

"Pesach; Atheists; Master Stories"

Pesach

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Rabbi Gerald L. Zelizer

Those of you who have studied in adult classes with me have heard this joke. If so, please be generous and don't roll your eyes. Others haven't. Because it is so realistic, it is one of my favorites. It speaks to a reality of modern shuls.

The story is told of a rabbi who retired, "How will you fill your time?" asked a congregant. "I am going to finish my book." he answered. "Oh" said the congregant "I didn't know that you were writing a book." The rabbi answered "I'm not writing a book, I'm reading a book." Well, that joke resonates with me as a functioning pulpit rabbi who is involved 24/7 in so many duties on your behalf – "hatching,

matching and dispatching," with little space left to read a book. But alas, recently I actually read a book. The book, which was widely reviewed, is Religion for Atheists: A Nonbeliever's guide to the uses of religion, by Alain de Botton

Who is Alain de Botton? He is an independently wealthy kind of popular philosopher and high-brow writer, who lives in Switzerland. He is of Sephardic Jewish, decent; is independently wealthy; and managed the Rothschild fortune. He writes bestselling books including "How Proust can Change Your Life" and "The Art of Travel". De Botton is an atheist; a nonbelieving Jew. In his book, He says his readers should not believe in "spooky ghosts in the sky." De Botton posits the following. How can a nonbeliever take the products

of religion and put them to positive use? Why should any nonbeliever do that? Because says Botton "religions merit our attention for their sheer conceptual ambition; for changing the world in a way that few secular institutions ever have. They have a practical involvement in education, fashion, politics, travel, hostelry, initiation ceremonies, publishing, art and architectural and arrange of interest that puts to shame the scope of the achievements of even the greatest and most influential secular movements and individuals in history." Not a bad compliment from a nonbeliever! Mind you. De Botton is not a glatt nonbeliever like Bill Maher or Christopher Hitchens, may he rest in peace (Oy, would Hitchens allow me to say that?). Botton does not throw out the baby with the

bathwater. (Wait a minute, isn't that how we got to this Pesach holiday in the first place?!)

Alain De Botton calls on secular institutions to mimic the rituals, habits and teachings that churches, mosques, and synagogues have tackled over the centuries. One example will resonate from the very seder that we went through last night. He says that we religious people are smart enough to combine spirituality and eating. (You know that too well on this HAG!) Religious people are, aware that while dining in a group, people tend to be in a convivial welcoming mood for matters of the spirit. So he encourages secular people to create communal restaurants that mimic the Passover seder. Atheists and friends of his would sit at a big communal table. They would find guide books in

front of them, similar to the haggadah, which would include rituals directing diners to talk to one another asking questions of their neighbors like "Who can you not forgive?" or "What do you fear?"

When I first read his proposal in Religion for Atheists my first reaction was cute "Hey, we got it already? Why do I have to create new institutions when we have one Pesach and the seder which is tried and works?" My second reaction was a bit more thoughtful. Interestingly, De Botton recognizes that something is missing in secularism which can be filled in by the mechanisms of religion. Like the seder and many other subjects he writes about. He gets an A for effort. But then I thought to myself that something major is missing in his whole approach. What is missing is the master story behind the

rituals! How can one meaningfully sit down at secular seders if there is no master story? Last night we sat down to go through the kind of details that de Botton is encouraging nonbelievers to go through, because we were acting out the master story. "Avadim Hayinuy Bmitzraim"- "We were slaves in Egypt" and "Vayozeino Adonai Byad Hazakah" – "the Almighty brought us out of there with a strong hand." That master story does two things: It gives internal energy and cohesion to our Jewish people and our religion "Avadim Hayeenu LParoh Bm Itzraim" "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And at the same time it motivates Jews to assist others who are still in servitude "Gerem Hayitem Beretz Mitzraim" – You too were strangers in the land of Egypt – (Warning, we dare not be as

the " rasha" in last night's seder – focus our energies on the latter “the other” and not the former “our people”, other reverse, we lose 50% of the energy generated from the master story!)

It is that master story which gives substance and thickness to all the details of the seder. It gives thickness to all the dietary rules that we will follow for eight days.

Lets talk more about spirituality and food as they relate to master stories. We all know the old joke that in Judaism the whole religion can be boiled down to "we were attacked, we prevailed over them, now let's sit down and eat!" Good joke, but think about it - not really accurate! It does not explain the master stories behind a lot of our eating. Consider Shabbat, where we have another kind of required

eating and drinking, religiously motivated, wine, hallah (excuse the expression) and ethnically derived - chicken soup, kugel. The master story there is “ ” the creation of the world. It has nothing to do with being attacked and prevailing. In a few weeks on Shavuot we will have a different kind of eating of dairy and blitzes again, based on a master story. What is it? It is the master story of “ ” the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. It has nothing to do with being threatened and then victorious. On Sukkot we have yet a different kind of eating in a mandated location of flimsiness and nature - a sukkah. What is the master story there? It is our wandering in the wilderness and mimicking the habitat of our ancestors. And by the way, even

our non-eating is motivated by a master story which has nothing to do with "We were attacked, we overcame them, let's eat". That occurs on Yom Kippur. There we have the master story of the Almighty king reviewing the book of our failures in the past year. So to say that Jews simply have one master story "we were attacked, we defeated them, let's eat." is a good joke, but inaccurate.

Let me bring you two statistics. Think about what you make of them. Then I'll tell you what I make of them. The number of Jews who say they do not believe in G-d is the largest number among major American religious groups – 52%. On the other hand, over 75% of American Jews say they attend a seder! Think what you make with that contradiction. I see one of two realities. Either a lot

of De Botton's people – Jews who do not necessary believe in God – are already sitting at the seder, or possibly; maybe we should be clear about what we mean "believing in God – Consider in the Haggadah, one of God's names is – Baruch Hamakom" – 'the place'. An odd name! Which place? All place and no place at the same time! . Rather, a transcendent power that gives meaning to our place as species in the universe and is yet not of this place. Hardly "spooky things in the sky."

I can hear you thinking to yourselves "so Rabbi, what do you want me to take back with me from this message? Well, tonight we shall eat again at the seder. During the next eight days we shall go through a lot of culinary and dietary rules and regulations. Religion and eating are connected. But

they are connected more thoughtfully than we may realize: than De Botton's realizes. They are connected so effectively because there is background music "we slaves to Pharoah in Egypt and the Almighty took us out with a strong hand" on our life screen. It is the master story of "Yetziat Mitzrayim" that gives meaning to the details.

Most helpfully, as you go through the Jewish year, all of the eating and religion will have more substance if the recipes call for mixing with various master stories. Hag Kasher V'Sameach.