

On Kol Nidre 5674, 1913, Franz Rosenzweig entered a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin for what he expected to be the last time he would attend worship services as a Jew. Rosenzweig ... had become convinced, as did many modern Germans of his day, that the path to success and acceptance in German life was as a Christian. He was raised, as many Jews of his day in Germany, with modest exposure to Jewish life and Jewish learning. He viewed Judaism as an anachronism – a faith not in touch with the contemporary world of Western Europe.

And so, he decided to become a Christian. He established for himself only one provision: he wished to enter Christianity as did its founders, as a Jew, not as a “pagan.” He walked into that small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin 101 years ago, not with the intention of breaking off from Judaism, but deliberately aiming to “go through” Judaism into Christianity. And so, he decided that he would attend Yom Kippur services to say farewell to his Jewish identity and the Jewish people.

Something entirely unexpected happened to Rosenzweig in that synagogue that night and it changed his life. He wrote a friend: "After prolonged, and I

believe, thorough self-examination, I have reversed my decision ... I will remain a Jew."

What he thought he could find in the church only, faith that gives one orientation of the world, he found on that day in the synagogue. For the rest of his life, Rosenzweig devoted himself to Jewish study and teaching, and became one of the outstanding Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century.¹

Here is the 2014, 5775, version.

Debbie Rosenzweig grew up attending Temple with her family. She attended Religious School and became bat Mitzvah. Debbie went to college and is beginning to establish herself in a successful career in the business world. While she was in college she never participated in Hillel. Going to temple had never been meaningful to her though she enjoyed being with her family around the Passover Seder table, Debbie doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about religion. Debbie culturally identifies with her Ashkenazi Jewish upbringing, the foods especially. She is a hard-working person and has a full social life with friends and the occasional date thanks to the online dating app du jour. She knows one day she would like to get married and start a

family. Whether or not a rabbi marries her is not something Debbie thinks much about. Debbie will not walk into a synagogue on Yom Kippur. Debbie practices yoga regularly, in fact on Yom Kippur she will attend a full-day meditation and yoga retreat. It is within the vinyasa, moving between poses in yoga that she finds her spirituality. Debbie describes herself as spiritual, but not religious and if asked on a survey her religion, Debbie chooses none.²

Unlike the great philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, we do not yet know what the rest of Debbie's story will look like, what her great contribution might be. Debbie is be part of the fastest growing religious group in America. The 'nones.' No, not Catholic religious women, people who do not identify with any religion, therefore they have none. "Although the term 'none' may sound pejorative, it is simply a shorthand used by sociologists to designate those who might check 'none' on a survey when asked to what particular faith group they belong. This phenomenon is increasing so rapidly that worldwide 'unbelief' now represents the world's third largest 'religion.'"³

This is not a new phenomenon. There have always been people in society who do not have a religious affiliation. What is alarming though, is that "the largest percentage of 'nones' is among young adults--estimates range from at least one-third to as high as three-quarters. This shows no

signs of being a transitional youthful phrase but instead indicates a permanent pattern.”⁴ The ‘nones’ are on the rise. “The results of the extensive General Social Survey show ‘nones’ at 5% in 1972, ...14% in 2000, 18% in 2010 and at least 20% in 2012.” The ‘nones’ are your friends, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.⁵

In *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*, Linda Mercadante studies a segment of the ‘nones,’ the ‘spiritual but not religious.’ Of course there is a natural overlap between the notions of spirituality and religion.

Both spirituality and religion consist of four basic components: (1) Belief in some kind of larger reality, some transcendent or sacred force, something greater than the individual. (2) A desire to connect with this larger reality or great force. (3) The promotion of rituals and practices as an aid or witness to this connection. (4) The expectation of particular behaviors (whether called ‘moral’ or not) that foster or demonstrate the desired connection.⁶

Mercadante writes, “‘spirituality,’ is an old concept with a new usage. Previous to our current era, what people today call ‘spirituality’ was often called ‘piety.’ It referred both to one’s particular type of spiritual practices and also to the vitality of one’s faith. Debbie Rosenzweig would fit into this ‘spiritual but not religious’ category. She finds spirituality in her yoga practice.

And there are many others like Debbie who find a spiritual component in various forms of meditation, reiki, twelve-step addiction recovery groups and yes, yoga practice.

‘Religion’ has become a dirty word and we Reform Jews need to reclaim it for ourselves, our children and grandchildren and our community. “...The word religion comes from the Latin root meaning bonds or linkages, the same root from which we get the word ‘ligament.’ Religions describe the ties that we have to our families, our community, the rest of humanity, the environment, and the transcendent.”⁷

The media makes it seem that religion is filled with hypocrisies and scandals. They take every one of these painful moments and indite all religions because there are religious people who behave badly and commit crimes. For the Catholic Church it was the priest scandal and subsequent cover up. The Evangelical Christians it is any of their pastors who condemn x, y or z behaviors and then get caught doing the same things themselves. And there are Jewish people too who commit crimes and are the subject of scandals. But Bernie Madoff and Ryan Braun do not speak for the entirety of our religion. Neither do our brothers and sisters get to condemn us because we do not practice Judaism as they do get to claim our religion unto themselves. Judaism the way we practice and observe it is ours as religious Reform Jews!

