

There is nothing like the 10 commandments to provoke a conversation about what it means to be religious.

Battles rage over the posting of the 10 commandments in public. Advocates say it heightens ethical awareness. Opponents say it weakens the separation of church and state.

2000 years ago, the 10 commandments were recited daily in Jewish public prayer. But the rabbis phased this out. They were concerned that we might ignore or lessen the other 603 commandments in our tradition.

Most American Jews oppose the posting the 10 commandments in public. But U.S. debate over this makes me think about the word “religious.” What does it mean to be religious?

People often tell me, “Rabbi, I am spiritual, but not religious.” This comment represents 7% of all Americans, according to the 2012 Pew Religion and Public Life Project. This is a bigger group than atheists, Jews, Muslims or Episcopalians.

In fact, this group has come to be known as the “SBNRs” – spiritual but not religious. What does it mean to be SBNR?

According to a recent NY Times article, SBNRs crave connection to the divine, but don't feel affiliated with traditional religion. As Rev. Lillian Daniel describes it, "Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. . . These people always find God in the sunsets and in walks on the beach."

The self-image of SBNRs is anti-institutional, maverick. As author Courtney Bender notes their self-image "makes them think, 'I don't need history, I don't need the past,' . . . 'I am not religious, which is about the past — I am spiritual, about the present.'"

But it is clear that SBNRs crave connection with the divine. What is it about religion that is such a deterrent to SBNRs?

The English word "religion" is at a huge disadvantage: it connotes a staid institution, a stale approach, a lot of rules and people who are out of touch.

But the word "religion" has the same Latin root as the word "ligament". It means to connect. So "religion" actually means to "re-connect." How do we bridge the gap between what religion connotes and re-connecting really means?

Someone here recently asked me where God could be found. I thank her for allowing me to share our exchange with you today. She is facing some mighty challenges right now. She always told me she wasn't religious. Within a very short period of time, several different individuals told her: God is with you. She was stymied. What did this mean? So she came and asked the rabbi, "Where is God?"

When you ask a rabbi a question, you usually get another question. So, I asked her, "Where were you when these conversations happened?" She realized: she was not alone on a mountain or shrouded in solitude, but she was with another human being. That's where God is found: in interaction with others. This is how she felt the presence of God. She was surprised to find out that she was religious. She had always connected with others. She just didn't know that she could experience God's presence in that way.

Another story of "connecting:" In South Korea, a child was born. The doctor said, "He's not nursing, not suckling. He will surely die." The father prayed: God, save my child. If he lives, I dedicate his life in service to You." The child lived and grew up. Aware of his father's promise, he wasn't religious himself. He couldn't dedicate his life to God. But he felt obligated to his father to at least investigate what it

could mean and went on religious retreat. At the end of the retreat, unmoved by the experience, he, along with the other participants, was asked to bless the person next to him. He turned to the person next to him: there was someone he not only didn't like, but really disliked. He reluctantly placed his hands on the person's shoulders. The person grabbed him and gave him a hug. Then, the son realized that community and connecting with others, even those we don't necessarily like, is a religious experience. He began his life with his father's blessing and he enters into a life of meaning through the blessing of another human being. Where is God to be found? Menachem Mendl of Kotzk answers, "Wherever people are willing to let God in."

If we re-connect with theology, we can do that alone. If we reconnect with spirituality, we can do that alone. But if we reconnect with others meaningfully, we do this face to face: *panim el panim*, in the words of today's Torah portion. Moses tells the Israelites, "God spoke to you [all], face to face, on the mountain. " *Panim el panim*, not skype to skype, or fingers to a smartphone, but in community with each other – that is where we find what we can call God.

The Jewish community is not a race, but is rather, in the words of Mordechai Kaplan, a religious civilization. One cannot convert to a race, but one can convert to Judaism. We are a faith, a culture and a people. We re-connect to God through community, not through individual endeavor.

In community, we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We console the bereaved; we take care of the sick. We hug those in pain. But we also afflict the comfortable. We remind each other that the world is broken, we dedicate ourselves to justice; we remember that nothing on this earth really belongs to us. We do this together through our ancient faith tradition, based not only on the 10 commandments but on all 613 commandments, enough to keep us very busy for a long while.

“Rabbi, I am spiritual, but not religious.” I close with the provocative words of Reverend Daniel, drawn from the holy pages of the New York Times:

“Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. . .What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on for stuff or, heaven forbid, disagree with you.

Spiritual But Not Religious – A sermon on Parshat V'ethanan by Rabbi Susan Leider, Congregation Kol Shofar  
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Where life with God gets rich . . . is when you dig into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself." *Shabbat Shalom.*