

Don't fear 'God,' 'Torah' and 'Judaism'

By Joel Alpers

OMAHA (JTA) —“Fear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” No, it's not a typo. The *Shema*, which starts “Hear O Israel,” is the central credo of the Jewish people. It states that there is only one God—and as a result, only one set of divinely authored ethics and imperatives.

According to the Torah, the Jews were given the daunting task of bringing God-based universal ethics to the world. However, given the number of Jews who are uncomfortable with such a mandate and with religious imperatives in general, I now worry that our prayer could read “Fear O Israel.”

I have this worry because a great number of non-Orthodox Jews—I am not Orthodox—are afraid to mention the core concepts of our remarkable religion. We fear that by talking too much or even about any Judaism, even among ourselves, we'll sound too Christian, too much like our religious oppressors of centuries past, or like Orthodox Jews.

Examples?

I've collected the mission statements of the largest 17 Jewish Federations in North America, and not one mentions “God,” “Torah” or “Judaism.” Nor do the mission statements of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, Hillel, the National Council of Jewish Women, The Wexner Heritage Foundation, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, Haddassah and the Jewish National Fund. Of all the organizations I looked into, only United Jewish Communities mentions but one of the three words, Torah, in its mission statement.

Some surely will be quick to say that the above organizations were not created to convey religious concepts. That is precisely my point: How can we say these organizations are Jewish and at the same time don't need to mention God, Torah or Judaism?

They are not afraid to use other religious terms—many of them mention “*tzedakah*” (charity), “*klal yisroel*” (Jewish peoplehood) and “*tikkun olam*” (repair the world). Why are those words appropriate and not the others I've mentioned?

Many Jewish organizations apparently feel the need to embrace terms that are universal in nature and avoid terms that are more particularistic. *Tzedakah*, *tikkun olam* and *klal yisroel* are considered universal and inclusive terms.

But God? What about those Jews who don't believe in God, or have their doubts? Wouldn't they be excluded when God is mentioned in a mission statement?

Torah? Authored by whom? God, man or a combination of the two? And

what about those who don't consider themselves to be Torah observant?

Judaism? Whose Judaism? Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Humanistic or something else?

The more our terms suggest that we're not all the same, the more we shy away from using them. Yet the more we shy away from God, Torah and Judaism, the more we distance ourselves from the foundational elements of our religion and of our people. Consider, therefore, how much meaning we sacrifice to give the impression that we're inclusive.

I realize that simply adding these words to rarely referenced mission statements is unlikely to significantly better the Jewish world all by itself. As they are currently used, the mission statements not only are guidelines for addressing our Jewish challenges. Perhaps more important, they offer insights into our collective Jewish psyches.

We must be the only people on the planet who believe we can transmit a message to future generations without saying specifically what that message is. Is it any wonder that most Jews cannot articulate Jewish purpose beyond some catch phrases or beyond merely expressing a desire that we survive as a people?

It cannot be coincidental that as generations of Jews become further and further removed from God-talk, they also give less and less *tzedakah*. We should no longer confuse generic feel-good terms with knowing specifically what the Torah, however we choose to interpret it, asks of us.

The great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that “Man is a messenger who forgot the message.” This particularly applies to us Jews: Too many have become messengers who fear their message. The sooner we overcome that fear, the sooner we can talk more about the brilliant and profound life Judaism offers us.

As we talk about, teach and increasingly live that life, more of the Jews we wish would join us will actually do so. They, too, have a need. They want purpose in their lives that money alone cannot fulfill. They want a sense of community that country club memberships won't satisfy. In short, they want richness in their lives that Judaism and Jewish community can provide in endless amounts.

But make no mistake. We cannot effectively distinguish ourselves from all the other enticing options from which Jews can choose unless we speak to our discomfort-inducing distinctions. As we do this, our communities will become more compelling and more meaningful to more Jews.

Ironically, rather than divisive, it is this approach that will make us more inclusive.

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