In today’s Torah portion we read, “You stand this day all of you before Adonai your God; your

captains of your tribes, your elders, and all of your offices with all the men of Israel. Your little ones, your wives and your stranger who is in your camp, your woodchopper to your waterhauler,” every member of society stands before the God they may or not believe in to enter into the covenant then at that moment and for all time.⁸ This sacred relationship between God and Israel is the core of our Jewish religion. It is our bond to one another and to God. I believe we need to embrace our religion and take pride in it. There is no shame in being religious. We must continue to teach Judaism to our children and grandchildren and continue to study ourselves. Our Jewish religion is multi-faceted, rich, and varied. We have sacred texts that explain our purpose in the world; paths to access the many ways our tradition understands God; rich values that guide our actions in the world including treating workers fairly, helping those in need, and caring for our natural world. Our religious convictions have created the institutions that enables us to pray, learn, rejoice, help, mourn and dance together.

We need to be proud of being religious, liberal Jews. In our own synagogue we have so much to take pride in. Our students in our schools learn and think thoughtfully about Judaism. We celebrate together, we hold one another close when going through life’s challenges. We learn together, we advocate for the rights of all of humanity. We sing beautifully together and we mark Jewish time using our rich religious tradition. We feed so many thousands of people with our partners in the North Hollywood Interfaith Food Pantry, other religious people. Being religious

can be good for us! Studies show,

people who can easily access their religious belief seem to have a higher life satisfaction and endure less emotional and cognitive struggle when faced with life stressors. Religiousness, rather than spiritual seeking--including both belief and behavior--seems more conducive to aging well. And the benefits do not stay at home, for people who are secure in their faith tend to get more involved in their communities, vote more often, and give charitably.⁹

In this new year be proud of being a religious Jew. If you've never thought of yourself this way before, try it on. If being 'spiritual but not religious' resonates with you, let's talk about it after the holiday and delve a little deeper together.

It was a beautiful day when a rabbi and a soap maker decided to go out for a stroll. They were both enjoying the warm weather when the soap maker abruptly turned to the rabbi and asked, "What good is religion? Religion teaches all these highfalutin morals and all these lofty values and ethics, yet look at this world!" Without giving the rabbi a chance to respond, the soap maker continued his rant: "The world is corrupt. It's filled with pain and evil and wickedness. So I ask you, Rabbi, what good is religion?"

Before the rabbi could answer, out of nowhere a large rubber ball came flying through the air, headed right toward him. Fortunately the rabbi had quick reflexes. He caught the ball before it smacked him in the face! The rabbi returned the ball to the apologetic young boy who had come after it. As the boy ran off to join his friends, the rabbi said, “Just look at that young child. He’s absolutely filthy! And you’re a soap maker, so I ask you, what good is soap? There’s all this soap in the world and that young boy is still dirty!”

The soap maker protested. “How can you say that about soap? You’re a learned man, Rabbi, so surely you understand that soap is good only if it is used.”

“Aha,” said the rabbi, with a slight grin. “And so it is with religion. We can teach it, and people can say they’ve learned it, but until they’ve used it and truly understand the meaning of its lessons, the power of its teachings, and the weightiness of its laws, then--and only then--can religion make a positive difference in the world.”¹⁰

In this new year let us welcome the Debbie Rosenzweigs we know who are ‘spiritual but not

religious' and engage them in thoughtful conversation about what it can mean to be a religious Jew. Let us teach our religion, our precious Judaism, to ourselves and to the next generation so that together, we can make a difference in the world for ourselves and for all of humanity. G'mar chatimah tovah -- may we each be sealed in the Book of Life. Amen.

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1. Adapted from a beautiful sermon by Rabbi Howard Jaffe, http://www.templeisaiah.net/Resources/Sermons/Read_Sermons/ArticleId/168/Kol-Nidre-5774-2013-Rabbi-Howard-Jaffe.aspx.
 2. Debbie Rosenzweig is a completely fictitious character I made up to use as an illustration in this sermon.
 3. Mercadante, Linda A. *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 1.
 4. Ibid., p. 2.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid. p. 5
 7. Dorff, Elliot N., "Ethics of Judaism," *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism* ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck. Wiley-Blackwell, 2003. p. 377.
 8. Deut. 29:9-10.
 9. Mercadante, p. 10.
 10. Becker, Laney Katz. *Three Times Chai: 54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories*. Springfield, New Jersey. Behrman House, Inc., 2007. p. 48